

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Deuteronomy

Scripture: Deuteronomy

Code: MSB05

Title

The English title “Deuteronomy” comes from the Greek Septuagint (LXX)¹ mistranslation of “copy of this law” in 17:18 as “second law,” which was rendered *Deuteronomium* in the Latin version (Vulgate). The Hebrew title of the book is translated “These are the words,” from the first two Hebrew words of the book. The Hebrew title is a better description of the book since it is not a “second law,” but rather the record of Moses’ words of explanation concerning the law. Deuteronomy completes the five-part literary unit called the Pentateuch.

Author and Date

Moses has been traditionally recognized as the author of Deuteronomy, since the book itself testifies that Moses wrote it (1:1, 5; 31:9, 22, 24). Both the OT (1 Kin. 2:3; 8:53; 2 Kin. 14:6; 18:12) and the NT (Acts 3:22, 23; Rom. 10:19) support the claim of Mosaic authorship. While Deut. 32:48–34:12 was added after Moses’ death (probably by Joshua), the rest of the book came from Moses’ hand just before his death in 1405 B.C.

The majority of the book is comprised of farewell speeches that the 120-year-old Moses gave to Israel, beginning on the first day of the 11th month of the 40th year after the Exodus from Egypt (1:3). These speeches can be dated Jan.–Feb., 1405 B.C. In the last few weeks of Moses’ life, he committed these speeches to writing and gave them to the priests and elders for the coming generations of Israel (31:9, 24–26).

Background and Setting

Like Leviticus, Deuteronomy does not advance historically, but takes place entirely in one location over about one month of time (cf. Deut. 1:3 and 34:8 with Josh. 5:6–12). Israel was encamped in the central rift valley to the E of the Jordan River (Deut. 1:1). This location was referred to in Num. 36:13 as “the plains of Moab,” an area N of the Arnon River across the Jordan River from Jericho. It had been almost 40 years since the Israelites had exited Egypt.

The book of Deuteronomy concentrates on events that took place in the final weeks of Moses’ life. The major event was the verbal communication of divine revelation from Moses to the people of Israel (1:1–30:20; 31:30–32:47; 33:1–29). The only other events recorded were: 1) Moses’ recording the law in a book and his commissioning of Joshua as the new leader (31:1–29); 2) Moses’ viewing of the land of Canaan from Mt. Nebo (32:48–52; 34:1–4); and 3) his death (34:5–12).

The original recipients of Deuteronomy, both in its verbal and written presentations, were the second generation of the nation of Israel. All of that generation from 40 to 60 years of age (except Joshua

and Caleb, who were older) had been born in Egypt and had participated as children or teens in the Exodus. Those under 40 had been born and reared in the wilderness. Together, they comprised the generation that was on the verge of conquering the land of Canaan under Joshua, 40 years after they had left Egypt (1:34–39).

Historical and Theological Themes

Like Leviticus, Deuteronomy contains much legal detail, but with an emphasis on the people rather than the priests. As Moses called the second generation of Israel to trust the Lord and be obedient to His covenant made at Horeb (Sinai), he illustrated his points with references to Israel's past history. He reminded Israel of her rebellion against the Lord at Horeb (9:7–10:11) and at Kadesh (1:26–46), which brought devastating consequences. He also reminded her of the Lord's faithfulness in giving victory over her enemies (2:24–3:11; 29:2, 7, 8). Most importantly, Moses called the people to take the land that God had promised by oath to their forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (1:8; 6:10; 9:5; 29:13; 30:20; 34:4; cf. Gen. 15:18–21; 26:3–5; 35:12). Moses not only looked back, he also looked ahead and saw that Israel's future failure to obey God would lead to her being scattered among the nations before the fulfillment of His oath to the patriarchs would be completed (4:25–31; 29:22–30:10; 31:26–29).

The book of Deuteronomy, along with Psalms and Isaiah, reveals much about the attributes of God. Thus, it is directly quoted over 40 times in the NT (exceeded only by Psalms and Isaiah) with many more allusions to its content. Deuteronomy reveals that the Lord is the only God (4:39; 6:4), and that He is jealous (4:24), faithful (7:9), loving (7:13), merciful (4:31), yet angered by sin (6:15). This is the God who called Israel to Himself. Over 250 times, Moses repeated the phrase, "the LORD your God" to Israel. Israel was called to obey (28:2), fear (10:12), love (10:12), and serve (10:12) her God by walking in His ways and keeping His commandments (10:12, 13). By obeying Him, the people of Israel would receive His blessings (28:1–14). Obedience and the pursuit of personal holiness is always based upon the character of God. Because of who He is, His people are to be holy (cf., 7:6–11; 8:6, 11, 18; 10:12, 16, 17; 11:13; 13:3, 4; 14:1, 2).

