

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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This resource has been adapted into multiple languages, including English, Tok Pisin, Arabic (عربى), French (Français), Hindi (हिन्दी), Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia), Portuguese (Português), Russian (Русский), Spanish (Español), Swahili (Kiswahili), and Simplified Chinese (简体中文).

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Deuteronomy

God first revealed Israel's national "constitution" to Moses at Sinai ([Exod 20-23](#)). The great leader Moses was now about to die. God had appointed a younger man, Joshua, to replace Moses, but he was not yet fully tested. Israel had been rescued from slavery in Egypt and miraculously preserved through forty years of wandering in the wilderness. The Israelites now stood on the verge of entering the land promised to them, but it was inhabited by powerful and hostile enemies. Although God had been faithful in the past, the future seemed uncertain. Deuteronomy is the account of Israel's covenant with God renewed—a covenant that would guide Israel to God's blessings throughout the remainder of their history as a nation.

Setting

Forty years after their exodus from Egypt, the Israelites arrived at the plains of Moab, just across the Jordan River from Jericho. After four decades of wandering, they were poised to cross the Jordan, conquer the Canaanite nations, and settle their land in fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham. First, however, God would renew his covenant with them.

Moses was aware that he would die before leading his people to their destination. So, prior to his death, he needed to remind the people of the terms of the covenant that God had revealed to him. The initial covenant, suitable for Israel while en route to Canaan, had been made thirty-eight years earlier at Sinai ([Exod 19–24](#)). Now, in anticipation of Israel's establishment as a settled community, the original covenant must be restated and enlarged. The book of Deuteronomy is this restatement.

Summary

Deuteronomy is Moses' farewell address to the tribes of Israel. The book includes narratives, exhortations, warnings, instructions, and promises of blessings or curses in relation to Israel's faithfulness. Deuteronomy is composed as a treaty text, using elements common to covenants between nations. It is similar to other treaties known from ancient Near Eastern sources, particularly from Hittite archives. Moses thus communicates God's purposes to Israel in a familiar literary and legal form.

The formal structures of Deuteronomy yield a great deal of insight into the theological nature of the book. As a covenant text, it underscores the seriousness of God's promises and of Israel's need (as the covenant partner) to obey the terms of the treaty so that God can fulfill his promises. As a farewell speech, it is rooted in a historical and geographical setting.

The following outline reflects the analysis of Deuteronomy as a covenant document:

- [1:1–5](#) Preamble to the covenant
- [1:6–4:49](#) Historical prologue
- [5:1–26:15](#) Stipulations of the covenant
- [26:16–29:1](#) Blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience
- [29:2–30:20](#) Review of the covenant and choice between life and death
- [31:1–29](#) Deposit of the text of the covenant
- [31:30–32:43](#) Witnesses of the covenant

The outline embedded in the Bible text reflects Deuteronomy's structure both as a covenant text and as a farewell speech communicated in a series of sermons.

Authorship

Long-standing Jewish and Christian tradition holds that Moses wrote Deuteronomy. Both the Old Testament and New Testament acknowledge Moses' authorship of the book (see [1 Kgs 2:3](#); [2 Kgs 14:6](#); [2 Chr 25:4](#); [Ezra 3:2](#); [Matt 19:7](#); [Mark 12:19](#); [Luke 20:28](#); [Acts 3:22–23](#); [Rom 10:19](#); [1 Cor 9:9](#)).

However, during the past two hundred years, critical scholars have denied that Moses wrote Deuteronomy. Some scholars identify Deuteronomy as the scroll found in the Temple in King Josiah's time (around 621 BC; see [2 Kgs 22:8–20](#)) and argue that Deuteronomy should be dated in close proximity to that time. Some also attribute editorial additions as late as the period following the Exile (538 BC and later).

Archaeologists have discovered Hittite treaty texts originating in the Late Bronze Age (1500–1200 BC), around the time of Moses. These texts, which contain a number of similarities to Deuteronomy, provide support for an early authorship of the book. Some scholars compare Deuteronomy to seventh-century Assyrian treaty texts that are closer to Josiah's time. However, the Hittite texts are more similar to Deuteronomy in structure and content than the Assyrian examples, making it less likely that Deuteronomy was written during the later period.

In short, the traditional viewpoint that Moses authored the majority of the book is a reasonable conclusion. Certain editorial additions were included later (e.g., the account of Moses' death; [34:5–12](#)). See further Genesis Book Introduction, "Authorship."

Literary Form

Deuteronomy's structure resembles other treaty texts drawn up between various nations in the period of the Exodus and the conquest. Some of these were treaties between equals, while others were suzerain-vassal treaties. In a suzerain-vassal treaty, the superior party (the suzerain, or "great king") would make demands of and offer promises to subject peoples (the vassals) in return for their unqualified obedience.

Deuteronomy is a suzerain-vassal treaty between God and Israel. God called the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt to be his servant people. He took the lead in the relationship, determined the terms for maintaining the treaty, and offered promises of blessing if Israel obeyed and judgment if the nation disobeyed.

Moses' use of the suzerain-vassal treaty format makes it clear that Deuteronomy is a covenant text. God chose Israel to be his special people. It was not the covenant that made them so, for they were already identified as God's people before the Exodus ([Exod 4:22-23](#)). Rather, the text of the covenant regulated their behavior. By reviewing the covenant with this generation of Israelites, Moses ensured that they would enter the Promised Land as God's covenant people.

Meaning and Message

The covenant is the leading theme of Deuteronomy—and perhaps of the entire Old Testament. The covenant provided the means for the Lord to unite himself to Israel. The covenant stated that the Lord was Israel's God, Israel was God's people, and the relationship between them would achieve God's redemptive purposes. This awesome privilege also included profound responsibility. Could Israel conduct itself in a manner that would guarantee the success of its mission? What standards of behavior would enable them to fulfill their calling?

Israel had the freedom to accept or reject God's covenant ([Exod 19:7–8](#)). Once they accepted it, the distribution of blessings and curses, as outlined within the covenant, depended on whether they obeyed or disobeyed ([28:1–6, 15–19](#)). Yet even disobedience could be overcome if the nation would repent, return, and be restored to covenant fellowship ([30:1–10](#); see also [Lev 26:40–45](#)).

This covenant did not make Israel God's people; God's promise of a national offspring to Abraham had already done that ([Gen 17:1–8](#)). The covenant made at Sinai gave Israel the privilege of serving the Lord as a kingdom of priests ([Exod 19:4–6](#)). Deuteronomy reiterates the terms and conditions of that covenant: If Israel could remain faithful in its role as a “kingdom of priests and [God's] holy nation,” it would direct God's blessings to the whole world.

The Israelites were the unique people of God. God made promises to the nation's forefathers that he fulfilled in the Exodus and in creating the nation. He was ready to solidify Israel in the conquest of the Promised Land and move the nation forward until his purposes were complete. The book of Deuteronomy established the principles of faithful life and ministry that would ensure Israel's ongoing relationship with God in achieving those objectives. Israel had the indescribable honor of partnering with Almighty God to bring about his plan for the ages.