

# Book of Deuteronomy

The **Book of Deuteronomy** (literally "second law" from Greek *deuteros* + *nomos*<sup>[1]</sup>) is the fifth book of the Jewish Torah, where it is called "Devarim" (Heb. דְבָרִים).

Chapters 1–30 of the book consist of three sermons or speeches delivered to the Israelites by Moses on the plains of Moab, shortly before they enter the Promised Land. The first sermon recounts the forty years of wilderness wanderings which had led to that moment, and ends with an exhortation to observe the law (or teachings), later referred to as the Law of Moses; the second reminds the Israelites of the need to follow Yahweh and the laws (or teachings) he has given them, on which their possession of the land depends; and the third offers the comfort that even should Israel prove unfaithful and so lose the land, with repentance all can be restored.<sup>[2]</sup> The final four chapters (31–34) contain the Song of Moses, the Blessing of Moses, and narratives recounting the passing of the mantle of leadership from Moses to Joshua and, finally, the death of Moses on Mount Nebo.

Presented as the words of Moses delivered before the conquest of Canaan, virtually all modern scholars reject its attribution to Moses and date the book much later, between the 7th and 5th centuries BC.<sup>[3]</sup> Furthermore, scholars have identified multiple literary strata in Deuteronomy, written by different authors at different times. Chapters 12–26, containing the Deuteronomic Code, are the earliest, followed by the second prologue (Ch. 5–11), and then the first prologue (Ch. 1–4); the chapters following 26 are similarly layered.<sup>[4]</sup> Most scholars believe that the Deuteronomic Code was composed during the late monarchic period, around the time of King Josiah (late 7th century BC), although some scholars have argued for a later date, either during the Babylonian captivity (597–539 BC) or during the Persian period (539–332 BC).<sup>[5][6]</sup> Many scholars see the book as reflecting the economic needs and social status of the Levite caste, who are believed to have provided its authors;<sup>[7]</sup> those likely authors are collectively referred to as the Deuteronomist.

One of its most significant verses is Deuteronomy 6:4 (<https://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pto506.htm#4>), the Shema Yisrael, which has become the definitive statement of Jewish identity: "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one." Verses 6:4–5 were also quoted by Jesus in Mark 12:28–34 (<https://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Mark+12:28–12:34&version=nrsv>) as part of the Great Commandment.

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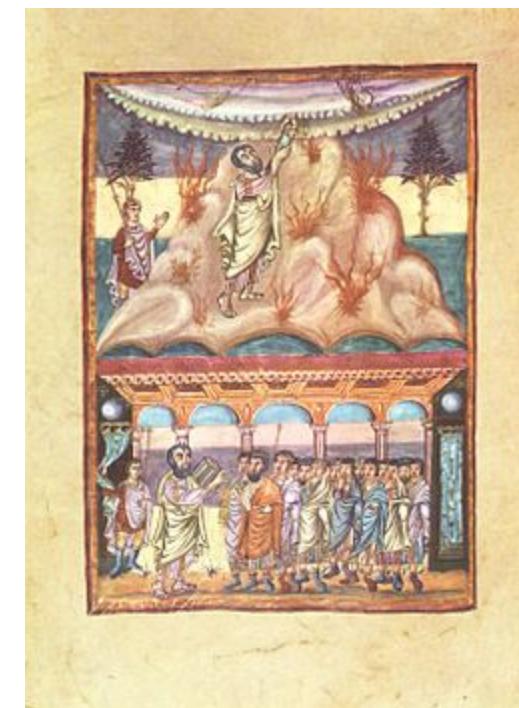
## Structure

Patrick D. Miller in his commentary on Deuteronomy suggests that different views of the structure of the book will lead to different views on what it is about.<sup>[8]</sup> The structure is often described as a series of three speeches or sermons (chapters 1:1–4:43, 4:44–29:1, 29:2–30:20) followed by a number of short appendices<sup>[9]</sup> – Miller refers to this as the "literary" structure; alternatively, it is sometimes seen as a ring-structure with a central core (chapters 12–26, the Deuteronomic Code) and an inner and an outer frame (chapters 4–11/27–30 and 1–3/31–34)<sup>[9]</sup> – Miller calls this the covenantal substructure;<sup>[8]</sup> and finally the theological structure revealed in the theme of the exclusive worship of Yahweh established in the first of the Ten Commandments ("Thou shalt have no other god before me") and the Shema.<sup>[8]</sup>

