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DEUTERONOMY

INTRODUCTION TO DEUTERONOMY

Deuteronomy might be called the Romans of the Old Testament. It is chock-full of the great themes of scripture. It is a wonderfully down-to-earth and practical book that provides counsel about both the large and small issues and questions of life. It addresses itself both to private matters such as the inner conflicts of the believing soul, the way of faith under trial, marriage and family, and to such public and corporate issues such as worship and the proper stewardship of the environment.

AUTHOR

Moses is clearly identified as the author of Deuteronomy in verse 1. Moses' authorship is claimed throughout Deuteronomy (1:5, 9; 5:1; 27:8; 29:2; 31:1, 30) as well as in other Old Testament books (1 Kings 2:3; 8:53; 2 Kings 14:6; 18:6, 12). Jesus also identified Moses as the author of Deuteronomy (Matthew 19:7–8; Mark 10:3–5; John 5:46–47), as did Peter (Acts 3:22), Stephen (Acts 7:37–38), and Paul (Romans 10:19; 1 Corinthians 9:9).

The final chapter, recording Moses' death and burial (34:1–12), was most likely added by another writer after Moses' death.

PURPOSE

The title *Deuteronomy* means "second law." In this book, Moses reiterates and expands on the laws God has already given Israel and calls them to renew their covenant with God by pledging their obedience.

OCCASION

The book of Deuteronomy records Moses' last words to the people of Israel as they are poised to enter the promised land after forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Moses reminds the people of all that the Lord has done for them to this point and calls them to a life of faithful obedience in the land they are about to receive.

STRUCTURE

At the time that Deuteronomy was written (around 1400 BC), "suzerainty treaties"—treaties of sovereignty of a stronger king over a weaker one—were common. Deuteronomy appears to be an almost perfect example of the ancient Middle Eastern treaty, a literary form that would have been easily appreciated and understood in Moses' day:

- Opening preamble (paralleled in 1:1–5)
- Historical introduction (1:6–4:49)
- The particular stipulations of the treaty (chapters 5–26)
- What blessings and curses would result from keeping or breaking the treaty (chapters 27–28; 32–33)
- Some form of oath taking (chapters 29–30)
- Provisions for the perpetuation of the covenant after the death of the particular kings who signed it (chapter 31)

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DEUTERONOMY 1:1–46

FAITH BEFORE WORKS

Preamble	1:1–5
God's Faithfulness Comes First	1:6–18
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Setting Up the Section

When Deuteronomy commences, Israel as a nation is poised on the eastern bank of the Jordan River opposite Jericho. Two months later, she will cross the river, on dry land, into the promised land for the first time. It is at this juncture in her history that God initiates a renewal of the covenant He had established with the Israelites when they were camped at Sinai (Exodus 19–24). Chapter 1 records the preamble to this renewal and the beginning of a lengthy review of God's dealings with Israel. The historical prologue, which begins here in chapter 1, serves to provide a rationale for obedience to the commandments which occupy the largest part of the book.

 1:1–5

PREAMBLE

Deuteronomy appears to be an almost perfect example of the ancient Middle Eastern treaty form. It begins, as did the treaties of that time, with a preamble (1:1–5), giving the geographical and historical setting.

**Critical Observation**

Archaeological discoveries of international treaties have shed new light on the literary structure of the book of Deuteronomy. Ancient Middle Eastern treaties had a standard form:

- Opening preamble (paralleled in 1:1–5)
- Historical introduction (1:6–4:49)
- Particular stipulations of the treaty (chapters 5–26)
- What blessings and curses would result from keeping or breaking the treaty (chapters 27–28; 32–33)
- Some form of oath (chapters 29–30)
- Provisions for the perpetuation of the covenant after the death of the particular kings who signed it (chapter 31)

GOD'S FAITHFULNESS COMES FIRST

Moses begins by reminding Israel that their favored status as God's children and their wonderful prospects as a people have nothing to do with them or anything they have done. They can take no credit for the land and prosperity that is soon to be theirs—or for the spiritual life and bounty of which the promised land is a sign and seal. The promise being fulfilled was made generations before to their forefather, Abraham. God is faithful to His promises.

The Lord had promised Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky (Genesis 15:5; 22:17; 26:4). Moses observes that this promise has come true (Deuteronomy 1:10) and with it the conclusion that leading the people is more work than one man can do (1:9–12). Moses reminds the people that they approved the appointment of leaders and agreed to be subject to their authority (1:13–18). Chapters 16–18 will further refine the system of leadership in Israel.

THE NECESSITY OF FAITH

The account of Israel's cowardly refusal to enter the land that God had promised is an instructive beginning to the book of Deuteronomy, because it shows that God's fundamental requirement is not obedience to the law, but faith.

