

# Deuteronomy

## ORIENTING DATA FOR DEUTERONOMY

- **Content:** rehearsal of the covenant for a new generation of Israelites just before the conquest
- **Historical coverage:** during the final weeks east of the Jordan
- **Emphases:** the oneness and uniqueness of Yahweh, the God of Israel, over against all other gods; Yahweh’s covenant love for Israel in making them his people; Yahweh’s universal sovereignty over all peoples; Israel as Yahweh’s model for the nations; the significance of the central sanctuary where Yahweh is to be worshiped; Yahweh’s concern for justice—that his people reflect his character; the blessings of obedience and the dangers of disobedience

## OVERVIEW OF DEUTERONOMY

As with Genesis, two kinds of structure are evident in Deuteronomy at the same time. First, there is a concentric (chiastic) structure to the book, which looks backward at the beginning and forward at the end. Thus:

- A The Outer Frame: A Look Backward (chs. 1–3)
- B The Inner Frame: The Great Exhortation (chs. 4–11)
- C The Central Core: The Stipulations of the Covenant (chs. 12–26)
- B\* The Inner Frame: The Covenant Ceremony (chs. 27–30)
- A\* The Outer Frame: A Look Forward (chs. 31–34)

Note how easily you could read each of the two parts of both framing sections as continuous narrative: chapters 1–3 and 31–34; chapters 4–11 and 27–30. The first part of the outer frame (A) repeats the essential narrative of Numbers, up to where Moses is forbidden to enter the land; the second part (A\*) picks it up right at that point and concludes with the appointment of Joshua, Moses’ song, his blessing, and his death. The inner frame (B), which calls Israel to absolute devotion to God, concludes with the *announcement* that God is setting before them “a blessing and a curse” (11:26); the second part (B\*) picks up right at that point by offering the *content* of the curses and blessings.

This insight into how Deuteronomy works also highlights its second structural feature—that Deuteronomy presents this restatement of God’s covenant (for the new generation) in the style of an ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaty-covenant (see “Specific Advice for Reading Exodus,” p. 37), with preamble, prologue, stipulations, document clause, sanctions, and witnesses. These last three items both supplement and reiterate the final three elements of the covenant of Exodus 20–Leviticus 27.

Thus, as a restatement of the covenant, Deuteronomy begins with a *preamble* and *historical prologue* (chs. 1–4), which look both to the past and to the future. God has been faithful in the past, rewarding Israel for their faithfulness and likewise punishing them for unfaithfulness. Now they must again commit to being his people. The *stipulations* (chs. 5–26) begin with a restatement of the Ten Commandments, while the laws in chapters 12–26 tend to follow their vertical/horizontal order, having first to do with an individual’s relationship with God and then with one another. The *document clauses*, reminders of the terms of the covenant, are found mainly in chapters 27 and 31, joined immediately by a long list of blessings and curses (prose in chs. 28–29 and poetry in 32–33), which serve as the *sanctions* of the covenant. Finally, there are three kinds of *witnesses* to the covenant: “heaven and earth” (4:26; 30:19–20), the song of Moses (31:19; 31:30–32:43), and the words of the law itself (31:26).

On this reading, Moses’ death and Joshua’s succession to leadership (ch. 34) form a kind of epilogue—not part of the covenant per se, but a narrative that connects Deuteronomy to the book of Joshua that follows.

## **SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING DEUTERONOMY**

Deuteronomy has perhaps had more influence on the rest of the biblical story (both Old and New Testaments) than any other book of the Bible. The continuation of Israel’s history (Joshua–Kings) is written mostly from its perspective, so that this history portion has come to be called the Deuteronomistic History. Deuteronomy likewise had considerable influence on Israel’s and Judah’s prophets, especially Isaiah and Jeremiah, and through them deeply influenced the major figures of the New Testament (especially Jesus and Paul).