## Summary

(The following "literary" outline of Deuteronomy is from John Van Seters;<sup>[10]</sup> it can be contrasted with Alexander Rofé's "covenantal" analysis in his Deuteronomy: Issues and Interpretation.<sup>[11]</sup>)

- Chapters 1–4: The journey through the wilderness from Horeb (Sinai) to Kadesh and then to Moab is recalled.
- Chapters 4–11: After a second introduction at 4:44–49 the events at Mount Horeb are recalled, with the giving of the Ten Commandments. Heads of families are urged to instruct those under their care in the law, warnings are made against serving gods other than Yahweh, the land promised to Israel is praised, and the people are urged to obedience.
- Chapters 12–26, the Deuteronomic code: Laws governing Israel's worship (chapters 12–16a), the appointment and regulation of community and religious leaders (16b–18), social regulation (19–25), and confession of identity and loyalty (26).
- Chapters 27–28: Blessings and curses for those who keep and break the law.
- Chapters 29–30: Concluding discourse on the covenant in the land of Moab, including all the laws in the Deuteronomic code (chapters 12–26) after those given at Horeb; Israel is again exhorted to obedience.
- Chapters 31–34: Joshua is installed as Moses's successor, Moses delivers the law to the Levites (a priestly caste), and ascends Mount Nebo or Pisgah, where he dies and is buried by God. The narrative of these events is interrupted by two poems, the Song of Moses and the Blessing of Moses.



Moses receiving the Law (top) and reading the Law to the Israelites

The final verses, Deuteronomy 34:10–12, "never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses," make a claim for the authoritative Deuteronomic view of theology and its insistence that the worship of the Hebrew God as the sole deity of Israel was the only permissible religion, having been sealed by the greatest of prophets.<sup>[12]</sup>

## Deuteronomic code

Deuteronomy 12–26 (<https://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0512.htm#1>), the Deuteronomic Code, is the oldest part of the book and the core around which the rest developed.<sup>[13]</sup> It is a series of mitzvot (commands) to the Israelites regarding how they ought to conduct themselves in Canaan, the land promised by Yahweh, God of Israel. The following list organizes most of the laws into thematic

groups:

## Laws of religious observance

- All sacrifices are to be brought and vows are to be made at a central sanctuary (12:1–28).
- The worship of Canaanite gods is forbidden. The order is given to destroy their places of worship (12:29–31) and to commit genocide against Canaanites and others with "detestable" religious beliefs (20:16–18).
- Native mourning practices such as deliberate disfigurement are forbidden (14:1–2).
- The procedure for tithing produce or donating its equivalent is given (14:22–29).
- A catalogue of which animals are permitted and which forbidden for consumption is given (14:3–20).
- The consumption of animals which are found dead and have not been slaughtered is prohibited (14:21).
- Sacrificed animals must be without blemish (15:21, 17:1).
- First-born male livestock must be sacrificed (15:19–23).
- The Pilgrimage Festivals of Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot are instituted (16:1–17).
- The worship at Asherah groves and setting up of ritual pillars are forbidden (16:21–22).
- Prohibition of mixing kinds (22:9–11).
- Tzitzit are obligatory (22:12).

## Laws concerning officials

- Judges are to be appointed in every city (16:18).
- Judges are to be impartial and bribery is forbidden (16:19–20).
- A central tribunal is established (17:8–13).
- Should the Israelites choose to be ruled by a King, regulations for the office are given (17:14–20).
- Regulations of the rights, and revenue, of the Levites are given (18:1–8).
- Concerning the future (unspecified) prophet (18:9–22).
- Regulations for the priesthood are given (23:1–8).

## Civil law

- Debts are to be released in the seventh year (15:1–11).
- Regulations of the institution of slavery and the procedure for freeing slaves (15:12–18).
- Regulations for the treatment of foreign wives taken in war (21:10–14)
- Regulations permitting taking slaves and plunder in war (20:14)
- Lost property, once found, is to be restored to its owner (22:1–4).
- Marriages between women and their stepsons are forbidden (22:30).
- The camp is to be kept clean (23:9–14).
- Usury is forbidden except for foreigners (23:19–20).
- Regulations for vows and pledges are given (23:21–23, 24:6, 24:10–13).
- The procedure for tzaraath (a disfigurative condition) is given (24:8–9).
- Hired workers are to be paid fairly (24:14–15).
- Justice is to be shown towards strangers, widows, and orphans (24:17–18).
- Portions of crops are to be given to the poor (24:19–22).

