

DEUTERONOMY - SHORT VERSION

“Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. Therefore you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength.” (6:4-5)

Deuteronomy is the fifth and final book of the Pentateuch. The name is derived from two Greek words: *deuteros* + *nomos* meaning “second law” or “repetition of the law” (see Dt 17:18). A large portion of this book is a reiteration of the law delivered on Sinai and recorded in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. In Jewish tradition, Deuteronomy is sometimes called *seper debarim*, “the book of words,” which is a very appropriate title in that it essentially consists of a monologue, i.e., Moses’ declaration of all the Lord’s commands. There is no action in this book until its final chapter which describes the burial of Moses.

Historical setting. The book has three historical settings.

- The first historical setting has the Israelites on the banks of the River Jordan in the territory of Moab. They are poised to take the land of Canaan which God has promised to them. Before they cross over, their leader Moses gives them one last sermon during which he reviews the events of the Exodus from Egypt and of the forty years in the desert. He restates the laws, including the Ten Commandments (Dt 5:1-21) by which Israel is to be governed. He lists the blessings that will come upon the Israelites if they obey God, and warns them of the curses that will afflict them if they disobey. After Joshua is commissioned by God as Moses’ successor, Moses blesses the tribes, climbs Mount Nebo to view the Promised Land, dies and is buried.
- Pinpointing the second and third historical settings is not easy and is disputed amongst scholars. Moses lived in the thirteenth century B.C. but the Book of Deuteronomy was not written until several centuries later. Many scholars believe that Deuteronomy, or part of it, is the book that was discovered in the Jerusalem temple during the reign of King Josiah in the late seventh century (see 2 Kings 22:8). In this historical setting, the sermon of Moses would have been used to bring about much needed religious reform.

- As the Book of Deuteronomy was still in formation, the historical circumstances of Israel changed dramatically. In 587 B.C. the southern kingdom, Judah, falls to the Babylonians and the people are taken into exile. This period is seen by the prophets as a new wilderness. Moses’ sermon has a new audience, a battered band of exiles. The sermon is used to explain why God allows terrible things to happen to them—they have been unfaithful to the Sinai covenant. But all is not lost. If the exiles listen to Moses’ great sermon and heed it, God will restore the land to Israel and bless them in the years ahead. We might say that in the first and second historical settings, the authors of this book wanted to make ancient tradition speak again in a time of great crises to help the Israelites to understand present events and move forward with hope into the future. Deuteronomy admonishes its audience that obedience to God’s law is the only way to secure the future. Obey and live—or disobey and die (30:15-20).

Using the figure of Moses to speak to different audiences at different historical periods is a literary device, just like characters in a play that are used to speaking to various audiences.

Division of chapters. Scholars divide the Book of Deuteronomy into three parts, often referred to as the three sermons, addresses or sets of instructions, followed by Moses’ last will and testament.

First sermon (Chapters 1:1-4:13). Moses surveys God’s past dealings with Israel. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 recount how God helps Israel defeat her enemies. Chapter 4 is an exhortation to fidelity to the law.

Second sermon (Chapters 4:4-28:69). Moses’ second sermon is the heart of Deuteronomy. He proclaims the Great Commandment to love God with one’s whole being and he repeats the Ten Commandments. Then he recalls those laws governing the worship, public and private life of Israel. This sermon concludes with a series of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience.

Third sermon (Chapters 29-32). Moses delivers a covenant appeal and promise of divine forgiveness, called the Song of Moses.

Moses' last will and testament (Chapters 33-34). Joshua is appointed Moses' successor; Moses gives his deathbed blessing to the tribes of Israel; Moses dies and is buried.

Even though this book, like the two previous books, has many chapters dedicated to the laws governing Israel's worship and daily life, it also contains, as we shall see, many wonderful sections that give much food for thought. "*The book of Deuteronomy offers a theological evaluation of God's dealings with Israel over a period of about seven hundred years*" (Kenneth Baker, S.J.). Deuteronomy is referred to several times in the New Testament. Two of the best known are when Jesus quotes three times from the book to refute Satan in the desert, and when Jesus responds to the scribes' question about the greatest commandment and quotes Deuteronomy 6:4-6 (see Mk 12:28-34).

The *theme* of this book is *exhortation*. In his three sermons, the preacher/teacher Moses exhorts his people to be faithful to their covenant with God and to avoid all that would hurt their relationship with him.

Suggested passages to read

Chapter 4:25-40 – A call to obedience

Chapter 5–This chapter includes the Ten Commandments

Chapter 6 – The Great Commandment

Chapters 8-9:6 – Remembering the God who gave the land.

Chapter 11:18-32 –Reward for fidelity

Chapter 30:15-20 –Israel's choice

Chapter 31 –The call and commissioning of Joshua

Chapter 34 –Death of Moses