

## Getting Started with Deuteronomy

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### Introduction to Deuteronomy

The title of the book of Deuteronomy is taken from a mis-translation of Deuteronomy 17:18 by the Greek Septuagint to *deuteronomion* meaning “second law.” This came through the Latin Vulgate *deuteronomium* into our English title, with the perspective that it is a “second law” 40 years after the first one given at Mount Sinai. The reference in 17:18, however, refers to the king making “a copy” of this law. The Hebrew title is “these are the words” and is taken from the first words of the book. It refers to the words spoken by Moses on the plains of Moab just prior to Israel’s entrance into the Promised Land. The book of Numbers ends with Israel situated on the plains of Moab across the Jordan River from Jericho (Num 33:48f). Deuteronomy picks up from there and concludes with the death of Moses, the servant of the Lord, on Mount Nebo by these same plains of Moab, just prior to Joshua leading them into the land of promise.

Deuteronomy can be understood from three perspectives. First, Deuteronomy can be viewed as a last will and testament of Moses who was not allowed to enter the Promised Land (3:23-28). It is a set of hortatory speeches reflecting on Israel’s past rebellion and exhorting their faithfulness in the future as they enter and settle in the land.

There are four main speeches by Moses. The first short speech, after a preamble identifying the time, participants and location of the speech, rehearses a retrospective review of Israel’s rebellions during the 40 year wilderness wandering and God’s loyal love and provisions for them in fulfillment of his promises to the forefathers (1:1-4:43).

The lengthy second speech (4:44-26:19) states the general laws and requirements including a restatement of the Ten Commandments (Decalogue) and an encouragement to respond with gratitude, fear, loyalty and love to God (4:44-11:32). This speech goes on to give more specific directives regarding laws for prophets, judges, kings, war, captives, family relations, centralized worship, feasts, tithes and Levitical duties, as well as the seventh year cancellation of debts (12:1-26:19).

The third speech is short (27:1- 28:68) and provides for document preservation (27:2-8; cf. 31:26) and the recitation of the curses and blessings from Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim overlooking Shechem where Israel would renew their covenant allegiance to the Lord. The fourth speech is a covenant renewal ceremony (chs. 29-30).

The book concludes with the song and tribal blessings of Moses and the commissioning of Joshua as the new leader (chs. 31-34). The death of Moses (ch. 34) was probably recorded by Joshua who eulogizes “Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face” (34:10). Such last will and

testament speeches are also seen with Joshua (Josh 23-24), Samuel (1 Sam 12) and David (1 Kgs 2) as the responsibilities get passed on from one leader to the next.

A second perspective from which Deuteronomy can be viewed is as a suzerainty treaty between a suzerain (king) and a vassal/servant. The treaty form is well known in the ancient Near East both with the Hittites (ca. 1400-1200 BC) at the time of Moses and the Assyrians (ca. 700 BC) around the time of Hezekiah and Josiah. The book portrays itself as a covenant renewal ceremony. The earlier Hittite treaty form fits better with the structure of Deuteronomy as the later Assyrian treaties frequently lack the historical prologue and blessings sections.

Deuteronomy		
Preamble	1:1-5	names participants and treaty setting
Historical Prologue	1:6-4:49	rehearses suzerain's past kindnesses
General Stipulations	5:1-11:32	gives general laws and motivations for loyalty
Specific Stipulations	12:1-26:19	details laws on kings, prophets, judges, the poor, rituals, feasts, family relations
Document Clause	27:1-26	preserves the document
Blessings and Curses	28:1-68	states obedience brings blessings, disobedience results in curses
Witnesses	30:19; 31:19	calls on heavens and earth, witness song

A third perspective from which Deuteronomy can be looked at is as a legal code similar to the Code of Hammurabi. Both present laws concerning the rights of the firstborn, slandered wives, adultery, rape among others. Thompson makes comparisons between the Book of the Covenant law code (Exod 21-23) and Deuteronomy (Thompson, 27, 43). One can also parallel the two Ten Commandments texts found both in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. Note, for example, that in Exodus 20:11 the days of creation are cited as the reason behind the Sabbath commandment while Deuteronomy 5:15 proffers the deliverance from Egypt as the basis.

