

# Deuteronomy 33:1–5

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/deut/deut-33/deuteronomy-331-5/>

*Moses introduces the blessing of the Israelite tribes with a brief historical account of the LORD's relationship with His covenant people, Israel.*

Before invoking God's blessings on the tribes of Israel, Moses provided a brief introduction. It was a historical account of the LORD's relationship with His covenant people, Israel. The text begins with the narrator stating that *this is the blessing with which Moses the man of God blessed the sons of Israel before his death* (v. 1). The phrase *the man of God*, used here for the first time in the Old Testament, describes Moses' authority to speak on God's behalf. With this authority, Moses interceded for Israel on several occasions (for example, Exodus 32:11–14). Here in Deuteronomy 33, Moses acts as would a father, and pronounced prophetic blessings on the Israelite tribes, asking God to grant special favor to each one.

Following the narrator's introductory statement, Moses used poetry to briefly describe the One Suzerain God (the LORD) who would bestow the blessings on the tribes (His vassals). The Suzerain Vassal treaty structure was common to that era, and featured a supreme king's agreement with subordinate rulers, and spelled out blessings for obedience and cursings for rebellion. In the case of God's covenant with Israel, God was the supreme Suzerain but made His covenant directly with the people. Their blessing within the covenant was tied to their obedience to Him (the greatest commandment) exercised through loving one another (the second greatest commandment).

The imagery Moses used to portray the LORD appears to be that of a warrior-king. If so, then the emphasis of these verses might have been intended to remind Israel that their supreme Suzerain would fight on their behalf as they entered the Promised Land. This would make sense, given that Moses will die in the next chapter, and Joshua will be appointed as their new leader. Moses is reminding the people here that their true leader is Yahweh, the Supreme Suzerain with whom they had entered a treaty, or covenant. It will be He who will protect them, if they remain faithful to follow His command to love one another.

Moses identified this Warrior-King as *the Lord* (Yahweh) who *came from Sinai* (v. 2). Moses reminded the Israelites that the LORD revealed Himself to them at Mount Sinai as their Suzerain (Ruler) of the covenant, and it was here that the LORD gave them the law and established this covenant relationship with them (Exodus 19-20). Mount Sinai is also commonly referred to as “Horeb” throughout Deuteronomy.

This Warrior-King (*the LORD*) also *dawned* on Israel *from Seir*. The term *Seir* likely refers to the entire land of Seir, also called Edom (Genesis 32:3; Numbers 24:18; Ezekiel 35:15). The LORD also *shone forth from Mount Paran*. The place called *Mount Paran* was a mountain located in the wilderness of Paran, south of the Promised Land. It was the first site where the Israelites encamped after leaving Mount Sinai (Numbers 10:11-13). The verbs *dawned* and *shone forth* pictured the LORD’s coming in His glory like the sun flooding the desert around Mount Sinai, Seir, and Paran. These were all geographic regions through which Israel passed on their journey from Egypt to their current location, just on the border of the Promised Land, where they are preparing to cross over (See map of Israel’s path in Additional Resources).

These poetic images told Israel that the Suzerain (Ruler) God rose in all His glory like the bright sun to shine on them during their wilderness journey, from *Sinai*, *Seir*, and *Mount Paran*. The sun can be seen as the source of blessing, and the LORD rising up like the sun was a vivid picture of His blessing upon His people—His provision and His protection.

Furthermore, Moses said that God *came from the midst of ten thousand holy ones*. Though it is possible that the phrase *holy ones* refers to angels, it could also refer to the multitude of Israelites, mentioned in v. 3 as *the people*. These *holy ones* (Exodus 19:6) would follow their Warrior-King and He would fight against their enemies. Israel was called to be a holy (set apart) nation that provided a priestly function to surrounding nations, showing them a better way to live. Rather than living in a culture where the strong exploit the weak, as was common among the pagan nations (Leviticus 18) God desired Israel to exhibit a “love your neighbor” culture, where the strong serve the weak (Exodus 19:6).

Also, *At His right hand there was flashing lightning for them*. The LORD’s *right hand* is a symbol of power and strength. The *flashing lightning* renders “fiery law” in the Hebrew text. The Suzerain Warrior-King came down from Mount *Sinai*, marching ahead of thousands of His angelic beings with a fire of

flames in *His right hand* to protect the Israelites from danger so that they might safely make their way to the Promised Land. Jewish tradition holds that God wrote the Ten Commandments on stone with a finger of fire.

