

Introduction to Deuteronomy
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Title:

Deuteronomy means “second law” and is derived from the Septuagint (LXX), a Greek translation of the Hebrew OT (ca. 250 BC). The Greek word (δευτερονόμιον) appears in the LXX in Deuteronomy 17:18, where the anticipated future king of Israel would be required to “write for himself a copy of this law¹ on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests” (Deut 17:18b).² The book of Deuteronomy is not a second copy of the Law itself, “but an amplification and advancement of the covenant text first articulated to Moses and Israel at Sinai nearly forty years earlier.”³ The Hebrew title is derived from the first words of the book which are translated from the Hebrew (אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים) “these are the words.”

Author:

The author is Moses (Deut 1:1, 5; 4:44-45; 31:9, 24; cf. Josh 1:7-8; 2 Ki 14:6; Matt 19:7; Acts 7:37-38; Rom 10:19; 1 Cor 9:9), excluding his death (Deut 34:1-12). “Deuteronomy is quoted in the New Testament nearly one hundred times; and Jesus quoted more from Deuteronomy than from any other Old Testament book.”⁴

Audience:

The second generation of Israelites who were living just east of the Jordan River (Deut 1:1), whose parents rebelled against the Lord and wandered in the wilderness for forty years until they perished (Num 14:33-34; Deut 1:3; 2:7, 14; Josh 5:6).

Date of Writing:

Circa 1405 BC (Deut 1:3). This assumes an early date for the exodus in 1445 BC.

Occasion for Writing:

Moses is about to die. Deuteronomy is his farewell message to the Israelites who are about to enter the land of Canaan under the leadership of Joshua. Deuteronomy is not merely a

¹ The Hebrew phrase in Deuteronomy 17:18 (מִשְׁנֵה הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת) – *a copy of this law*) likely refers only the book of Deuteronomy itself which the king was to reproduce and carry with him all the days of his life.

² Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotes are from the *New American Standard Bible*.

³ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 22.

⁴ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Equipped*, “Be” Commentary Series (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Pub., 1999), 8.

recapitulation of Moses' previous writings; rather, "It is a selective digest of matters most important to the average Israelite in his or her relationship with God. Moses spoke as an aged father to his children. These are the parting words of the man who communed with God face to face."⁵

Structure:

The book of Deuteronomy is structured after an ancient Hittite suzerain-vassal treaty. "More than forty years of scholarship has reached a near consensus about the essential elements of standard Hittite treaty texts. These consist of (1) preamble, (2) historical prologue, (3) general stipulations, (4) specific stipulations, (5) blessings and curses, and (6) witnesses."⁶

In line with the general correspondence of the form of a thing to its function, it is safe to say that one cannot understand the theology of Deuteronomy without reference to its covenant form and structure ... That is, the very fact that the book is in the shape and style of a covenant text presupposes that the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel is a major concern. It follows then that the theology of Deuteronomy must be sensitive to this state of affairs and that, in fact, it must be informed from beginning to end by covenant concerns. It is no exaggeration to maintain that the concept of covenant lies at the very heart of the book and may be said to be the center of its theology. Covenant by its very definition demands at least three elements—the two contracting parties and the document that describes and outlines the purpose, nature, and requirements of the relationship. Thus, the three major rubrics of the theology of Deuteronomy are (1) Yahweh, the Great King and covenant initiator; (2) Israel, the vassal and covenant recipient; and (3) the book itself, the covenant organ, complete with the essentials of standard treaty documents. This means, moreover, that all the revelation of the book must be seen through the prism of covenant and not abstractly removed from the peculiar historical and ideological context in which it originated.⁷

Deuteronomy was to be read and taught within the family (Deut 6:4-7). A copy of the book was to be in the possession of the Levitical priests (Deut 31:9; cf. 31:24-26), and they were to read the book publicly every seven years (Deut 31:10-11). This instruction was intended to produce respect and obedience among God's people (Deut 31:12-13). Deuteronomy helps us understand all that occurs throughout Israel's history which follows, as the blessing and cursing is applied to subsequent Israelites.

⁵ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Introduction to Deuteronomy.

⁶ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 29–30.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 47–48.

Moses' Message:

The central message of Deuteronomy is: *serve the Lord from your heart* (Deut 6:4-9). The book of Deuteronomy is a reiteration of the covenant God instituted at Mount Sinai (Ex 19:1-6). The book of Deuteronomy consists of three messages Moses preached over a period of forty days (Deut 1:5-6; 5:1; 29:1). It was Moses' counsel to the Israelites who were about to enter a land dominated by a polytheistic pagan people who would tempt them away from their unique God, who alone is the God of the universe. Moses informed them, "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!" (Deut 6:4). If Israel would listen to the commands given in Moses' message, it would result in blessing, which is what God preferred. However, if they disobeyed, God would bring cursing (Deut 11:13-17).

The major theme of the book is love. God's love for His people is what motivated Him to govern the way He did (Deut 5:9-10; 7:7-9, 12-13; 10:15-19). And in response, God's people were to love and obey Him (Deut 6:4-5; 10:12-13, 18-19; 11:1, 13-14, 22-23; 13:3; 19:8-9; 30:15-16). Love starts with understanding (Deut 6:4-5; 11:18) and flows into action (Deut 10:18-19). Loving obedience to God would result in His blessing upon them, and cursing if they hated and disobeyed (Deut 11:26-28; 30:15-20). Similarly, God's love for us motivates us to love Him and others (1 John 4:19; cf. John 14:15, 21, 23).

This emphasis on love appears even more striking in comparison with other ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaties. The ancient Near Eastern kings delineated clearly the rights of the ruler and the responsibilities of the subjects in these documents. However, the motivation was self-interest, the opposite of love. Concern for others was present, but self-interest predominated.⁸

The Church would do well to learn the lessons of righteous living. "To love God supremely and our neighbors as ourselves, and to seek to glorify God in all that we do, is the essence of the message of Deuteronomy; and it's a message we need to return to as we face the challenges of the future."⁹

Outline:

1. Moses' introduction to Deuteronomy (Deut 1:1-5)
2. Moses reviews God's faithfulness to Israel since the Exodus (Deut 1:6—4:43)
3. Moses' exposition of God's laws to Israel (Deut 4:44—28:68)
4. Moses' appeal to faithfulness and commitment (Deut 29:1—30:20)
5. Moses' final words, song, and death are recorded (Deut 31:1—34:12)

⁸ Tom Constable, *Introduction to Deuteronomy*.

⁹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Equipped*, 8.