

Book of Deuteronomy Explained

Deuteronomy is one of the most significant books in the Old Testament.

Judging from the number of quotations or citations of Deuteronomy in the New Testament, its influence has been extremely great.

According to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament, Deuteronomy is quoted or cited 195 times in the New Testament, exceeded only by references to Psalms, Isaiah, Genesis, and Exodus, in that order.

Based on the number of manuscripts of the individual Old Testament books found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, Deuteronomy was one of the five most influential works at Qumran (thus far there are 27 manuscripts of Psalms, 24 of Deuteronomy, 18 of Isaiah and 15 each of Genesis and Exodus).

Three times Jesus found strength in Deuteronomy to turn back Satan's tempting (Matt. 4:1-11; compare Deut. 6:13, 16; 8:3).

When asked which commandment was greatest (Matt. 22:36-37), He quoted (Deuteronomy 6:5) in reply.

The entire Bible is the story of covenant.

(We affirm that central focus every time we refer to "Old Testament" and "New Testament", which really mean "Old Covenant" and "New Covenant").

In Deuteronomy, Moses was led by the Spirit of God to do something new and wonderful to express this covenant: he followed a pattern of international discourse between nations.

We know about these treaty forms today, especially from Hittite examples.

In this case, the LORD was viewed in the place of a great king; the people were viewed in the place of vassal states.

Deuteronomy therefore contains an introduction to the covenant (1:1-5), historical background (1:6 – 4:3), covenant requirements (4:44 – 26:19), and curses and blessings (27:1 – 30:20).

The final four chapters (31-34), are not part of the covenant formula but contain final matters associated with the end of Moses' leadership of Israel.

Almost all of Deuteronomy is a series of sermons by Moses, not always chronological, and sometimes repetitious and overlapping.

But overall, the book presents a clear, deeply heartfelt appeal to the new generation of Israelites to agree to acknowledge the LORD as their God, along with instruction in how to do so.

What it means | God's Love Restated

The themes of Deuteronomy are foundational to the entire message of the Old Testament:

Covenant:

The Book of Deuteronomy restates God's love for Israel, the history of His provision for them, the benefits or blessings of walking in covenant with God, and the consequences for disobeying the stipulations of the covenant (see the summary in 28:1-68).

Christians today live in a New Covenant relationship with God, based on the blood of Christ, a covenant written on the heart rather than on tables of stone (Jer. 31:33-34).

Choice:

Throughout the history of God's relationship with humanity, choice has been integral.

God chose Abraham and his descendants (10:15), and he appeals to Israel to choose him in return (30:19).

God clearly outlines the implications of choosing Him or not, so that, to borrow the apostle Paul's words "[We] are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20).

Love:

It is easy to overlook the love that flows through the mechanics of covenant stipulations.

Twenty-five times in Deuteronomy, love (both divine and human), is mentioned as the basis and evidence of God's relationship with Israel (7:7-13; 10:12-15; 30:16-20).

Faithfulness:

The faithfulness of God and the faithfulness of Moses illustrate the best of divine and human love.

God is a God of promises kept (2 Peter 1:4).

Indeed, it was the promises of God to the patriarchs that caused Him to be longsuffering toward Israel and finally bring them to the Promised Land (7:7-9).

Title:

The English title “Deuteronomy” comes from the Greek Septuagint (LXX) 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.

Deuteronomy is also a treasure chest of theological concepts that have influenced the religious thought and life of ancient Israel, Jews, and Christians down through the ages.

These concepts include:

1. The concept of creed; Deuteronomy 6:4-5 is the “creed” of Israel, known as the Shema (“Hear”). The words were to be upon the hearts of the Israelites, who were to teach them diligently to their children. The words were to be bound “for a sign” on the hand and “as frontlets” between the eyes. They were to be written on the doorposts of the house and on the gates. Jesus took the words of 6:5 as the first and greatest commandment (Matt. 22:37).
2. The concept of the God “who acts” permeates the book. The historical acts of Yahweh became a basic part of the book’s viewpoint, particularly as these acts relate to the claims Yahweh makes on the Israelites, both at the moment and after they entered the Land of Promise. Moses reminds them of “what the LORD did because of Baal-peor” (4:3), which is to instruct future behavior in the Promised Land (verse 5).
3. The “election” of Israel is based in the call of Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-6), where God’s promise is directed to the “seed” or descendants of Abraham. The word most often used to set forth the doctrine of election in the Old Testament is the verb (bachar), “to choose”. It occurs quite frequently in Deuteronomy (30 times).