## Criminal law

- The rules for witnesses are given (19:15–21).
- The procedure for a bride who has been slandered is given (22:13–21).
- Various laws concerning adultery and rape are given (22:22–29).
- Kidnapping is forbidden (24:7).
- Just weights and measures are obligatory (25:13–16).

# Composition

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## Composition history

According to Rofe, since the idea was first put forward by W.M.L de Wette in 1805, most scholars have accepted that the core of Deuteronomy was composed in Jerusalem in the 7th century BC in the context of religious reforms advanced by King Josiah (reigned 641–609 BC).<sup>[14]</sup> On this view, the history of Deuteronomy is seen in the following general terms:<sup>[15]</sup>

- In the late 8th century BC both Judah and Israel were vassals of Assyria. Israel rebelled and was destroyed c.722 BC. Refugees fleeing to Judah brought with them a number of new traditions (new to Judah, at least). One of these was that the god Yahweh, already known and worshiped in Judah, was not merely the most important of the gods, but the only god who should be served. This outlook influenced the Judahite landowning elite, who became extremely powerful in court circles after they placed the eight-year-old Josiah on the throne following the murder of his father, Amon of Judah.
- By the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign, Assyrian power was in rapid decline, and a pro-independence movement gathered strength in the court. This movement expressed itself in a state theology of loyalty to Yahweh as the sole god of Israel. With Josiah's support, they launched a full-scale reform of worship based on an early form of Deuteronomy 5–26, which takes the form of a covenant (i.e., treaty) between Judah and Yahweh to replace that between Judah and Assyria. This covenant was formulated as an address by Moses to the Israelites (Deut.5:1).
- The next stage took place during the Babylonian captivity. The destruction of the Kingdom of Judah by Babylon in 586 BC and the end of kingship was the occasion of much reflection and theological speculation among the Deuteronomistic elite, now in exile in the city of Babylon. They explained the disaster as Yahweh's punishment of their failure to follow the law and created a history of Israel (the books of Joshua through Kings) to illustrate this.
- At the end of the Exile, when the Persians agreed that the Jews could return and rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, chapters 1–4 and 29–30 were added and Deuteronomy was made the introductory book to this history, so that a story about a people about to enter the Promised Land became a story about a people about to return to the land. The legal sections of chapters 19–25 were expanded to meet new situations that had arisen, and chapters 31–34 were added as a new conclusion.



Moses viewing the Promised Land, Deuteronomy 34:1–5 (Tissot)

## Sources

The prophet Isaiah, active in Jerusalem about a century before Josiah, makes no mention of the Exodus, covenants with God, or disobedience to God's laws; in contrast Isaiah's contemporary Hosea, active in the northern kingdom of Israel, makes frequent reference to the Exodus, the wilderness wanderings, a covenant, the danger of foreign gods and the need to worship Yahweh alone; this has led scholars to the view that these traditions behind Deuteronomy have a northern origin.<sup>[16]</sup> Whether the Deuteronomic code – the set of laws at chapters 12–26 which form the original core of the book – was written in Josiah's time (late 7th century) or earlier is subject to debate, but many of the individual laws are older than the collection itself.<sup>[17]</sup> The two poems at chapters 32–33 – the Song of Moses and the Blessing of Moses were probably originally independent.<sup>[16]</sup>

## Position in the Hebrew Bible

Deuteronomy occupies a puzzling position in the Bible, linking the story of the Israelites' wanderings in the wilderness to the story of their history in Canaan without quite belonging totally to either. The wilderness story could end quite easily with Numbers, and the story of Joshua's conquests could exist without it, at least at the level of the plot; but in both cases there would be a thematic (theological) element missing. Scholars have given various answers to the problem. The Deuteronomistic history theory is currently the most popular (Deuteronomy was originally just the law code and covenant, written to cement the religious reforms of Josiah, and later expanded to stand as the introduction to the full history); but there is an older theory which sees Deuteronomy as belonging to Numbers, and Joshua as a sort of supplement to it. This idea still has supporters, but the mainstream understanding is that Deuteronomy, after becoming the introduction to the history, was later detached from it and included with Genesis-Exodus-Leviticus-Numbers because it already had Moses as its central character. According to this hypothesis, the death of Moses was originally the ending of Numbers, and was simply moved from there to the end of Deuteronomy.<sup>[18]</sup>

## Themes

# Overview

Deuteronomy stresses the uniqueness of God, the need for drastic centralisation of worship, and a concern for the position of the poor and disadvantaged.<sup>[19]</sup> Its many themes can be organised around the three poles of Israel, Israel's God, and the covenant which binds them together.

