

Introduction to Deuteronomy

Author

Deuteronomy, the final book in the Pentateuch, contains Moses' last three sermons and two prophetic poems about Israel's future.

The Theological Message of Deuteronomy

The apostle John declares that "God is love" and that God first loved us, so we must love one another (1 John 4:7–12). Though his statements reflect God's love in Christ (John 3:16), they also summarize Deuteronomy and the whole Bible. Deuteronomy describes God's love in Israel's past, in their present situation, and in his future plans for them. This love transcends time, place, and circumstances. It is inexhaustible.

Deuteronomy unfolds as a covenant document, following the structure of the most-used treaty form of the day. Addressing Israel's second generation, Moses expresses this covenant in a series of sermons (Deut. 1:1–4:3; 4:44–28:68; 29:1–33:29). All covenants reflect a past relationship between the parties, for covenants reflect relationships; they do not create them. Moses begins by relating Israel's post-exodus history (chs. 1–4). This summary of Israel's past relationship with the Lord functions as the historical prologue of the treaty/covenant. It repeatedly emphasizes God's mighty deeds, extraordinary patience, saving power, and enduring kindness. His grace has kept Israel alive. He has proven that he alone is God and there is no other (4:35, 39), which is the OT's chief theme. God's steadfastness and Moses' faithfulness have made this new day possible.

All covenants contain basic requirements. Moses outlines the Ten Commandments and other primary covenant standards in Deuteronomy 5–11. Two key texts explain the covenant's main motive and purpose. Deuteronomy 6:4–9 commands the people to love God with heart, soul, and strength and to teach their children to do the same. Jesus deems this the first and greatest commandment (Mark 12:28–34). Deuteronomy 7:6–11 and 9:4–5 explain that God's motive for choosing Israel was his love for them and his fidelity to the promises he made to their ancestors. God's love and truth go hand in hand. Before Israel knew God, he first loved them and loved the world through them.

Since the Lord is one, Israel's love relationship with the Lord is to be exclusive. Idolatry is expressly forbidden: no other gods are to be recognized or worshiped (4:35, 39; 32:39). This emphasis has particular significance for the Israelites at this moment in their history. A new generation is about to enter the land of Canaan, where they will encounter the heathen deities and customs of the inhabitants of that land. The great question before them is whether they will adopt the practices of these people and accept their deities or remain loyal to the Lord.

Covenants also include specific requirements. Moses delivers these in Deuteronomy 12–26. He states standards for godly prophets (ch. 13) and kings (17:14–20), thereby protecting the people from false

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religion and self-centered rulers. Moses promises a great future prophet (18:15–22), and Acts 3:22 and 7:37 reveal that Jesus fulfills this promise. The rest of this section mainly teaches Israel how to treat one another fairly and justly—in short, lovingly. The covenant community must reflect the character of their covenant God.

Covenants usually include blessings and curses—benefits for compliance and consequences for disobedience. Moses outlines these in Deuteronomy 27–30. Every aspect of their lives will benefit if they fear and obey God (28:1–14). Their homes, land, and nation will flourish, declaring God's goodness to the world. If they disobey God, however, he will discipline them as he disciplined their parents. He will bring troubles intended to get them to change their ways. If they refuse, he will eventually drive them from the good land he has given them (28:15–68). Yet even then he will not abandon them. In exile they will repent, and he will bring them home (30:1–10). Discipline and hope are inseparable.

Covenants are ratified, and those who do so eventually die, as Deuteronomy 31–34 indicates. Moses passes on leadership to Joshua and dies, but the covenant people continue, and God cannot die. Moses was a great prophet (ch. 34); only Jesus was superior to him. Moses and Jesus taught the people about God's love, and his people continue to walk obediently in that covenant love to this day (Eph. 5:1–2).

Outline

- Prologue (1:1–5)
- Moses' First Speech: Historical Prologue (1:6–4:43)
- Moses' Second Speech: General Covenant Stipulations (4:44–11:32)
- Moses' Second Speech: Specific Covenant Stipulations (12:1–26:19)
- Moses' Third Speech: Blessings and Curses (27:1–28:68)
- Moses' Third Speech: Final Exhortation (29:1–30:20)
- Succession of Leadership (31:1–34:12)