The event that Moses recounts had happened thirty-eight years earlier at Kadesh Barnea (1:19). As Moses recollects in verse 21, the Lord has already given them the land, as it were, and all they have to do is walk in and take possession. But they are unnerved by the spies' reports of fortified cities and warlike people (1:22–28). The Lord has already proved His might and His faithfulness to His people by bringing them out of Egypt and providing their food and water in the wilderness (1:29–33). Now they stand poised to enter the promised land, but they do not do so. Verse 32 indicates it's a faith issue: "You did not believe the LORD your God" (ESV).

Demystifying Deuteronomy

Most ancient Middle Eastern treaties were "suzerainty treaties," or treaties of sovereignty of a stronger king over a weaker one. The Lord had given Moses this covenantal revelation in the form drawn from the custom of ancient Middle Eastern diplomacy. It provides a wonderful example of God's condescension, of His employing a literary form that would have been easily appreciated and understood in Moses' day. He wanted to be understood and wanted His covenant to be kept.

When the people realize that as a result of their lack of faith they will never be permitted to enter Canaan (1:34–40), they see the error of their ways and march across the border (1:41–43). The Lord does not go with them, and they are soundly thrashed by Canaanite armies and chased back into the wilderness (1:44). They gather in the camp and weep before the Lord, but He will not relent (1:45–46).

It is clear enough that what lies behind the Lord's unwillingness to listen to Israel's cries is His knowledge that their hearts are far from Him. They are bitterly sorry for the consequences of their stupidity, but they still have neither true faith in the Lord nor true reverence for Him. Numbers 14:24, the original account of this episode, reveals that the Lord does not punish Caleb the same way, because Caleb has a different spirit. It is not the disobedience itself that is so important; God is always forgiving the disobedience of His people. The problem is the people do not obey God, because they neither trust His Word nor love Him for His goodness to them.



Take It Home

First things first: faith then obedience. First the glad acceptance of God's gracious salvation; then a life lived in demonstration of undying gratitude to God. Deuteronomy spends most of its time teaching us how to live so as to demonstrate our love and gratitude to God—how God would have us think and speak and act. But it begins by reminding us that the only obedience that pleases God is that which flows from the love and gratitude of a person who knows full well that he or she has been saved by the grace and mercy and goodness and power of God alone. To a very great degree, what kind of Christian you are will be determined by just how fully you appreciate the grace of God.

DEUTERONOMY 2:1–37

FROM WANDERING TO CONQUEST

Mercy over All His Works

2:1–23

Hard Sayings

2:24–37

Setting Up the Section

Moses, at the end of the forty years of desert wanderings, is recalling for the people their history. Chapter 1 ends with the Lord's decree that the generation who left Egypt will not enter the promised land of Canaan. Chapter 2 begins the saga of Israel's forty-year sojourn in the wilderness.

2:1–23

MERCY OVER ALL HIS WORKS

Poised on the brink of the promised land, the Israelites now have to turn around and retrace their steps toward the Red Sea (2:1). Hidden in this narrative of Israel's travels through the wilderness from Kadesh Barnea to the Arnon Gorge is a lovely and profoundly important truth: The Lord shows kindness to the large part of humanity that lies beyond the boundaries of the church and His kingdom.

Verses 1–8 show the Lord's concern for the people living in Seir. The Lord gives careful instructions to Israel that she is not to engage them in battle, for God has no intention of letting Israel take the land from them (2:5). What is more, all the food and water they consume while passing through is to be paid for in cash, which they could easily afford because God has provided; they lack nothing (2:6).

Similar instructions about how to treat the Moabites (Deuteronomy 2:9, 17–19) bracket the three short verses relating the passage of thirty-eight years and the death of an entire generation of fighting men (2:14–16). Historical asides about the previous inhabitants of the land (2:10–12, 20–23) remind the readers that in these cases, as in the case of Israel's conquest of Canaan, it is the Lord who drives out the nations (2:21–22) and who gives ownership of the land (2:7, 9, 12, 19).



Critical Observation

The mercy of God toward all people, not just believers, often goes by the name of “common grace,” to distinguish it from particular and saving grace.

2:24–37

HARD SAYINGS

Verse 24 signals a change in the way God commands Israel to deal with other nations. They *will* engage in battle, but according to God's plan (2:24–25). The Lord is telling them what will occur. Peace can still be genuinely offered (2:26–29).

Deuteronomy 2:30–37 not only recounts the first victory recorded in the book, but also introduces some hard sayings. Verse 30 states that God hardens Sihon's heart so that he will not allow Israel to pass through his territory peacefully, because God had determined to give Sihon and his kingdom into Israel's hand. This is the only explanation given of this statement.



Critical Observation

The word translated *destroyed* in verse 34 is the Hebrew term which means “to dedicate or devote something to God.” Sometimes it has a positive sense—such as when objects are devoted for use in the temple and its worship—but more often it refers to the compulsory devotion of something which impedes or hinders God's work. In that case, the object is devoted to utter destruction. That is the idea here.

It is clear that it is the Lord who wins the battle for Israel (2:31–33, 36). Verses 34–37 are the account of the utter annihilation which Israel bestowed upon Sihon's kingdom. No one is left; not men, not women, not even children. That God would use these means is a tough truth to understand.