The basis on which the Suzerain (Ruler) God delivered Israel and protected them was because of His love: *Indeed, He loves the people* (v. 3). The word translated loves (Hebrew “hābab”) is only used in the Old Testament here in this verse, conveying the idea of affectionate love of a mother to a child. Such an unfailing love caused the LORD to rescue Israel from slavery in Egypt and establish a covenant relationship with them at Mount Sinai, a covenant through which Israel would be singled out as a “holy nation” (Exodus 19:4–6). This covenant relationship is also depicted in the Bible as a marriage, with Sinai being like a marriage ceremony (see Ezekiel 16:32 where God depicts a disobedient Israel as an adulterous wife).

Furthermore, Moses declared that *All Your holy ones are in Your hand*. This is a picture of a loving God protecting His covenant people with His powerful hand. The Israelites were God’s *holy ones* in God’s hands because they belonged to Him. They had been made holy, meaning they were separated out, in order to serve a priestly function by showing the world a better way to live, by having communities organized around the self-governing principle of “love your neighbor as yourself (Exodus 19:6; Leviticus 19:18). Also, the LORD guided them, and *they followed in His steps*.

To make sure the Israelites did not deviate from the righteous path, the Suzerain God ensured that *Everyone receives of Your word*. This means that all the Israelites received the Torah (Law) from the Suzerain God to learn how to please Him. The Ten Commandments can be viewed as the major tenants of the law. Chapters 5 through 26 largely expand on these Ten Commandments, and explain specific ways in which the people of Israel were to love God and love their neighbors. God’s covenant with Israel established them as His own people, as He swore to their ancestors (Deuteronomy 29:10–13) and to show them how to live in the manner that was most constructive (Deuteronomy 10:13).

The truth that all Israel received God’s word becomes readily apparent in the next verse where the people declared: *Moses charged us with the law, a possession for the assembly of Jacob* (v. 4). The *law* or Torah was a special document unique to Israel and it was given to them instruct them on how to be a kingdom of priests to represent God on earth as a Holy nation and be His

treasured possession (Exodus 19:4–6). This was a special privilege granted to Israel. It was their job to embrace the self-governing principle of loving one another, and demonstrate to the surrounding nations this superior way to live, as an example and invitation to follow.

The LORD's authority to grant this special privilege to Israel was His supreme authority and power. He *was king in Jeshurun* (v. 5). The term *Jeshurun* is a poetic and affectionate name for Israel and it means "the upright one" (Deuteronomy 32:15). As such, the term suggests that the Israelites were called to be upright because they belonged to an upright and righteous God (Deuteronomy 32:4). Israel's benevolent Leader's purpose was to show them a way of life that was for their best (Deuteronomy 10:13).

The Suzerain God was *king* in Israel before they ever had human kings. God was king when the people submitted to His law, and governed themselves under God's rule of law, and the organization principles of loving their neighbor as themselves (1 Samuel 8:7). The book of Exodus tells us that "the LORD shall reign forever and ever" (Exodus 15:18). And as Suzerain King over the vassal nation, the LORD manifested His rule over Israel *when the heads of the people were gathered and all the tribes of Israel together* to receive the covenant words at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:7–8). Likewise, God's authority and rulership over Israel made it possible for them to receive the farewell blessings which Moses was about to articulate to each of the tribes.

### **Biblical Text:**

**<sup>1</sup>Now this is the blessing with which Moses the man of God blessed the sons of Israel before his death. <sup>2</sup>He said,**

**The Lord came from Sinai,  
And dawned on them from Seir;  
He shone forth from Mount Paran,  
And He came from the midst of ten thousand holy ones;  
At His right hand there was flashing lightning for them.**

**<sup>3</sup>Indeed, He loves the people;  
All Your holy ones are in Your hand,  
And they followed in Your steps;  
Everyone receives of Your words.**

**<sup>4</sup>Moses charged us with a law,  
A possession for the assembly of Jacob.**

**<sup>5</sup>And He was king in Jeshurun,**

**When the heads of the people were gathered,  
The tribes of Israel together.**