## Israel

The themes of Deuteronomy in relation to Israel are election, faithfulness, obedience, and God's promise of blessings, all expressed through the covenant: "obedience is not primarily a duty imposed by one party on another, but an expression of covenantal relationship."<sup>[20]</sup> Yahweh has chosen ("elected") Israel as his special property (Deuteronomy 7:6 and elsewhere),<sup>[21]</sup> and Moses stresses to the Israelites the need for obedience to God and covenant, and the consequences of unfaithfulness and disobedience.<sup>[22]</sup> Yet the first several chapters of Deuteronomy are a long retelling of Israel's past disobedience – but also God's gracious care, leading to a long call to Israel to choose life over death and blessing over curse (chapters 7–11).

## God

Deuteronomy's concept of God changed over time. The earliest 7th century layer is monolatrous, not denying the reality of other gods but enforcing the worship of Yahweh in Jerusalem alone. In the later, Exilic layers from the mid-6th century, especially chapter 4, this becomes monotheism, the idea that only one god exists.<sup>[23]</sup> God is simultaneously present in the Temple and in heaven – an important and innovative concept called "name theology."<sup>[24]</sup>

After the review of Israel's history in chapters 1 to 4, there is a restatement of the Ten Commandments in chapter 5. This arrangement of material highlights God's sovereign relationship with Israel prior to the giving of establishment of the Law.<sup>[25]</sup>

## Covenant

The core of Deuteronomy is the covenant that binds Yahweh and Israel by oaths of fidelity (Yahweh and Israel each faithful to the other) and obedience (Israel obedient to Yahweh).<sup>[26]</sup> God will give Israel blessings of the land, fertility, and prosperity so long as Israel is faithful to God's teaching; disobedience will lead to curses and punishment.<sup>[27]</sup> But, according to the Deuteronomists, Israel's prime sin is lack of faith, apostasy: contrary to the first and fundamental commandment ("Thou shalt have no other gods before me") the people have entered into relations with other gods.<sup>[28]</sup>

The covenant is based on seventh-century Assyrian suzerain-vassal treaties by which the Great King (the Assyrian suzerain) regulated relationships with lesser rulers; Deuteronomy is thus making the claim that Yahweh, not the Assyrian monarch, is the Great King to whom Israel owes loyalty.<sup>[29]</sup> The terms of the treaty are that Israel holds the land from Yahweh, but Israel's tenancy of the land is conditional on keeping the covenant, which in turn necessitates tempered rule by state and village leaders who keep the covenant: "These beliefs", says Norman Gottwald, "dubbed biblical Yahwism, are widely recognised in biblical scholarship as enshrined in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History (Joshua through Kings)."<sup>[30]</sup>

Dillard and Longman in their *Introduction to the Old Testament* stress the living nature of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel as a nation: The people of Israel are addressed by Moses as a unity, and their allegiance to the covenant is not one of obeisance, but comes out of a pre-existing relationship between God and Israel, established with Abraham and attested to by the Exodus event, so that the laws of Deuteronomy set the nation of Israel apart, signaling the unique status of the Jewish nation.<sup>[31]</sup> The land is God's gift to Israel, and many of the laws, festivals and instructions in Deuteronomy are given in the light of Israel's occupation of the land. Dillard and Longman note that "In 131 of the 167 times the verb "give" occurs in the book, the subject of the action is Yahweh."<sup>[32]</sup> Deuteronomy makes the Torah the ultimate authority for Israel, one to which even the king is subject.<sup>[33]</sup>

## Weekly Torah portions

- *Devarim*, on Deuteronomy 1–3: Chiefs, scouts, Edom, Ammonites, Sihon, Og, land for two and a half tribes
- *Va'etchanan*, on Deuteronomy 3–7: Cities of refuge, Ten Commandments, Shema, exhortation, conquest instructions

- *Eikev*, on Deuteronomy 7–11: Obedience, taking the land, golden calf, Aaron's death, Levites' duties
- *Re'eh*, on Deuteronomy 11–16: Centralized worship, diet, tithes, sabbatical year, pilgrim festivals
- *Shofetim*, on Deuteronomy 16–21: Basic societal structure for the Israelites
- *Ki Teitzei*, on Deuteronomy 21–25: Miscellaneous laws on civil and domestic life
- *Ki Tavo*, on Deuteronomy 26–29: First fruits, tithes, blessings and curses, exhortation
- *Nitzavim*, on Deuteronomy 29–30: covenant, violation, choose blessing and curse
- *Vayelech*, on Deuteronomy 31: Encouragement, reading and writing the law
- *Haazinu*, on Deuteronomy 32: Punishment, punishment restrained, parting words
- *V'Zot HaBerachah*, on Deuteronomy 33–34: Farewell blessing and death of Moses

