



Deuteronomy

The book of Deuteronomy is set up as a farewell sermon by Moses to the people of Israel before his death and before they began their entry into the promised land (which begins in the following book of Joshua). The book begins with Moses telling God's people how they had arrived near the river Jordan (i.e. a recap of the story so far) and then contains an explanation of God's covenant with his people, including an explanation of the law, which contains a challenge to them to live up to the covenant and all it required of them. The book ends with the death of Moses and a reassurance that God would keep his promises.



How long will it take?

Reading time: 2 ½ hours
Short of time? Just read 1.1-46; 5.1-33; 30.11-20; 32.48-52 and 34.1-12



Genre

Theological History and Law



Anything tricky?

Like Joshua and Judges, Deuteronomy states the need to drive the Canaanites from the promised land. The challenge is to work out what you think is going on here. Did God really say this? If so why?



Inspiring quotes

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. ⁵ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6.4-9)

¹⁹ I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰ loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. (Deuteronomy 30.19-20)



About the Author

Traditionally Moses was regarded as the author of the first five books of the Bible (Genesis–Deuteronomy); known in Judaism as the Torah and in Christianity often as the Pentateuch (or five teachings).

Today many scholars would argue that Moses was not the author of the Pentateuch but that these five books grew up over a long period of time and were written down and edited from oral tradition.



About the times

In 2 Kings 22.8, the high priest Hilkiah found ‘the book of the law’ in the temple and brought it to King Josiah. The reforms that Josiah did following that suggest that what Hilkiah found was Deuteronomy. This would mean that some, if not all of the book of Deuteronomy, existed before the exile in the time of King Josiah (640-609 bc).

Since one of the themes of the book is ‘choose life’, behind Deuteronomy lurks the fear that they won’t, a fear that came to fruition at the end of 2 Kings when the people went into exile in Babylon.

Other books set around this time

At least in part, Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers which are all set around the time of the giving of the law.



What kind of Book is it?

Deuteronomy, like Exodus, falls into two categories

- Theological history i.e. history that is told with an eye to communicating what we believe about God. With Deuteronomy the theme is living up to the covenant that God has made with this people.
- Law, i.e. the giving of the commandments by God so that the people, in doing the law, were able to express their membership of the covenant.



How is it structured?

- | | |
|------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1.1-4.43 | Moses’ first speech to God’s people in which he reminded them how they got there |
| 4.44-28.68 | Moses’ second speech reflecting on the covenant |
| 29.1-30.20 | Moses’ third speech inviting God’s people to choose life |
| 31.1-34.12 | A selection of passages including the appointment of Joshua and the death of Moses |



Look out for...

Right at the heart of Deuteronomy lies the covenant between God and his people. Look out for the theme of the relationship between God and his people: especially what God promises that he will do for his people and what he asks from the people in response.

One of the key themes of Deuteronomy (and the subsequent histories based on it, Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings) is that God always keeps his promises. Notice the theme of God's promises as it runs through the book.

Also keep an eye out for blessings and curses (which you will find especially in chapter 28).



What could this mean for me?

Christians often struggle with the laws in the Torah. Paul makes it very clear that the law no longer binds us in the way it did for the people of Israel. As a result, it is easy to see the law as entirely negative. Reflect on the laws as you read and what sense you can make of them in the context of a relationship with God.



Discussion group questions

- Were there any parts of the book that you particularly liked or which inspired you?
- Were there any parts of the book that you disliked or which troubled you?
- What did *you* think the book was about?
- There is a lot of emphasis on social justice in Deuteronomy. What struck you about the emphasis on care for each other, for the stranger, for animals etc. in the book? Does Deuteronomy have anything to say to us today?
- A more uncomfortable strand of the book is the expectation that God's people will drive the Canaanites from the promised land. What do you think about this expectation? Do you think God commanded it? How should we understand it today?
- Moses is the central character of Deuteronomy. What did you think about him? Do you think Deuteronomy portrayed him sympathetically? If you were to ask him a question what might you ask him?
- Did you read anything in the book that touched you, expanded your faith or made you think more deeply about your life and how you live it?



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