

DEUTERONOMY

THEME

Author and Title

The name “Deuteronomy” derives from the Greek for “second law,” an early mistranslation of “copy of this law” in [17:18](#). In fact, Deuteronomy emphasizes that its laws are not a new law but rather the preaching of the original law given to Israel at Sinai.

[Deuteronomy 31:9](#) records that Moses wrote down “this law,” most likely referring to [chapters 1–30](#). Certainly the bulk of these chapters is the speech of Moses to Israel in the plains of Moab at the end of the 40-year wilderness period and immediately preceding the conquest under Joshua. Later OT and NT statements also assume Mosaic authorship (cf. [Josh. 23:6](#); [1 Kings 2:3](#); [Mal. 4:4](#); [Matt. 19:7–8](#); [Rom. 10:19](#)).

Date

There are two main issues related to the dating of this book. One is the date of the conquest, and hence of Moses’ life. The dating of the conquest is disputed, with the two major positions placing it in the late fifteenth century B.C. (about 1406) or in the thirteenth century (about 1220; for further discussion, see [Introduction to the Historical Books](#)).

The second issue is the dating of the book itself. If Moses is the author, then the two issues are more or less the same. However, another widely held view is that the book should be dated long after Moses. Some would date the book to the time of King Josiah in the latter part of the seventh century B.C. ([2 Kings 22:8–13](#)). Certainly Josiah’s reforms were advanced by the finding of a book, probably Deuteronomy, in the temple. However, this need not indicate that the book was written then. Others argue that while there may be material in Deuteronomy from the time of Josiah, it was subsequently edited in the exilic period of the sixth century B.C.

The view taken in these notes is that the book substantially dates from Moses himself, in agreement with its internal testimony (cf. [Deut. 31:9, 24](#)). The parallels with ancient treaties, especially the Hittite treaties from the second millennium, also point to an early date, thus around the fifteenth or thirteenth century B.C.

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Structure

There are a number of similarities between the structure of Deuteronomy and ancient treaty documents. In particular, treaties from the Hittites of the second millennium and treaties from the Assyrians of the eighth century B.C. have clear affinities with the structure of Deuteronomy, though each with differences. Though Deuteronomy does not perfectly match the treaties of the Hittites, it is much closer in structure to them than to the later Assyrian treaties.

A simple summary of the treaty structure, with Deuteronomy's verses, is shown on the [chart](#).

Ancient Treaty Structure	Deuteronomy
Preamble	1:1–5
Historical Prologue	1:6–4:43
General Stipulations	4:44–11:32
Specific Stipulations	12:1–26:19
Blessings and Curses	27:1–28:68
Document Clause	31:9–29
Witnesses	32:1–47

Theme

Deuteronomy, the last installment of Moses' biography, contains his last three sermons and two prophetic poems about Israel's future. Reflecting on the nation's past mistakes, he urges the people not to repeat those mistakes when entering the Promised Land. Israel's entry fulfills the promises made to the patriarchs, but if the people fall into idolatry or fail to keep the law, they will be exiled.

Purpose, Occasion, and Background

Deuteronomy is largely a sermon, or set of sermons, preached by Moses to all of Israel shortly before his death and not long before the conquest of the land under the leadership of Joshua. It is a motivational sermon, urging Israel's faithful obedience to the covenant laws of Sinai given 40 years previously.

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The circumstance of the sermon carries added significance because of Israel's failure, a generation earlier, to conquer the land starting at Kadesh-barnea on the southern border of Canaan (see [1:19–46](#)). Now that they are back at the eastern border of the Promised Land, Deuteronomy seeks to ensure that such failure does not recur. The rhetorical style of the sermon motivates obedience by constantly reassuring them of God's faithfulness and his power to keep his promise of land. This faithfulness of God remains despite Israel's persistent sin, detailed at length (e.g., [1:19–46](#); [9:1–29](#)). Thus Deuteronomy demonstrates that God's faithfulness results in mercy to his sinful people, for the sake of his promises to Abraham.

The theology of Deuteronomy is focused on convincing Israel to trust and obey, and to conquer the land. The uniqueness and incomparability of God is clearly argued (e.g., [ch. 4](#)). His power over other nations and armies is evident (e.g., [2:1–23](#)). His grace and faithfulness are also stressed, with frequent reminders that the land is sworn by him on oath and is undeserved ([9:4–6](#)) and full of good things (e.g., [6:10–12](#)).

The book's emphasis on the continuation of the covenant made at Sinai with the previous generation underscores the abiding significance of God's law for his people (e.g., see [5:1–3](#)). The large central section of Deuteronomy ([12:1–26:19](#)) recites the law, consistently urging Israel to keep it. The law is wide-ranging, incorporating all areas of life—economics, family and sexual relationships, religious observance, leadership, justice, guidance, food, property, and warfare. To some extent, the detail of the laws fleshes out the great command of [6:5](#), that Israel is to love the Lord with all its heart, soul, and strength. [Chapters 12–16](#) show what such total love of God will look like and, in many respects, provide examples of what the Ten Commandments ([ch. 5](#)) mean in practice.

