

A Survey of Deuteronomy

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The Importance of Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy is a significant Old Testament book. According to Norman Geisler, it “is the book of the Law most quoted in the New Testament, being cited over eighty times (cf. Acts 3:22; Rom. 10:19; I Cor. 9:9).”¹ The fact that *Jesus quoted from it three times during his temptation* by Satan (comp. Matt 4.4 with Deut 8.3; Matt 4.7 with Deut 6.16; Matt 4.10 with Deut 6.13; 10.20) should suffice to interest us in its message.

The Context of Deuteronomy

Authorship

The fact that Moses authored the book is supported by various lines of evidence. *Internal evidence* includes the following:

- ❖ Moses is named as the mediator of the covenant contained in the book (1.1; 4.44; 29.1).
- ❖ The book speaks of Moses recording the Law--or at least elements of it--in written form (e.g., 28.58; 29.20-21; 29.27; 30.10; 31.9, 24).
- ❖ “The geographical and historical details of the book display a firsthand, informed acquaintance such as Moses would have had.”²

External evidence of Mosaic authorship includes the following:

- ❖ Joshua 1.7-8 indicates that the Law was given through Moses and that it had been committed to written form in Joshua’s day.
- ❖ Christ referred to the books of the Law as being Moses’s work and as referring to himself (Luke 24.27, 44; 5.45-47).
- ❖ The leaders of the early church referred to the “reading” of Moses (Acts 15.21; 2 Cor 3.15), thus confirming that he did not merely give the Law in oral form, but recorded in written form.

Conservative biblical scholars estimate that the book was written around 1405 BC.³

Historical Context

The book of Deuteronomy is not primarily historical. Its content is essentially didactic, recording Moses’s instruction concerning the Law. Moses gave this instruction to the Israelites on the eve of their passage over the Jordan River to conquer the Promised Land, Canaan.⁴ The recipients of this teaching were a generation removed from the Exodus and the revelation of God’s Law at Sinai. As they prepared to inherit the land God had promised, it was necessary for Moses to rehearse the spiritual responsibilities they had as the people of God.

Geographical Context

Moses gave the Deuteronomy message(s) to the Israelites when they were in the plains of Moab on the east side of the Jordan River (Deut 1.4). They had lately come up from their wilderness wanderings to conquer Sihon, King of Heshbon, and Og, King of Bashan (Deut 3.3-7).

¹ Norman L. Geisler, *A Popular Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 77.

² *Ibid.*, 78.

³ *Ibid.*; cf. Paul N. Benware, *Survey of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 72.

⁴ “Deuteronomy is the least overtly historiographical of the books of the Pentateuch, for in its entirety it is an address by Moses to the covenant community on the eve of the conquest” (Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* [Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 1996], 24).

The Structure of Deuteronomy

Since Deuteronomy does not clearly transition from one topic of discussion to another, the modern reader may have difficulty understanding its structure. To the untrained eye, the book appears to be a legal code lacking organization. However, the logical flow of Deuteronomy becomes more clear when its structure is compared to that of the Hittite treaties of the ancient Near East. Jack S. Deere explains:

Deuteronomy follows the pattern of the vassal treaties typical of the second millennium B.C. When a king (a suzerain) made a treaty with a vassal country the treaty usually contained six elements: (a) a preamble, (b) a historical prologue (a history of the king's dealings with the vassal), (c) a general stipulation (a call for wholehearted allegiance to the king), (d) specific stipulations (detailed laws by which the vassal state could give concrete expression to its allegiance to the king), (e) divine witnesses (deities called to witness the treaty), and (f) blessings and curses (for obedience or disobedience to the treaty).⁵⁻⁶

These elements are basically present in Deuteronomy. Together they provide a rationale for the book's content and arrangement. Why did Moses borrow a literary form from a heathen nation? Eugene Merrill offers this explanation:

He could, of course, have created a new literary form with its own peculiar elements; but since his intent was to be instructive rather than creative, he used a vehicle with which the people would already have been familiar. . . . To clothe the profound theological truths of the . . . covenant relationship in the familiar garb of the form of international treaties was of inestimable value in communicating all that the covenant implied.⁷

The Key Ideas of Deuteronomy

Possession of the Land

The word *land* is used more than 180 times in Deuteronomy. Forms of the word *possess* occur more than 60 times in the book. The reason for this language is quite clear: Moses was primarily concerned with preparing Israel to enter the land of Canaan and assume the spiritual and moral responsibilities that would enable them to continue enjoying God's blessings there.⁸

Obedience to the Covenant

The theme of obedience is quite prominent in Deuteronomy. This is nowhere more evident than in chapters 27 and 28. There God outlined both the blessings Israel could expect to receive if she obeyed his

⁵ Jack S. Deere, "Deuteronomy," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty: Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs: ChariotVictor Publishing, 1985), 260. On the elements of Hittite treaties, see George E. Mendenhall, "Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition," *Biblical Archaeologist* 17 (September 1954): 54-60.

⁶ The view that Deuteronomy resembles a suzerainty treaty is confirmed by various sources: "Covenant," *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 177; Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 81-82; John Arthur Thompson, "Covenant, Covenants," *The New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology*, ed. Edward M. Blaiklock and R. K. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), 138-139.

⁷ Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 82.

⁸ The following texts illustrate the prominence of the idea of possessing the land: 26.1; 26.9; 28.8; 30.5.

Law, and the cursings that would follow if she disobeyed.⁹ While we may think it better to remain unaware of God's requirements for his children, Deuteronomy makes it clear that God intends for us to understand his will so that we can follow it.

The Worship of Jehovah

Deuteronomy provides specific guidelines for worshiping the LORD, particularly in chapter 12. Israel was not to deviate at all from God's instructions (12.32). Three elements of worship are emphasized:

- ❖ The proper person: Jehovah (10.12-13, 20)
- ❖ The proper place: the place God would designate (12.2ff)
- ❖ The proper procedure: not according to pagan ritual (12.4, 29-31)

Though times have changed and God has given new instructions for Christians to follow, one principle remains unchanged: We err when we try to serve God without following his prescriptions for doing so.

Messianic Prophecy

There is a Messianic flavor to Deuteronomy. In other words, the book gives some clues concerning the person and ministry of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. The Messianic text found in 18.15-19 is applied by Peter to Jesus in Acts 3.22-23. Implicit in the old covenant, the Law, was the expectation that a new covenant would some day be instituted by another prophet of Moses's stature.

Transition to New Things

Deuteronomy is laden with the idea of transition to new things. Israel was obviously entering a new land, Canaan. A new leader, Joshua, was emerging. The previous generation would soon die off and the young would carry out God's plan for conquest. The nation's worship would change as the people spread out and convened in a designated place at specific times during the year.

A Gospel Message

Nestled in the covenant language of Deuteronomy is a challenge to spiritual responsibility appropriated in the New Testament by the Apostle Paul (Deut 30.11-14). The text basically affirms that God's commands are not so distant or obscure that we must make special effort to comprehend them. Rather, they are very near us--in fact, in our mouth and heart. Romans 10.6-13 quotes twice from Deuteronomy, stating that the path to salvation is a matter of confession with the mouth and belief in the heart. The roots of the Christian gospel are firmly planted in the old covenant.

The Word is so near
To your heart and your tongue
With the one you confess
And acknowledge the Son
With the other believe
And are justified
And find life in knowing
It was for you He died.¹⁰

⁹ The language of blessing is typified in 28.1-6. Examples of curses that would attend disobedience may be found in 28.15-20.

¹⁰ Michael Card, "The Word Is So Near," on *The Ancient Faith*, Sparrow SPC 1377-1, sound recording.