### **Content of the book of Deuteronomy**

The book of Deuteronomy opens in the same place that Numbers left off--the plains of Moab, east of the Jordan river in the fortieth year after they came out of Egypt. Moses begins with his remembrance of God's command to leave Horeb [Mount Sinai] and the appointing of the leaders who were to help him judge Israel. He oscillates back and forth between historical narration and exhortation/advice. He rehearses how the twelve spies were sent out and how Israel rebelled resulting in only Joshua and Caleb from the former generation of the exodus entering the promised land. He narrates how

Israel went around peacefully, rather than fighting with, their ancestral brothers Edom (Esau), Moab (from Lot) and Ammon (from Lot). They did, however, defeat Sihon and Og (Amorites) in Transjordan and their land was parsed out to Reuben, Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh. The exhortation section in chapter 4 calls on Israel to remember and not forget what God had done for them with a stern warning against idolatry. Their sovereign Lord was a jealous God and one who had loved and chosen their forefathers. Chapters 1-4 fit well with the Hittite covenant pattern of the historical prologue by reviewing the history of God's benevolence and encouraging Israel's loyalty.

Chapter 5 begins the general stipulations (chs. 5-11). The Ten Commandments (Decalogue) opens this section in apodictic fashion based on the fact that God brought them out of Egypt. The *Shema* (Deut 6:4, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.") is recited daily by Jews and makes a clear declaration of monotheism followed by the response that he is to be loved with all one's heart, soul and strength. Chapter 6 elucidates what it means to love God in terms of fearing God and obeying his laws. Directives for war and taking the Promised Land are developed in chapter 7. God is portrayed as a compassionate father in Deuteronomy 8-10 caring for his people with manna and giving them a land flowing with milk and honey. They are to remember what the Lord did for them. Moses re-narrates the golden calf rebellion at Sinai and admonishes Israel to fear the Lord and walk in his ways by serving, obeying and loving him. Chapter 11 finishes this section with blessings and curses and an exhortation to teach these things to their children and write them on the doorframes of their houses. This "general stipulations" section stresses the broad requirements and underlying motives for obedience, fear, love, and loyalty.

The next section is the detailed stipulations (chs. 12-26). It has apodictic type laws ("you shalt not..."; 14:22; 15:1; 16:19; 17:1 etc.) as well as casuistic or case laws ("if a person ... then..."; 22:6-8; 23:21-23; 24:10-12 etc.). Here Moses lays the foundation of the great institutions in Israel: prophets (13:1-3; 18:9-22), judges (16:18ff.), kingship (17:14-20), Levitical priests (18:1-8), cities of refuge (ch. 19), as well as ritual functions such as feasts (ch. 16), clean/unclean (ch. 14), tithes/offerings (ch. 26) and the centralized sanctuary where God's name would dwell (ch. 12). There is another chapter on war (ch. 20; cf. 7) and the strong warnings against idolatry are again reiterated (13:2; 16:21f.; 20:18). The seventh year with its cancellation of debts and freeing of slaves (ch. 15) and family guidelines for divorce, marrying a captive woman, rights of the firstborn (ch. 24), punishment of a rebellious son (ch. 21) and other marriage violations (ch. 22) are all detailed here. Great compassion is expressed for the poor, aliens, orphans, and widows (15:7ff.; 24:14f.; 16:11, 14). There was also to be consideration for animals (25:4; 22:6), trees (20:19f) and the land itself (21:23; 24:4).

