

The Last Words of Moses

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

As Moses is about to die he blesses the tribes of Israel, echoing the blessings that Jacob gave before he died. Like Jacob, he gives a brief one line to Reuben but unlike Jacob he ignores the tribe of Simeon and also gives a very brief line to Judah. But he says much more than Jacob about the tribe of Levi and about Joseph. The differences between the two sets of blessings is striking. He ends with a powerful blessing to Israel reiterating its strengths and its isolation. He uses the word Badad, alone, used first by Balaam and then in Ha'azinu and now finally in his farewell speech. Also interesting is that unlike Jacob, he makes no mention of Shilo or anything vaguely messianic or futuristic.

Why did he ignore Simeon? Was it because Jacob had said he wanted to separate Levi and Shimon because they were violent? He channeled Levi's zealotry into the priesthood. But did Simeon just die out? Can't be because he is mentioned several times in the Book of Joshua. Perhaps it was because Zimri who blatantly challenged Moses with his Midianite princess had sullied the name of the tribe? But why blame the whole tribe? Some suggest that Shimon was subsumed under his brother Levi.

Those who like to do forensic analysis will answer that these all reflect different authors and if Joseph is given priority it is because this was written in the Northern kingdom which was led by the Joseph tribes and took his name into exile with them. It could just as well indicate that this was written closer to the Exodus where Joseph was still the dominant figure in the minds of the Israelite slaves. We will never know for certain. This becomes a matter of tradition as much as scholarship.