## Influence on Judaism and Christianity

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### Judaism

Deuteronomy 6:4–5: "Hear, O Israel (*shema Yisra'el*), the LORD is our God, the LORD is one!" has become the basic credo of Judaism, the Shema Yisrael, and its twice-daily recitation is a mitzvah (religious commandment). It continues, "Thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thy heart and all thy soul and all thy might"; it has therefore also become identified with the central Jewish concept of the love of God, and the rewards that come as a consequence.



The Book of Deuteronomy, Debarim. Hebrew with translation in Judeo-Arabic, transcribed in Hebrew letters. From Livorno, 1894 CE. Moroccan Jewish Museum, Casablanca

### Christianity

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus cited Deuteronomy 6:5 as a Great Commandment. The earliest Christian authors interpreted Deuteronomy's prophecy of the restoration of Israel as having been fulfilled (or superseded) in Jesus Christ and the establishment of the Christian Church (Luke 1–2, Acts 2–5), and Jesus was interpreted to be the "one (i.e., prophet) like me" predicted by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15 (Acts 3:22–23). While the exact position of Paul the Apostle and Judaism is still debated, a common view is that in place of the elaborate code of laws (*mitzvah*) set out in Deuteronomy, Paul the Apostle, drawing on Deuteronomy 30:11–14 (<https://bible.oremus.org/?passage=Deuteronomy+30:11-30:14&version=nrsv>), claimed that the keeping of the Mosaic covenant was superseded by faith in Jesus and the gospel (the New Covenant).<sup>[34]</sup>

### See also

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- 613 commandments
- Documentary hypothesis
- Hebrew Bible
- Kashrut
- Mosaic authorship
- Old Deuteronomy
- Papyrus Rylands 458 – the oldest Greek manuscript of Deuteronomy

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2. Phillips, pp.1–2
3. Bos 2013, p. 133.
4. Van Seters 2015, pp. 79-82.
5. Pakkala 2009, p. 391.

6. Davies 2013, p. 101-103, "In short, the belief of most biblical scholars that a scroll depriving the monarch of all real powers (and in effect destroying the institution of monarchy) is a plausible product of seventh-century Judah is astonishing and can only be explained by assuming that such scholarship is taking the fact for granted and thus either ignoring the absurdity or fabricating an implausible rationalization for it... the fifth century BCE provides a plausible context..."
7. Sommer 2015, p. 18.
8. Miller, p.10
9. Christensen, p.211
10. Van Seters 1998, pp. 15–17.
11. Rofé, pp.1–4
12. Tigay, pp.137ff.
13. Van Seters 1998, p. 16.
14. Rofé, pp.4–5
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16. Van Seters 1998, p. 17.
17. Knight, p.66
18. Bandstra, pp.190–191
19. McConville
20. Block, p.172
21. McKenzie, p.266
22. Bultman, p.135
23. Romer (1994), p.200-201
24. McKenzie, p.265
25. Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, 112.
26. Breuggemann, p.53
27. Laffey, p.337
28. Phillips, p.8
29. Vogt, p.28
30. Gottwald
31. Dillard & Longman, p.102.
32. Dillard & Longman, p.117.
33. Vogt, p.31
34. McConville, p.24

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- Jewish translations:
  - Deuteronomy at Mechon-Mamre (<http://www.mechon-mamre.org/e/et/et0501.htm>) (modified Jewish Publication Society translation)
  - Deuteronomy (The Living Torah) (<http://bible.ort.org/books/pentd2.asp?ACTION=displaypage&BOOK=5&CHAPTER=1>) Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan's translation and commentary at Ort.org
  - Devarim – Deuteronomy (Judaica Press) (<http://www.chabad.org/article.asp?AID=8164>) translation [with Rashi's commentary] at Chabad.org
  -  *Devarim* – Deuteronomy (<http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0501.htm>) (Hebrew – English at Mechon-Mamre.org)
- Christian translations:
  - *Online Bible* at GospelHall.org (<http://www.gospelhall.org/bible/bible.php?passage=Deut+1>) (King James Version)
  - *oremus Bible Browser* (<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=56784112>) (New Revised Standard Version)
  - *oremus Bible Browser* (<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=56784148>) (Anglicized New Revised Standard Version)
  - *Deuteronomy* at Wikisource (Authorized King James Version)
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