

Deuteronomy 33:8–11

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Moses pronounces blessings on the tribe of Levi.

Moses continues the poem of blessing he pronounced upon Israel that he began in Deuteronomy 33:1. In this section, Moses pronounced the blessings of *Levi* (v. 8), his own tribe. He begins by encouraging them to *let Your Thummim and Your Urim belong to Your godly man*.

The *Thummim* and *Urim* were two objects (perhaps stones) used by the high priest to determine the will of the LORD (Exodus 28:30; Leviticus 8:8). For Moses to pray that these objects remain with *Levi* (here referred to as *Your godly man*) means that *Levi* was dedicated to full-time service to the LORD.

That *Levi* was set apart for God's service was made clear when *Levi* was *proved at Massah* and *with whom* He [God] *contended at the waters of Meribah*. The Levites passed both of these tests, which qualified them for their service to the LORD.

God often tests the faith of His people by allowing them to go through life challenges to see how they would respond. In Jeremiah, God says, "I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds" (Jeremiah 17:10; Genesis 22:1; Deuteronomy 8:2; Psalms 26:2).

The incidents at *Massah* and *Meribah* mentioned here are recorded in the books of Exodus and Numbers, respectively. The Israelites tested the LORD at *Massah* when they lacked drinking water (Exodus 17). Instead of trusting Him and humbly petitioning Him to provide for them, as He had done in the past, the people stated a demand in the form of a test, saying "Is the LORD among us, or not?" (Exodus 17:7). The idea seemed to be that if God did not perform for them, then they would get another God. Rather than trusting God to have their best interest at heart, they treated God in a transactional manner, as they might treat a pagan deity. Although God provided water for the people, He was not pleased with their faithless attitude (Exodus 17:1-7).

Like the episode at *Massah*, the Israelites tested God later in the exodus when they were quarreling *at the waters of Meribah* (near the city of Kadesh) because of a lack of water (Numbers 20:1-13). The Suzerain (Ruler) God commanded Moses to speak to the rock to bring water for the people (v. 8). However, instead of speaking to the rock, Moses struck it twice out of anger. Despite Moses's disobedience and failure to honor Him in the presence of the Israelite congregation, God graciously provided water for His covenant people.

In Deuteronomy Moses made clear that God *proved* the Levites and *contended* with them during those incidents. The truth of the matter is that God allowed His covenant people to experience hunger and thirst to test them (Deuteronomy 8:3). He wanted to see the ones who would remain faithful to Him. The poem in Chapter 33 points out that the tribe of Levi passed God's test because they did not side with the rebellious Israelites during those incidents.

The Levites rightly decided to follow God faithfully instead of aligning themselves with the people. Moses reinforced this point when the tribe of Levi *said of his father and his mother, 'I did not consider them'; and he did not acknowledge his brothers, nor did he regard his own sons* (v. 9).

This statement seems to refer to the golden calf episode recorded in Exodus 32-34. In this passage, the golden calf incident occurred while Moses was on Mount Sinai to receive the two tablets of the covenant from the LORD (Exodus 32:1-10). When Moses descended, he saw that the people of Israel had indeed sinned against the LORD by worshiping a molten calf (Exodus 32:8).

Then Moses spoke to the assembly of Israel, saying, "Whoever is for the Lord, *come to me!*" (Exodus 32:26). All the Levites gathered to Moses instead of joining the people in idolatry. The Levites obeyed Moses and killed their own brothers, "three thousand men of the people fell that day" (Exodus 32:28). Instead of giving in to the urging of their own family members, the sons of Levi chose to serve the Suzerain God faithfully. Simply put, the Levites *observed His word, And kept His covenant* at the expense of their own familial ties and relationships.

As a result of the Levites' obedience, God set them apart for His service. As ministers before the Suzerain (Ruler) God, the Levites had two responsibilities. The first was to *teach Your ordinances to Jacob, And Your law to Israel*. The

Levites were given the task of educating the other tribes concerning the LORD's revealed covenant regulations.

The second responsibility was to *put incense and burnt offerings before the LORD, on His altar* (v. 10b). As the priestly tribe, the Levites were commissioned to manage the offerings that were presented by the people (Leviticus 4:7; Numbers 4:16). To sum up, the Levites were dedicated to serving the LORD and presenting offerings and sacrifices to Him.

The term "incense" refers to an aromatic substance that was often used with sacrifices. The *burnt offerings* (Heb. "olah") is literally "what goes up" usually in smoke. The worshiper who brought the offerings would lay his hands on the animals to declare that the gift belonged to him and that the benefits of the *burnt offerings* would be his (Leviticus 1). The worshiper had to offer an animal "without defect," that is, with no physical damage (Leviticus 1:3; 1:10). Because of their allegiance to the LORD, the Levites were the ones whom God chose to oversee Israel's formal system of worship. They were chosen to conduct sacrificial services, as demanded by the Suzerain (Ruler) God.

Therefore, Moses prayed that the LORD might *bless Levi's substance and accept the works of his hand* (v. 11). The word for *substance* (Heb. "hayil") can mean power or strength. So, Moses petitioned God to boost (build up) the skills of Levi and to bless them so that they might prosper and that their priestly ministry to the people would be effective.

Moses also petitioned God to *shatter the loins of those who rise up against Levi, and those who hate him, so that they might not rise again*. To *shatter the loins* (lit. "smash the sinews") has the idea of destroying one's strength or to render someone incapable of producing offspring. The idea is that, for Levi to carry out his priestly duties, obstacles such as adversaries, had to be weakened and removed.

The tribe of Levi did not receive an allotment of land. They had only cities and grazing lands. The Lord was their inheritance (Deuteronomy 10:8-9).

Biblical Text:

**⁜ Of Levi he said,
"Let Your Thummim and Your Urim belong to Your godly man,
Whom You proved at Massah,**

With whom You contended at the waters of Meribah;

⁹Who said of his father and his mother,

'I did not consider them';

And he did not acknowledge his brothers,

Nor did he regard his own sons,

For they observed Your word,

And kept Your covenant.

¹⁰"They shall teach Your ordinances to Jacob,

And Your law to Israel.

They shall put incense before You,

And whole burnt offerings on Your altar.

¹¹"O Lord, bless his substance,

And accept the work of his hands;

Shatter the loins of those who rise up against him,

And those who hate him, so that they will not rise *again*."