The book finishes with instructions for the preservation of this law by writing it on plastered stones on Mount Ebal (27:4). The tribes reciting the curses were to stand on Mount Ebal and the tribes announcing the blessings on the opposite Mount Gerizim (ch. 27-28). Moses holds a covenant renewal ceremony and Joshua is installed as the new leader (chs. 29-30). The reading of this book at the Feast of Tabernacles is directed (ch. 31). The famous Song of Moses (ch. 32) praises God for his care for Israel as their rock, father and creator. After the song Moses gathers the assembly proclaiming, “They are not just idle words for you—they are your life” (32:47). Moses blesses the tribes in a manner reminiscent of Jacob’s tribal blessing in Genesis 49. The final chapter records Moses’ death on Mount Nebo and Joshua taking the reins of leadership (ch. 34).

### **Critical approaches to Deuteronomy**

Traditionally critical theories have looked at Deuteronomy in two ways. First, from the old source critical approach, which is based on the centralization of worship reforms of Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18, ca. 700 BC) and especially Josiah’s finding of the “Book of the Law” (2 Kgs 22-23; ca. 621 BC). It should be noted that Deuteronomy 12, the key passage for centralization of worship, never mentions a particular place where God’s name would dwell. Indeed, Mount Ebal is the place that is specified as to where the altar and public documentation of Deuteronomy should be established (27:4-5). Leaving the place of the sanctuary unnamed facilitates shifts that would later take place from Shechem, Gibeon (Josh 9:27; 1 Kgs 3:4), Shiloh and ultimately to Jerusalem (Jer 7:12).

The prohibitions against sacred pillars (16:22) and the worship of sun, moon and stars (17:3) and the celebration of Passover (ch. 16; 2 Kgs 23:22) also give critics grounds for a Josianic time frame. The “Book of the Law” (*torah*) found by Josiah (2 Kgs 23:1-3) is the same term used in Deuteronomy to refer to itself (Deut 29:21; 30:10, 26; cf. Josh 1:8). Critics suggest that Josiah was trying to continue Hezekiah’s reforms and that rather than finding the book of the law of Moses, he and his supporters wrote or compiled it to support their reforms. This is contrary to claims in Deuteronomy that Moses wrote it (31:9, 24; 33:4). Thus Deuteronomy is identified as the D document of the JEDP source theory for the formation of the Pentateuch. They confidently assert that Deuteronomy is certainly not Mosaic, although some of the traditions may go back to him.

The other way Deuteronomy is viewed is to harvest the insights of M. Noth who saw the influence of what he called “Deuteronomistic History” as shaping a huge swath of the Old Testament historical books from Joshua-2 Kings. They see Joshua-2 Kings as redacted together by a single or multiple editors or even in a Deuteronomistic School that applied the law in new ways to each successive generation resulting in a unified perspective of history from Deuteronomy through 2 Kings in what has been labeled

“Deuteronomistic History [DH or Dtr].” This can be seen in the theology of the name (12:5, 11) and the shift from God’s dwelling in the tabernacle or temple to his dwelling in heaven (Deut 26:15; 1 Kgs 3:2; 5:17; 8:17, 27). Joshua, for example, picks up common Deuteronomic phrases such as “be strong and courageous” (Deut 3:28; Josh 1:9), among others (Weinfeld, ABD). While it is fascinating to trace the themes intertextually from Deuteronomy through 2 Kings, there are other explanations other than editors that may explain the foundational role of Deuteronomy in the shaping of Israel’s religion.

