CHAPTER TEN

THE BLESSING OF MOSES (DEUT 33:2–29)

The Blessing of Moses is one of the most difficult texts not only in the present corpus, but in Hebrew Bible in general: it is conventionally accepted that this literary composition is not homogeneous, and consists of a hymnal framework in vv. 2–5 and 26–29 (with some possible insertions in the middle of the composition) and the collection of tribal sayings (6–25). Without challenging this historical-literary approach to the problem of its composition, the discursive analysis of the text reveals a structure that is more complicated than the two-fold distinction between a hymnal framework and a collection of tribal sayings; moreover, there is a certain correlation between the framework and the collection of sayings in regard to the discourse structure, as will be shown below.

10.1. INTRODUCTION: DISCOURSE STRUCTURE

10.1.1. The Communication Participants

An interesting discourse feature in the Blessing of Moses is the total lack of 1cs reference to the speaker, even within the elements of the conversational framework, which are, however, marked with the 2nd-person

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1 Cf. Beyerle 1998: 215: “the Blessing of Moses (Deut 33) is among the most difficult and puzzling texts in the OT”. See also his review in Beyerle 1997: 1–7.
3 Cf. Tigay 1996: 547 nn. 1 and 2 (in Excursus 33) or Rendsburg 2009a.
4 See Freedman 1980a; van der Woude 1994: 281–82; Beyerle 1997; Christensen 2002: 833–36; a chapter wholly dedicated to the analysis of the hymnal framework is Pfeiffer 2005: 178–203. Among possible hymnal insertions in the body of the collection of sayings vv. 11, 19, and 21 have been mentioned; see Weisman 1978: 367; Christensen 2002: 850–54. A research review up to 1990 may be found in Heck 1990.
5 On the general order of the tribes see Tigay 1996: 521–22: the geographic order of the tribes’ location in the land of Canaan (cf. Mayes 1991: 396–97) is combined with the sequence of wives/concubines. According to Christensen 2002: 845–46, the role of the mothers is decisive for the literary structure, the blessing of Joseph has a central position, and “the two sons of Rachel’s handmaid, Bilhah, are framed by the two sons of Leah’s handmaid, Zilpah.” Moreover, just as the sons of Bilhah are framed by the sons of Zilpah, the sons of Rachel are framed by the sons of Leah, forming two perfectly parallel inclusio structures: (1) Leah (Reuben, Judah, Levi)—Rachel (Benjamin, Joseph)—Leah (Zebulon, Issachar); (2) Zilpah (Gad)—Bilhah (Dan, Naphtali)—Zilpah (Asher). See also Greenberg 2009.
references to the addressee and other conversational elements.\(^6\) Even the very beginning of the composition lacks any personal elements and does not explicitly start within the conversational framework (v.2), in contrast to most other pieces of the present corpora. The only direct reference to the speaker is in icpl (v. 4). This discourse situation presupposes the collective anonymous character of the speaker.

The loose marking of the speaker correlates with the problem of the conversational role of Moses. Many scholars claim that there is no textual indication that Moses is the speaker\(^7\) except for the prose framework (v. 1) and several interpolations of the speech verb ומ" in the body of sayings (vv. 8, 12, 13, 18, 20, 22, 23, and 24), which are not included in the discursive analysis of the poetic text. However, the very fact that Moses is mentioned (v. 4)\(^8\) is of special interest, since this statement potentially indicates that Moses is represented as a speaker of at least part of the composition, namely of the tribal sayings.\(^9\) Both candidates for the role of speaker, the anonymous collective speaker and Moses, have very covert characters and are not explicit in the discourse structure. In this work this covert character of the speaker will be associated with the anonymous collective speaker; this discourse feature in many cases hinders the semantic analysis of verb forms.

Different addressees are explicitly marked in different stages of the composition: the Lord (vv. 3, 7, 8–11),\(^10\) the people in general (v. 29), or separate tribes in particular (vv. 8, 18, 24). With regard to the collection of tribal sayings: scholars have noticed that some of them are actually similar to prayers because of the direct addressing of the deity (Judah v. 7, Levi v. 8–11; perhaps also Reuben v. 6, in spite of the impersonal character of speech);\(^11\) others are more like blessings in the proper sense of a word.

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\(^6\) However, ics elements may be found in the direct discourse quotation in v. 9.


\(^8\) Many scholars interpret the verse as a later gloss, see van der Woude 1994: 284; see also Pfeiffer 2005: 182; but cf. Freedman 1980a: 43: “the passage should not be regarded as secondary and unhistorical”.

\(^9\) The phrase תוריה יבגנ in v. 4 may indicate a certain speech activity transmitted in the following verses. Also the phrase מ"ר מ in v. 3, although obscure, may be a speech formula associated with Moses (contra most commentators, who prefer to read as a plural; see Christensen 2002: 837; Pfeiffer 2005: 184; for the tense in v. 3 see §10.2.4.2.1 below).

\(^10\) Scholars have noticed that the Blessing of Moses is much more ‘theological’ than other collections of tribal sayings, e.g., the Blessing of Jacob, because of the direct addressing of the deity; cf. von Rad 1966: 208: “it is noticeable that the Blessing of Moses is more religious”.

\(^11\) Cf. von Rad 1966: 206: “The saying about Judah is actually framed as a prayer . . . The saying about Levi too, is addressed to Yahweh somewhat in the style of a prayer.”