

A PROBLEM IN DEUTERONOMY

In the tenth chapter of Deuteronomy there are two verses which have puzzled all the commentators.

In chapters ix and x Moses recalls his experiences at Horeb, how the people had made them a golden calf (ix. 16), and in consequence how “the LORD was very angry with Aaron to have destroyed him; and I prayed for Aaron also the same time” (ix. 20). He next recounts how he made the ark and prepared new tables, and adds: “And I turned myself and came down from the mount, and put the tables in the ark which I had made; and there they be, as the LORD commanded me” (x. 5). Then comes a sudden break, for in verses 6 and 7 we read: “And the children of Israel journeyed from Beeroth-bene-Jaakan to Moserah; there Aaron died; and there he was buried; and Eleazar his son ministered in the priest’s office in his stead. From thence they journeyed unto Gudgodah, and from Gudgodah to Jotbathah, a land of brooks of water” (R.V.).

The names of the four places are doubtless the same as are found in Num. xxxiii. 31 f. in the list of camping places which “Moses wrote” (verse 1), but which modern critics attribute to P. The places there are spelled differently, given in a different order and attended with less detail. S. R. Driver says that “the discrepancy is conclusive against its [i.e. Deut. x. 6–8] having borrowed from P.”¹ With Wellhausen, he thinks it may have been “part of E which survived independently”, and adds that it may have been inserted to illustrate “the manner in which the priestly duties were provided for after Aaron’s death.”

He regards verses 8 and 9, “At that time the LORD separated the tribe of Levi . . . as the LORD thy God spake unto him”, as a parenthesis, but as a “genuine continuation of the discourse of Moses”, the first person being resumed in verse 10.

Several difficulties beset this hypothesis.

In the first place, it regards chapters v–xi as the free composition of the “Deuteronomist”, the seventh-century author of Deuteronomy, who was dependent on the JE narrative for his material, that of P belonging to a much later date. On this reckoning the author must have imagined that Moses “made an ark of shittim wood” (x. 3), for that is not found in JE, though it is in P; and also that he “prayed for Aaron at that

¹ *Deuteronomy* (I.C.C.), p. 119.

time" (ix. 20), which is neither in JE nor in P. But no one would dispute the imaginative power of an author of this discourse, if he lived in the reign of Manasseh!

Hertz in his commentary makes the attractive suggestion that the insertion of verses 6 and 7 was made by Moses himself when he came to write down the discourse which he had first delivered. An analogy is supplied by the tradition that Muhammad occasionally added glosses when recording his spoken words.

We venture, with much diffidence, to suggest another possible solution.

There is evidence in Deut. xxxiii. 1, "And this is the blessing, wherewith Moses the man of God blessed the children of Israel before his death", and in the account of Moses' death in chapter xxxiv, that after that event we have another hand, besides that of Moses, in the compilation of the book. It seems reasonable to attribute the opening verses (i. 1-3), telling where and when "Moses spake" the words, to the same person, whom for convenience we may call the narrator. If his narrative be true, he appears as a survivor of Moses, who had accompanied him on his journeys.

Let us now look more closely at the four names as they occur in Deut. x. 6 f. and in Num. xxxiii.

Bene-jaakan and Jotbath(ah) occasion no difficulty for they are given in the same order. But the new information in Deuteronomy regarding the supplies of water is of supreme interest. For in Deuteronomy Bene-jaakan is replaced by Beeroth ("wells") bene-jaakan; therefore Bene-jaakan or "sons of Jaakan" (A.V.) is not strictly a name, but a statement that the camping ground was an oasis where wells had been dug by the sons of Jaakan. In 1 Chron. i. 38, 42, one Jaakan appears among the descendants of Seir; if he be the same, then the wells might be not far from Mount Seir, i.e. on the border of Edom.

The narrator in Deuteronomy also informs us that Jotbath was a "land of brooks (*nachal*) of water". Now, from Num. xxxiii. 33, 36, it is clear that the Israelites had reached the mountainous country near Kadesh, where mountain streams were comparatively plentiful. The two accounts so far confirm one another.

Over and above their confirmation of the previous narrative, we observe that these additions are such as would proceed most

naturally from one of Moses' companions, who would be deeply interested in marking camping places where the flocks could be watered. It has another value, for it suggests that these two places might, on this account, be visited more than once. This would render any variation of order immaterial.

Gudgod(ah) is written Hor-haggidgad in Numbers. The LXX translates this τὸ ὄρος Γαδγὰδ, "the mountain Gadgad"; or it might possibly mean the Gadgad near Mount Hor.

The fourth of these words is Moserah, which means "chastisement" or "punishment". Elsewhere in Deuteronomy we have names which are rather those of events than of places, whilst denoting the place and time of those events, such as Massah ("tempting", vi. 16), Taberah ("burning", ix. 22; cf. Num. xi. 1-5), and Meribah ("striving", xxxii. 51; cf. Num. xx. 13). It is therefore possible that Moserah is of the same class, and this is rendered probable by its appearance in Numbers in the plural, Moseroth ("chastisements"). It becomes certain by the addition of the words in Deut. x. 6, "there Aaron died"; Aaron's death is regarded as a "chastisement".

There is therefore no "discrepancy" between this and Num. xx. 28 (cf. Deut. xxxii. 50 f.), where the scene of Aaron's death is placed in Mount Hor. Instead, the word "chastisement" is explained by Deut. xxxii. 51, which says that Aaron's death was "because ye trespassed against me". Elsewhere Moses attributes his own exclusion from the land to the fact that "the LORD was angry with me" (Deut. i. 37; cf. iii. 26); but he realizes that Joshua is to succeed him as leader, just as in Deut. x. 6 it is stated that Eleazar was to succeed his father Aaron "in the priest's office".

These facts, taken together, point to the person who made this insertion being one who had been present at the events described, and who had a special interest in the death of Aaron and in the succession of Eleazar to his office. Could it have been Eleazar himself?

In Deut. xxxi. 9 we read that "Moses wrote this law and delivered it unto the priests the sons of Levi". If this be true, the written law passed into the custody of Eleazar. Jewish tradition ascribed to Joshua the last chapter of Deuteronomy, which records the death of Moses. Yet, when we reach verse 9, the words seem to proceed rather from one of Joshua's friends, for they read: "And Joshua the son of Nun was full of the

spirit of wisdom; for Moses had laid his hands upon him, and the children of Israel hearkened unto him." Who would be more likely to add this comment than Eleazar, his comrade, who was standing by when Moses commissioned him (Num. xxvii. 18 f.), who shared with him in the leadership of the people, and survived him (Josh. xxiv. 31-33)?

It has long been the fashion to treat the legislation of Deuteronomy as the product of the seventh century, and much of the rest of the book as later still. Were the facts treated with greater respect, it would be seen that they can be quite well accounted for as contemporary records.

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