## **Theology**

### **God in Deuteronomy**

The book of Deuteronomy is a very theological book. Yahweh is portrayed as the suzerain (great king) who makes and keeps his covenant with Israel, his vassal (4:23, 31:9; 29:1, 12). He who is one (*Shema*, 6:4) has maintained his loyal love (*hesed*; 5:10; 7:9, 12) to Israel as demonstrated in his mighty acts on their behalf as they journeyed through the wilderness (3:24; 4:33; 8:19), and by giving them his law (10:2) and the land. He was a faithful God who had chosen them and placed his love upon them keeping the oath that he had sworn to their forefathers (7:7f; ). They, in turn, were to respond by fearing the Lord, walking in his ways and serving him with all their hearts and souls (10:12ff). It is he who defends the cause of the orphans, widows and aliens (10:18). God is a jealous God, demanding exclusive love and objecting to any pursuit of false gods or idols (4:16, 23-29). God is merciful (4:31) and loving (4:37), yet his fierce anger is frequently displayed when the covenant relationship is violated (9:18f; 31:29). God dwells in heaven (26:15), yet he is also the God of history so his mighty acts of delivering them from Egypt are not to be forgotten (4:34; 6:21-23; 7:18f). His acts of redemption are to be remembered, rehearsed and taught to their children (4:9; 6:7-9; 11:19; 31:12f; 32:46f). To forget is a problem. It is in history that Israel meets Yahweh (cf. Thompson, 71ff). While the transcendence of the divine is well noted, there is a closeness as the divine word is “very near you, it is in your mouth...” (30:12-14).

### **People of God**

The people of God were a chosen community not “because they were more numerous than other people, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out...” (7:7f). They were chosen not because of their righteousness (9:4ff) but were brought into the Promised Land because of the wickedness of the nations God was driving out before them. The whole community was elect (14:1, 21) and McConville (IVP, 188f.) notes that the term “brother” occurs in “unexpected places” in reference to slaves and debtors (15:3, 7, 12). There was to be special care extended to the orphans,

widows and aliens (14:29; 24:17; 26:12f). Warnings against the betrayal of covenant loyalty by idolatry and worship of other gods were abundant (4:28; 6:14; 12:30f; 32:16f). Instead Israel was to love, fear, serve, obey and walk in the ways of the Lord their God (10:12-11:1). In Deuteronomy the foundations of the basic institutions of the Israelite community are prescribed (kings, prophets, judges, priests). The people are united as they recite his mighty acts when they offer the first fruits of the land (Deut 26:5-10).

### **Wisdom and Deuteronomy**

Weinfeld has developed the connection between Deuteronomy and wisdom literature. Proverbs, Deuteronomy and the Egyptian Wisdom of Amenomope all refer to things as an “abomination to the Lord” (Deut 25:13-16; Prov 11:1; 20:10, 23), discuss the evil of changing weights and measures (Deut 25:13-16; Prov 20:10), and regulate slave and master relations (Deut 23:16; Prov 30:10). He also notes the stress on wisdom and understanding (4:6). It is interesting that in Exodus 18:13-27 Moses appoints judges who are “capable men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate gain” but in Deuteronomy (1:9-18) they are men of “understanding and full of knowledge” (Weinfeld, ABD).

### **Land**

Finally, the land concept is featured in Deuteronomy. The land is seen as a good land flowing with milk and honey (11:9-11; 26:9). Its crops of wheat, barley, figs, grapes, olive oil and pomegranates are the produce of this good land (8:7-10) resulting not from river irrigation but from rain provided or withheld depending on their obedience from the divine suzerain who personally watered the land (11:10-17). The land is given as a gift from God to them based on the promise to their forefathers (8:1; 31:20). Hence, it is the Promised Land. They had not earned it or built its flourishing cities (6:10f.; 9:6). They should not forget the Lord or go after other gods, thereby defiling the land and resulting in their being driven in exile from it (28:64f).

### **Questions to think about**

- 1) Compare and contrast the Book of the Covenant (Exod 21-23) and Deuteronomy.
- 2) Compare and contrast the Ten Commandments in Exod 20 and Deut 5.
- 3) How is the notion of war presented and God seen as a warrior?
- 4) How are the themes of divine love, election, and anger developed?
- 5) How is the theme of God’s revelation of himself in history developed?
- 6) How are the institutions of the kingship, judges, and prophecy developed?
- 7) What are the roles of the Levitical priests in Deuteronomy?
- 8) How is God portrayed in Deuteronomy? What metaphors are used? What does he do?
- 9) How are human choices, consequences and destinies featured in Deuteronomy?
- 10) What key phrases are shared by Deuteronomy and Joshua?