As you read, you will discover what drives Deuteronomy from beginning to end—an uncompromising monotheism coupled with an equally deep concern for Israel’s uncompromising loyalty to Yahweh (“the LORD”) their God. This comes out in any number of ways, but its primary moment is in the Shema (6:4–5), which became the distinguishing mark of Judaism and is identified by Jesus as “the first commandment”: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” The reason they are to love Yahweh in this way is that he first loved them—when they were slaves and counted for little: “The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples.... But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he ... redeemed you from the land of slavery” (7:7–8; cf. 4:37). Thus, everything is predicated on Yahweh’s love and faithfulness and his actions that flow out of that love and faithfulness.

This concern in turn accounts for the other distinctive features in the book, three in particular that are closely allied with this first one. Watch for the following:

1. The constant reminder that Israel is about to possess “the land” (a word that occurs more than one hundred times in Deuteronomy). God in his love is about to fulfill the oath he made with Abraham. But the land is currently under the control of the Canaanites.
2. The relentless demand that, when entering the land, Israel not only avoid idolatry but that they completely destroy the places of Canaanite worship as well as the Canaanite peoples. If they do not, Canaanite idolatry will destroy Israel’s reason for being. This

motif begins in the historical prologue (2:34; 3:6) and continues as a divine demand throughout (7:1–6, 23–26; 12:1–3; 13:6–18; 16:21–17:7; 20:16–18; cf. 31:3). The only hope for Israel to bless the nations (4:6) is for them to obliterate all forms of idolatry and to walk in the ways of the God who redeemed them to be his people (5:32–33).

3. The requirement that they regularly worship at one central sanctuary, “the place the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name” (12:11). You will recognize this as carrying over the theme of the presence of God in the tabernacle into their new setting in the promised land. Note how often this theme, which begins in 12:5, is repeated thereafter (12:11, 14, 18, 26; 14:23–25; 15:20; 16:2–16; 17:8–10; 26:2). Yahweh, the one and only God, will dwell among his one people in one place; he is not like the many pagan gods who can be worshiped at many high places throughout the land.

Why are these matters so important? Because the whole biblical story depends on them. At issue is not simply a choice between Yahweh and a Baal—although that too is involved—but syncretism, i.e., thinking that Yahweh can be worshiped in the form of, or alongside, Baal and Ashtoreth (Asherah), the Canaanite fertility gods. Since Yahweh is *one* Lord, not many—as are the pagan gods—he must not be worshiped at the high places where Baal and Ashtoreth were worshiped, and since Yahweh made human beings alone to bear his image (Gen 1:26–27) and does not have “form” as such (the second commandment), they must not think that he can be given form in some way by human beings (see especially Deut 4:15–20). You will notice how this issue recurs throughout the rest of the story, right through 2 Kings, and continues as a predominant feature in the prophets.

Two final items: God’s love for his people in redeeming them and in making them his own, and then in giving them “this good land” (9:6), also lies behind the special nature of the Law Code in Deuteronomy (12:1–26:19). Be watching for how the code follows the pattern of the Ten Commandments, beginning with requirements that have to do with loving God (chs. 12–13) and continuing with various laws that have to do with sacred days and with loving neighbor (chs. 14–26). But note especially how often God’s people are required to include “the poor and needy” (see 15:11; 24:14), which in Deuteronomy specifically takes the form of “the alien, the fatherless and the widow,” and sometimes includes “the Levite” (26:13). Their common denominator is that they do not own land among a people who will become agrarian in culture. As you read, observe how often these laws are tied either to God’s character or to the redemption of Israel.

Finally, don’t lose sight of one other important characteristic of Deuteronomy, namely, its forward-looking thrust throughout. This includes not only the immediate generation, which is poised to take possession of the land, but also future generations (4:9, 40). This motif in particular creates tension throughout the book between God’s goodness in bringing them into “this good land” and God’s awareness that Israel will fail nonetheless. Thus at both the beginning and the end, there are prophecies that the curses will eventually come upon them; their failure to keep covenant will result in loss of the land and in exile (4:25–28; 30:1; see 29:19–28 and 32:15–25), but God’s enduring love will result in their being restored to the land through a “second exodus” (4:29–31; 30:2–10; 32:26–27, 36–43). As you read on from here in both the Old Testament and New, you will see how often this theme recurs.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [\*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 55–59.