

DEUTERONOMY

An Old Testament book commonly identified as the farewell speech of Moses to the people of Israel just before his death. The title of the book comes from the Greek word <START TRANSLITERATED>Deuteronomion<END TRANSLITERATED>, which means "second law." In his address, Moses underscored and repeated many of the laws of God that the people received at Mount Sinai about 40 years earlier. He also challenged the people to remain faithful to their God and His commands as they prepared to enter the Promised Land.

Structure of the Book. Because it is written in the format of a series of warmhearted speeches, Deuteronomy is unique among the books of the Bible. Following a brief introduction of Moses as the speaker, the book begins with a series of speeches and addresses from Moses to the people. These speeches continue through chapter 33, with only brief narrative interruptions of his spoken words. The final chapter departs from the speech format to report on Moses' death and the selection of Joshua as his successor.

In his addresses, Moses reminded the people of their days of slavery in Egypt and how God had delivered them safely through the wilderness to the borders of the Promised Land. He also restated the Ten Commandments and indicated that these great moral principles should direct their lives. As God's special people, they were to be holy and righteous as an example for surrounding pagan nations. Moses also warned Israel of the perils of idolatry and called the people to worship the one true God, who demanded their total commitment: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might" (6:4-5).

As he spoke to the people, Moses also repeated many of the laws and regulations that dealt with observance of the Sabbath, proper forms of worship, treatment of the poor, religious feasts and festivals, inheritance rights, sexual morality, property rights, treatment of servants, and the administration of justice. Finally, Moses ended his words of caution and counsel with a beautiful song of praise to God. Then he pronounced an individual blessing on each of the tribes of the nation that would go into Canaan with Joshua to possess the land.

Authorship and Date. Conservative Bible students are united in their conviction that Moses wrote this book. But many liberal scholars theorize that Deuteronomy was written several centuries after Moses' time by an unknown author who wanted to bring about the religious reforms of the nation of Judah under King Josiah (2 Kings 22-23). These sweeping reforms began when a copy of the Book of Deuteronomy was discovered as workmen re-paired the Temple in Jerusalem. According to this theory, Deuteronomy was placed in the Temple to call the Jewish people back to observance of the laws which God had revealed to Moses and the people of Israel many centuries earlier.

This theory unfortunately overlooks the statement of the book itself that Moses wrote Deuteronomy and directed that it be read regularly by the people (31:9-13). The first-person pronoun I appears throughout the book as Moses refers to himself and his experiences. The logical conclusion is that Moses wrote the first 33 chapters of the book. Chapter 34, about his death, probably was added by his successor Joshua as a tribute to Moses. The date of the writing must have been some time around 1400 B.C.

Historical Setting. The Book of Deuteronomy marks a turning point in the history of God's Chosen People. For the previous 40 years, they had been through many unforgettable experiences under the leadership of Moses. He had led them out of enslavement in Egypt and through the wilderness to receive God's laws at Mount Sinai. Then, because of their rebellion and unfaithfulness, they had wandered aimlessly in the desert for two generations. Now they were camped on the eastern border of Canaan, the land which God had promised as their homeland.

Moses sensed that the people would face many new temptations as they settled in the land and established permanent dwellings among the pagan Canaanites. He also realized that his days as their leader were drawing to a close. He used this occasion to remind the people of their heritage as God's special people and to challenge them to remain faithful to God and His laws. Thus, the Book of Deuteronomy becomes a stirring conclusion to the life of this great statesman and prophet. One of the final verses of the book pays this fitting tribute to Moses' visionary leadership: "Since then there has not arisen in Israel a prophet like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face" (34:10).

Theological Contribution. The New Testament contains more than 80 quotations from Deuteronomy, so it must be rated as one of the foundational books of the Bible. Jesus Himself often quoted from Deuteronomy. During His temptation, He answered Satan with four quotations from Scripture. Three of these came from this key Old Testament book (Matthew 4:4; Luke 4:4-Deuteronomy 8:3; Matthew 4:7; Luke 4:12-Deuteronomy 6:16; Matthew 4:10; Luke 4:8-Deuteronomy 6:13).

When Jesus was asked to name the most important commandment in the Law, He responded with the familiar call from Deuteronomy: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might" (Matthew 22:37; Deuteronomy 6:5; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27). He then added some other important words from Leviticus to show that He was carrying the law one step further: "The second [commandment] is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself' " (Matthew 22:39; Leviticus 19:18; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27).

Another great truth underscored by the Book of Deuteronomy is that God is faithful to His Covenant People, those whom He has called to carry out His purpose of REDEMPTION in the world. The Hebrews were chosen as God's instruments not because they were a worthy, powerful people, but because He loved them and desired to bless the rest of the world through their influence (7:6,11). This is still God's purpose as He continues to call people to follow Him and commit themselves to His purpose in their lives.

Special Considerations. Some people look upon the laws of God in the Old Testament as burdensome and restrictive. The Book of Deuteronomy, however, teaches that God's laws are given for our own good to help us stay close to Him in our attitudes and behavior. Thus, Moses called on the people to keep God's statutes, "which I command you today for your good" (10:13). The intention of God's law is positive; passages in the New Testament that seem to condemn the law must be interpreted in this light. It is the misuse of the law-trusting it rather than God's mercy as the basis of our salvation-that we should avoid. God's law is actually fulfilled in the person of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (Matthew 5:17,20).

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