

A Look at a Book: Deuteronomy

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Second Law

On the surface, the book of Deuteronomy (“second law”) appears to be a repetition of the law found in preceding books, although here the laws are further explained and applied. Yet, some scholars call the book “The Gospel According to Moses,” while others compare Moses’ writings to Paul, describing the incredible theological value of this Old Testament book. Deuteronomy is the fifth and final book of what Jewish tradition knows as the Torah, and Christians refer to as the Pentateuch.

Moses, here, is more of a pastor than a lawgiver. Israel is poised to enter the Promised Land. It is a moment of hope, but likewise a moment of uncertainty, and God’s people need the reassurance of a pastor’s hand.

The tone of Deuteronomy is that of a personal plea; it is Moses’ last chance with the people he loved. The book contains three speeches delivered by Moses to the Israelites in the plains of Moab, between the close of the wilderness wanderings and the entrance into the land of Canaan (about 40 days at most). Moses constantly reminds the people of God’s gracious dealing with them and appeals for them to respond to God’s goodness by giving Him their undivided love and loyalty. What Moses tells the Israelites so long ago makes perfect sense to believers today. He tells them they need to be in a covenant relationship with God, that God wants them to be His people. Moses challenges the Israelites to respond by declaring that Yahweh alone is their God, and then by doing what God asks them to do.

Poised on the Edge

Moses passionately went over and over the same ground, occasionally lashing out, but more often showing the anguish and love of a doting parent. An undercurrent of sadness runs through Moses’ speeches; Moses knew he would not join them in the triumph of entering Canaan. God had revealed that Moses would die before then. In Exodus, Moses was marked by a quick temper and reluctance to speak. His humility and eloquence as seen in Deuteronomy show how far he had come in forty years. Deep in his soul, Moses felt that the entire history of the Jews depended upon what happened next.

Poised on the edge of the Jordan River, God’s people were about to enter the Promised Land and face the most crucial test of their lives. How would they react to the land? Would they keep their covenant with God or reject it for the more immediate pleasures around them? Desert-bred, the Israelites knew little about the seductions of other cultures: the sensuality, the exotic religions, and the glittering wealth. They had spent their lives in near-isolation, sheltered from civilization. Now they were marching into a land full of enticements.

A Book of Transition

A transition to a new generation

A transition to a new possession

A transition to a new experience
A transition to a new revelation of God (His love)

Three Speeches

Moses' first speech (1:1-4:43) reviewed God's dealings with Israel. Moses recalled Israel's history through his own eyes, mentioning such details as the irrigation system in Egypt, the abrupt departure, the fearsome desert with its serpents and scorpions, and the amazing miracles of God. He filled the account with his personal reflections, like an aging father telling his children what to remember when he is gone. He also encourages God's people to steer clear of idolatry.

The longest speech (4:44-26:19) went over the moral and civil codes the Israelites had agreed to keep. Even here, a personal tone came through. Moses did not list laws as in a textbook; he discussed and amplified and preached them. Along with the laws, he included reminders, object lessons, and personal outbursts.

The third speech (27:1-31:30) deals primarily with the blessings of obedience and the curses of disobedience. As clearly as he could, Moses presented the choices facing the Israelites. He would not be with them as they chose their future. They were on their own; they held their destiny in their own hands.

Three Appendixes

Moses' Song (chapter 32)

Moses' Blessing (chapter 33)

Moses' Death (chapter 34)

A Repeated Theme – Remember!

Remember where you have been (instructing a new generation in their past).

Remember where you are going (instructing a new generation in their future).

Remember how to act when you get there (instructing a new generation in their relationship).

A Favorite of Jesus and Paul

Judging by the number of quotations from Deuteronomy, this was Jesus' favorite book. This impression is reinforced by His distillation of the entire law into one simple command to love one's neighbor as oneself (Matt. 22:37, Mark 12:30, Luke 10:27). While appeals for love for one's neighbor and the stranger occur earlier in the Pentateuch (Lev. 19:18, 34), the command to love God occurs only in Deuteronomy (Deut 6:5; 11:1, 13; 13:3-4; 30:6).

Paul repeatedly cites texts from Deuteronomy to buttress his positions (Rom. 10:19; 11:8; 12:19; 1 Cor. 5:13; 9:9; Eph. 6:2-3, etc.). However, it is clear that Paul interpreted not only the entire history of God's revelation, but also Deuteronomy in particular in the light of Christ and the cross (Rom. 10:6-8; 1 Cor. 8:6; Gal. 3:13). In so doing, Paul functioned as a second Moses, not only in providing a profoundly theological interpretation of God's saving actions in Christ, but also in reminding his readers that salvation comes by grace alone. In Romans and Galatians Paul's argument is addressed to those who would pervert the "law" into a means of salvation, rather than treating it as a response to salvation as Moses perceived it. Paul was in perfect step

with Moses: obedience to the law was not a means of gaining salvation but a willing and grateful response to salvation already received.