Function of Deuteronomy in the Bible

Deuteronomy is an important book. It concludes the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), drawing together many of its key themes. Deuteronomy brings together the patriarchal promises, the history of the exodus and wilderness, and the laws given at Sinai. It also provides a theological foundation for the history books that follow (esp. Joshua–2 Kings). The language of Deuteronomy is often found in these later books, so much so that they are sometimes referred to as the Deuteronomistic History. Deuteronomy is surely the key book undergirding the reforms of Josiah in [2 Kings 23](#) and is referred to by several of the prophets, especially Jeremiah and Hosea. Deuteronomy is also frequently quoted in the NT, most notably by Jesus in his wilderness temptations and by Paul in his letter to the Romans.

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Deuteronomy and Ethics

The ethical application of OT law is a complex issue. There is no one rule that will cover the ethical application of all the laws in Deuteronomy; each law needs to be handled on a case-by-case basis. While many OT laws will not be kept by Christians to the letter, the laws embody important and abiding principles for Christian ethical behavior. Sometimes those OT principles are modified in the NT; often they are reinforced. For instance, the sacrificial system finds its fulfillment in the cross of Christ, but the principles of OT sacrifice are still instructive for Christians.

As a further example, the laws that define sexual morality and the principles underlying those laws are unchanged in the NT. Indeed, Jesus shows the deeper intent of the laws on sexual matters in the Sermon on the Mount ([Matt. 5:27–30](#)). However, the laws in Deuteronomy on warfare are not repeated for the NT church because God's people are no longer a nation and the land to be inherited is now heavenly ([1 Pet. 1:4](#)). Nonetheless, the principles of maintaining the holiness of God's people and of God judging sin remain unchanged.

It is important to recognize that there are different kinds of laws and rules in Deuteronomy. Many of the specific laws, especially those that detail penalties that judges are to impose, do not intend to spell out the ethical ideals for God's people; their main function is to set the minimum standard of behavior needed to protect Israel's theocracy. The "perfection" ([Ps. 19:7](#)) of these laws consists in the way they preserve the social fabric of the theocracy. The ethical ideals for God's people ultimately come from the creation pattern (the "image of God") and from the goal of community holiness. (See the note on [Deut. 24:1–4](#) for an example.) In addition, Deuteronomy constantly addresses the "heart" of its audience: embracing this law, seeking the good of this people, is the right response to God's grace and the embodiment of virtue.

Key Themes

1. The uniqueness of God ([4:1–40](#)).
2. The election of Israel ([4:37–38](#); [7:6–8](#); [10:14–15](#); [14:2](#)).
3. The goodness of the land that God has promised to give Israel ([1:25](#); [6:10–11](#); [8:7–13](#); [11:8–15](#)).
4. The faithfulness of God, despite Israel's sin, to keep his promise of land made originally to Abraham ([1:8](#), [19–46](#); [7:1–26](#); [8:1–20](#); [9:1–10:11](#)).

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5. The power of God to defeat the enemies in the land ([2:1–3:11](#); [4:1–40](#); [7:1–26](#)).
6. Exhortations to Israel to love, serve, fear, and obey God ([6:5](#); [10:12–13](#); [13:4](#)).
7. Warnings against idolatry and instruction for proper worship of God ([4:9–31](#); [5:6–10](#); [7:1–5](#); [8:19–20](#); [12:1–32](#); [13:1–18](#)).
8. The comprehensiveness of the laws of God affecting all of life in the land ([12:1–27:26](#)).
9. The imminent death of Moses ([1:37](#); [3:26](#); [4:21](#); [32:51](#); [34:1–12](#)).

History of Salvation Summary

Deuteronomy is an important book for understanding not only OT theology but also the theological unity of both Testaments. Deuteronomy recognizes the need for God to act within the heart if Israel is to achieve faithful obedience to God's covenant. The ideal life in the land is for each member of the people, and the body as a whole, to display fervent love to God as their proper response to God's love for them; this is the means by which the rest of the world is to learn of the true God ([4:5–8](#))—the very reason for which Israel exists. Israel's record of failure recounted in Deuteronomy exposes that need. In its projection in [4:29–31](#) and [30:1–20](#), Deuteronomy looks forward to the day when God will change Israel's heart. This longing recurs in the OT (e.g., [Jer. 31:31–34](#); [Ezek. 36:24–28](#)). It is finally met through the work of Jesus' death and the giving of his Spirit (e.g., [Rom. 2:25–29](#); [Col. 2:11–14](#)). (For an explanation of the "History of Salvation," see the [Overview of the Bible](#). See also [History of Salvation in the Old Testament: Preparing the Way for Christ](#).)

Literary Features

The book of Deuteronomy could be subtitled "farewell instructions for a nation." Two major events form the substance of Deuteronomy: (1) the long speech that Moses delivers, effecting a renewal of the covenant, and (2) the passing of the leadership from Moses to Joshua, thereby making the book a succession narrative. The book thus forms the final volume in the biography of Moses, which begins with his birth in [Exodus 2](#) and ends with his death in [Deuteronomy 34](#).