4. Another major thought is that of the “covenant relationship”. A people redeemed from slavery and bound to their God by a covenant needed some guidelines for a happy life in fellowship with God and with one another. The Sinai covenant was cast in the shape of an ancient Near Eastern treaty that listed obligations laid on the vassal (Israel), by the great King (Yahweh). These were the natural consequence of the King’s protection and care for His vassal.

5. Another concept, that of “sin”, is expressed in Deuteronomy in a unique way, in that it is seen against the background of the covenant relationship. The redemptive act by which the LORD brought the Israelites out of Egypt is mentioned in connection with the commandments (6:20-25). The obligation of the Israelites to keep and do His ordinances stemmed from the fact that they were chosen to be His possession (7:6). When they entered the land, they were to remember these facts and keep His commandments (8:1-10). However, they were in danger of forgetting this relationship and turning to other gods (verses 11-18), for which they would “surely perish” (verse 19). Loving God and keeping His commandments are set side by side (11:13), and blessing in the land is to follow from such obedience (verses 8-12). Disobedience would bring the withholding of blessing.

Historical Setting:

Like Leviticus, Deuteronomy contains much legal detail, but with an emphasis to 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 point with references to Israel’s past history.

He reminded Israel of her rebellion against the LORD at Horeb (9:7 – 10:1), 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; compare 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 New Testament (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), 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 (compare 7:6-11; 8:6, 11, 18; 10:12, 16-17; 11:13; 13:3-4; 14:1-2).

For 38 years after they had refused to enter Canaan, the Israelites remained in the wilderness of Paran and at Kadesh-barnea, until the old generation died off.

Then they resumed their journey by a long detour around Edom.

Finally, they were encamped in Moab, awaiting final instructions to go over and possess the land God had promised to their fathers.

It was a most exciting and momentous occasion.

According to the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses took this occasion to deliver three addresses to the people of Israel, all of them farewell addresses, because he had been told that he could not enter the land with the people.

The substance of the addresses is found in Deuteronomy, with the first being delivered “on this side Jordan, in the land of Moab” (1:5).

The second one, if the words of 4:44-49 are intended as a heading for the second portion and not as a summary of the first, was given “on this side Jordan, in the valley over against Beth-peor, in the land of Sihon king of the Amorites” (4:46).

The third was simply “in the land of Moab” (29:1).

Quite possibly the same location is intended for all three messages.

Authorship:

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 Old Testament (1 Kings 2:3; 8:53; 2 Kings 14:6; 18:12), and the New Testament (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. – February 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).

On conservative presuppositions, a very strong case for the Mosaic authorship of Deuteronomy can be established.

By the test of agreement with known historical conditions, and by careful literary analysis, it is possible to demonstrate the only pre-Davidic period can successfully be reconciled with the data of the Hebrew text.

In fact, the unity and authenticity of the book as a Mosaic product are confirmed by the remarkable conformity of its structure of that of the suzerainty (overlordship) type of covenant or treaty in its classic, mid-second millennium B.C. form.

Actually (Deuteronomy 31:9 and 24), state that Moses wrote, as well as spoke, "the words of this law".

Joshua, or some theocratic officer, in all likelihood, completed the document by recording Moses' death (chapter 34), and probably Moses' witness song (chapter 34), and testament (chapter 33).

Background and Setting:

Like Leviticus, Deuteronomy does not advance historically, but takes place entirely in one location over about one month of time (compare Deut. 1:3 and 34:8 with Joshua 5:6-12).

Israel was encamped in the central rift valley to the east of the Jordan River (Deut. 1:1).

This location was referred to in (Num. 36:13), as “the plains of Moab”, an area north 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 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).