Interpretive Challenges

Three interpretive challenges face the reader of Deuteronomy. First, is the book a singular record, or is it only a part of the larger literary whole, the Pentateuch? The remainder of the Scripture always views the Pentateuch as a unit, and the ultimate meaning of Deuteronomy cannot be divorced from its context in the Pentateuch. The book also assumes the reader is already familiar with the 4 books that precede it; in fact, Deuteronomy brings into focus all that had been revealed in Genesis to Numbers, as well as its implications for the people as they entered the Land. However, every available Hebrew manuscript divides the Pentateuch in exactly the same way as the present text, indicating that the book is a well defined unit recounting the final speeches of Moses to Israel, so it may also be viewed as a singular record.

Second, is the structure of Deuteronomy based on the secular treaties of Moses' day? During the last 35 years, many evangelical scholars have supported the Mosaic authorship of Deuteronomy by appealing to the similarities between the structure of the book and the ancient Near Eastern treaty form of the mid-second millennium B.C. (the approximate time of Moses). These secular suzerainty treaties (i.e., a ruler dictating his will to his vassals) followed a set pattern not used in the mid-first millennium B.C. These treaties usually contained the following elements: 1) preamble—identifying

the parties to the covenant; 2) historical prologue—a history of the king’s dealing with his vassals; 3) general and specific stipulations; 4) witnesses; 5) blessings and curses; and 6) oaths and covenant ratification. Deuteronomy, it is believed, approximates this basic structure. While there is agreement that 1:1–5 is a preamble, 1:5–4:43 a historical prologue, and chaps. 27, 28 feature blessings and cursings, there is no consensus as to how the rest of Deuteronomy fits this structure. While there might have been a covenant renewal on the plains of Moab, this is neither clearly explicit nor implicit in Deuteronomy. It is best to take the book for what it claims to be: the explanation of the law given by Moses for the new generation. The structure follows the speeches given by Moses. See Outline.

Third, what was the covenant made in the land of Moab (29:1)? The majority opinion posits this covenant as a renewal of the Sinaitic Covenant made nearly 40 years before with the first generation. Here, Moses supposedly updated and renewed this same covenant with the second generation of Israel. The second view sees this covenant as a Palestinian Covenant which guarantees the nation of Israel’s right to the land, both at that time and in the future. A third position is that Moses in chaps. 29, 30 anticipated the New Covenant, since he knew Israel would fail to keep the Sinaitic Covenant. The third view seems the best.

1. LXX Septuagint—an ancient translation of the Old Testament into Greek

Outline

I. Introduction: The Historical Setting of Moses’ Speeches (1:1–4)

II. The First Address by Moses: A Historical Prologue (1:5–4:43)

A. A Historical Review of God’s Gracious Acts from Horeb to Beth Peor (1:5–3:29)

B. An Exhortation to Obey the Law (4:1–40)

C. The Setting Apart of Three Cities of Refuge (4:41–43)

III. The Second Address by Moses: The Stipulations of the Sinaitic Covenant (4:44–28:68)

A. Introduction (4:44–49)

B. The Basic Elements of Israel’s Relationship with the Lord (5:1–11:32)

1. The Ten Commandments (5:1–33)

2. The total commitment to the Lord (6:1–25)

3. Separation from the gods of other nations (7:1–26)

4. A warning against forgetting the Lord (8:1–20)

5. Illustrations of Israel’s rebellion in the past (9:1–10:11)

6. An admonition to fear and love the Lord and obey His will (10:12–11:32)

C. The Specific Stipulations for Life in the New Land (12:1–26:19)

1. Instructions for the life of worship (12:1–16:17)
2. Instructions for leadership (16:18–18:22)
3. Instructions for societal order (19:1–23:14)
4. Instructions from miscellaneous laws (23:15–25:19)
5. The firstfruits and tithes in the land (26:1–15)
6. The affirmation of obedience (26:16–19)
- D. The Blessings and Curses of the Covenant (27:1–28:68)

IV. The Third Address by Moses: Another Covenant (29:1–30:20)

V. The Concluding Events (31:1–34:12)

- A. The Change of Leadership (31:1–8)
- B. The Future Reading of the Law (31:9–13)
- C. The Song of Moses (31:14–32:47)
 1. The anticipation of Israel's failure (31:14–29)
 2. The witness of Moses' song (31:30–32:43)
 3. The communicating of Moses' song (32:44–47)
- D. The Final Events of Moses' Life (32:48–34:12)
 1. The directives for Moses' death (32:48–52)
 2. The blessing of Moses (33:1–29)
 3. The death of Moses (34:1–12)

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