Authorship and Date

The speeches of Deuteronomy are derived from Moses himself, but the book as we have it, is probably earliest produced during the tenure of Joshua after the Israelites had crossed the Jordan. It is reasonable to suppose that by David's time Deuteronomy more or less as we have it existed as the last scroll of the Pentateuch.

Deuteronomy and Theology

The function of Deuteronomy is to call every generation of Israelites to faithful covenant love for Yahweh in response to His gracious salvation and His revelation of Himself (6:20-25) and in acceptance of the missional role to which He called them (26:19). In developing this theme, Moses presents a remarkable theology:

1. Israel's history begins and ends with God. Deuteronomy instructs Israel and all subsequent readers on Yahweh's absolute uniqueness, eternality, transcendence, holiness, justice and righteousness, passion for His covenant and His relationship with His people, faithfulness, presence, compassion, and especially His covenant love. Yahweh lives in relationship with human beings, which explains why Moses never tired of speaking of God's grace.
2. Deuteronomy offers a comprehensive picture of the community of faith, the chosen people of Yahweh. The book presents the nation of Israel as an incredibly privileged people. As objects of Yahweh's gracious redemption and covenantal love, they are a holy people belonging to Him.
3. No other book in the Old Testament presents as thorough a treatment of covenant relationship as Deuteronomy. The covenant ceremonies that underlie the book of Deuteronomy represent the present generation's own commitment to covenant (26:16-19). Within the covenant relationship obedience to the law is:
 - a. Not a burden but a response to the privilege of knowing God's will (4:6-8)
 - b. Not a precondition to salvation but the grateful response of those who have already been saved (6:20-25)
 - c. Not primarily a duty imposed by one party on another but an expression of covenant love (26:16-19)
 - d. Not merely an external act but evidence of the circumcision of one's heart and the internal disposition of fear of and love for God (10:12-11:1; 30:6-9)
 - e. Not a pressured response to a tyrant but a willing subordination of one's entire being to the gracious divine Yahweh (6:4-9; 10:12-13)
4. Deuteronomy presents a highly developed theology of land. The relationships involving Yahweh, the people, and the land were perceived as dynamic relationships, which meant the response of the land to Israel's occupation would depend entirely on the people's fidelity to Yahweh.
5. From beginning to end, it is clear that Israel is a theocracy, with Yahweh as her divine and only God.

To Consider

1. Deut. 1:6 – God calls us to journey with Him!
2. Deut. 3:21-27 – There are consequences to our sin.
3. Deut 3:28 – God provides leaders for His people (also in 31:23).
4. Deut 5:6-21 – The Ten Commandments repeated (Exodus 20).
5. Deut 6:4-9 – The greatest command (Shema)!
6. Deut. 7:2a-4 – Be careful in your relationships with non-believers.
7. Deut. 8:3 – Bread alone?
8. Deut. 9:3 – God goes before us!
9. Deut. 10:12 – What does God require?
10. Deut. 34:1-10 – God is faithful to His promises!

Outline of the Book of Deuteronomy

- I. Moses' First Address: Remembering the Grace of Yahweh (1:1-4:43)
 - a. The Preamble to Moses' First Address (1:1-5)
 - b. The Essence of Moses' First Address: The Grace of Calling (1:6-4:40)
 - c. The Epilogue to Moses' First Address (4:41-43)
- II. Moses' Second Address: Explaining the Grace of Yahweh (4:44-29:1)537
 - a. The Preamble to Moses' Second Address (4:44 – 5:1a)
 - b. The Essence of Moses Second Address: The Grace of Covenant (5:1b-26:19)
 - i. The Revelation of the Principles of Covenant (5:6-6:3)
 - ii. Proclaiming the Privilege of Covenant Relationship (6:4-11:32)
 - iii. Proclaiming the Dimensions of Covenant Relationship (12:1-26:19)
 - c. Interlude: A Call for Covenantal Renewal in the Promised Land (27:1-26)
 - d. The Epilogue to Moses' Second Address (29:1)
- III. Moses' Third Address: Trusting in the Grace of Yahweh (29:2-30:20)
 - a. The Preamble to Moses' Third Address (29:2a)
 - b. The Essence of Moses' Third Address: The Grace of Covenant Renewal (29:2b-30:20)
- IV. The Death of Moses (31:1-34:12)
 - a. Preparing for the Death of Moses (31:1-32:47)
 - b. Announcing the Death of Moses (32:48-52)
 - c. The Benediction of Moses (33:1-29)
 - d. Recounting the Death of Moses (34:1-12)

Block, Daniel L., *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Zondervan, 2012)
Stringfellow, Alan B., *Through the Bible in One Year* (Virgil W. Hensley, Inc. 1978)