Like the preceding books of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy mingles narrative with instructions and laws by which God wanted his covenant people to live. Deuteronomy differs from the preceding books because it is cast as a farewell discourse in which Moses is speaking to the nation. The repeated formula in the preceding three books is

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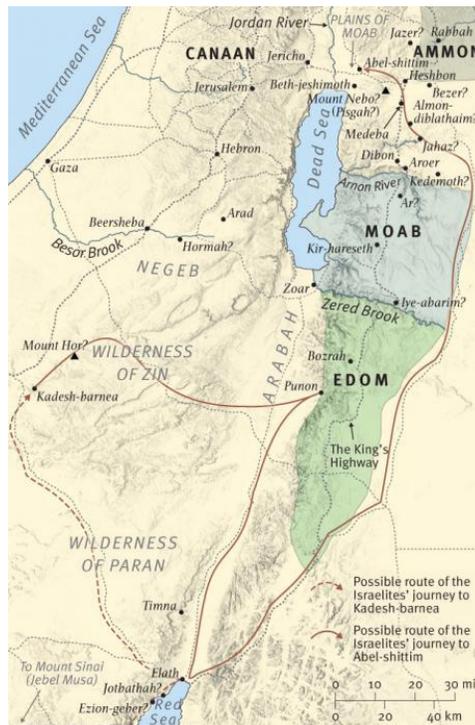
“the LORD spoke to Moses,” but in Deuteronomy the rhetorical stance is that Moses speaks to the people. Because the law-giving is phrased as Moses’ words to his nation, the effect is that of an extended exhortation to covenant faithfulness. Moses makes a passionate appeal to his followers as they are about to enter the Promised Land. Deuteronomy contains less narrative material than the three preceding books, but occasionally the speeches of Moses are placed into their narrative context. Late in the book, two formal discourses are cast in poetic form (the “Song of Moses,” 31:30–32:47; and Moses’ pronouncement of blessing on the nation, 32:48–33:29).

It is likely that the literary form of the suzerainty treaty of the ancient Near East lurks in the background. In a suzerainty treaty, a king or suzerain rehearsed what he had done for his nation and stipulated what he required in response. There is also an incipient note of anticipation, as it is understood that the instructions are given to a people on the verge of setting up a utopia—a good society governed by identifiable institutions and practices—in a promised land.

The Setting of Deuteronomy

c. 1406/1220 B.C.

The book of Deuteronomy recounts Moses’ words to the Israelites as they waited on the plains of Moab to enter Canaan. Moses begins by reviewing the events of Israel’s journey from Mount Sinai (or Mount Horeb) to the plains of Moab.



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Outline

- I. Prologue (1:1–5)
- II. Moses' First Speech: Historical Prologue (1:6–4:43)
 - A. Introduction to first speech (1:6–8)
 - B. Encouragement to trust in the land of promise (1:9–18)
 - C. Israel's failure at Kadesh recalled (1:19–46)
 - D. Israel passes through Edom, Moab, and Ammon (2:1–23)
 - E. Israel defeats Heshbon (2:24–37)
 - F. Israel defeats Bashan (3:1–11)
 - G. Distribution of Transjordanian land (3:12–17)
 - H. Command to all Israelites to fight (3:18–22)
 - I. Reiteration of Moses being denied entry into the land (3:23–29)
 - J. Exhortation to Israel (4:1–40)
 - K. Setting apart cities of refuge (4:41–43)
- III. Moses' Second Speech: General Covenant Stipulations (4:44–11:32)
 - A. Introduction to Moses' second speech (4:44–49)
 - B. The Ten Commandments (5:1–21)
 - C. Israel requests Moses to mediate God's law (5:22–33)
 - D. The greatest commandment (6:1–25)
 - E. Exclusive relationship worked out in conquest and worship (7:1–26)
 - F. Learning the lessons of the wilderness (8:1–20)
 - G. Recounting the golden calf incident (9:1–10:11)
 - H. Exhortation (10:12–11:32)
- IV. Moses' Second Speech: Specific Covenant Stipulations (12:1–26:19)
 - A. Proper worship (12:1–32)
 - B. Threats of idolatry (13:1–18)
 - C. Clean and unclean foods (14:1–21)
 - D. Tithes (14:22–29)

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- E. The sabbatical year (15:1–18)
- F. Firstborn animals (15:19–23)
- G. Feasts (16:1–17)
- H. Leaders (16:18–18:22)
- I. Protecting life (19:1–21:14)
- J. Protecting sexual morality (21:15–23:14)
- K. Various laws protecting property (23:15–24:22)
- L. Laws on justice, marriage, and business (25:1–16)
- M. Amalek (25:17–19)
- N. Firstfruits and tithes (26:1–19)
- V. Moses' Third Speech: Blessings and Curses (27:1–28:68)
- VI. Moses' Third Speech: Final Exhortation (29:1–30:20)
- VII. Succession of Leadership (31:1–34:12)
 - A. The commissioning of Joshua and the writing of the law (31:1–29)
 - B. The Song of Moses (31:30–32:47)
 - C. The blessing of Moses (32:48–33:29)
 - D. The death of Moses (34:1–12)¹

¹ Crossway Bibles. (2008). *The ESV Study Bible* (pp. 325-329). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.