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# Overview of the book of Deuteronomy

As a document of a succession treaty and of the covenant renewal in the Plains of Moab, the book can be divided as follows:

**The preamble** (1:1-5)

**The historical prologue** (1:6 - 4:49)

**The stipulations of the covenant** (ch.5 - 26)

**The “constitution”** (ch.5)

**The “first and greatest commandment”** (ch.6 - 11)

1. The “first and greatest commandment” and the Shema (ch.6)
2. The “first and greatest commandment” at the conquest of Canaan (ch.7)
3. The “first and greatest commandment” and the danger of self-sufficiency (ch.8)
4. The “first and greatest commandment” and the danger of self-righteousness (9:1 - 10:11)
5. The conclusion: Keep the “first and greatest commandment!” (10:12 - 11:32)

**The specification of the “decrees and laws”** (ch.12 - 25)

1. The specification of the “decrees and laws” in relation to the ceremonial service of the LORD (12:1 - 16:17)
  - a. “The place the LORD your God will choose” (ch.12)
  - b. What must be done in case of incitement to rebellious idolatry (ch.13)
  - c. Israel must be different in days of mourning (14:1-3)
  - d. Clean and unclean (14:4-21a)
  - e. The unique Thanksgiving Feast of the Israelites (14:21b-29)
  - f. “The LORD’s time for cancelling debts” (15:1-18)
  - g. The offering of the firstborn (15:19-23)
  - h. The tribute of the vassals (16:1-17)
2. The specification of the “decrees and laws” in relation to justice in Israel’s life (16:18 - 25:19)
  - a. Concerning the special offices in Israel (16:18 -18:20)
    - i. The judges in covenant life (16:18 - 17:13)
    - ii. The king in covenant life (17:14-20)
    - iii. The priests and Levites in covenant life (18:1-8)
    - iv. The prophets in covenant life (18:9-20)
  - b. Concerning jurisdiction (ch.19)
    - i. The cities of refuge and their importance with respect to justice (19:1-13)

# The Book

## A. Name and character

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The name “Deuteronomy” is derived from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament made by the Jews, which literally uses the word in 17:18. To a certain extent we can appreciate this name, which means “second legislation.”

In Galatians 3:10 we find a rather free quotation: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.” In Deuteronomy 27:26 the term “the Book of the Law” is not mentioned. Instead it says “this law.” In the days of the apostle Paul, Deuteronomy was seen as a “Book of the Law,” even as *the* “Book of the Law.”

In addition, in 31:26, the book speaks about itself in these terms: “Take this Book of the Law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God. There it will remain as a witness against you.” A confirmation of that is found in Joshua 1:8, where we read of the order which God gave to Moses’ successor. “Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.” Deuteronomy would be meant by that Book of the Law, or in any case the main part of it.

Therefore, our first conclusion is: *Deuteronomy is some kind of code of law.*

But what kind of code is it?

It was customary among the Jews to name the Bible books after their initial words or the very first word. Thus Deuteronomy was called “The Words” according to 1:1. “[These are] the words Moses spoke to all Israel...” This is the typical and traditional opening of a covenant text, to be more precise, of a suzerainty treaty which was made by a “great king” with his vassals.

## DEUTERONOMY 1 - 4

### **A. The Preamble, 1:1-5**

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“These are the words...” As a formal introduction, this formula is exactly the same as the traditional beginning of an ancient suzerainty treaty. It is the preamble in which the great king introduces himself, usually in impressive terms.

Here the term “words” means “commandments”, covenant stipulations, which are authoritatively imposed upon the vassals.

The person who introduces himself is Moses. However, he emphasizes that he represents the divine Great King, Yahweh (the LORD), as his covenant mediator (v.3). The vassal is “the Israelites,” which had just been gathered together on “the first day of the eleventh month” (v.3).

This preamble is rather long. The exact date and topographic indications are provided. They are camping in Jordan now, after having travelled through the desert and along the Arabah route. Paran is the region in which Israel rebelled against the LORD. The other names are most likely those of halting-places at which Israel stayed for some time during its journey through the wilderness.

Altogether, these names give us a rough idea of the regions in which the people of Israel moved around for forty years because they had fallen away from God’s covenant. This is not only a geographic indication, but also “preaching.”

This is also shown in verse 2. Normally, the Arabah route requires only approximately eleven days, but its end, Kadesh Barnea, became for Israel the starting-point of forty years of wandering.

It was customary in the days of old that one partner in a covenant would endow the other with a “territorial gift” when a treaty was made. But the direction from which the Israelites approached the land of Canaan and the long time the trip took indicate disobedience to the covenant and, as punishment, a delay in taking the land of Canaan into possession as God’s “territorial gift” to Israel.

However, in verse 4, Moses also reminds Israel of the recent victory over two strong Amorite kings. This indicated to Israel the beginning of the entrance into the inheritance! As a matter of fact, they had passed Kadesh Barnea for the second time! God’s grace had brought them this far, and now he renews his covenant with them!

“East of the Jordan in the territory of Moab, Moses began to expound this law, saying...” Apparently he decided to do so in view of his imminent death which, indeed, occurred about one month later.

“This law” means the main part of the book of Deuteronomy, therefore, a written law.

This preamble, then, places the whole law (so called because the stipulations take up a considerable place in this document) in the light of the required humility and thankfulness.

This is how Moses warned the Israelites: At Kadesh Barnea you stood at the cross-roads; in fact you always do. It is all a matter of blessing or curse, for you are living under the obligations of a covenant. Your Great King is the God Who, in spite of the previous generation’s obvious falling away from the covenant, is already opening the gates of the inheritance and even now wants to renew his covenant with you!

### Questions

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1. Are there any texts in the Bible that show us that the first day of the month, or the “day of the new moon,” was a suitable day for public meetings?
2. Where does the New Testament say that the death of Israel’s exodus generation due to covenant disobedience is a warning for us?

### **B. The Historical Prologue, 1:6 - 4:49**

The historical prologue in this covenant document is also long. This is because in days of old when a treaty was renewed the historical prologue