

Introducing Deuteronomy

Introduction

Again?!? It's the protest of youngsters attempting to acquire almost any skill—Do I have to do this AGAIN! It's also the incessant command of toddlers with their favorite book: read it again, again! Welcome to Deuteronomy—a book about again.

The word “Deuteronomy” combines two Greek words meaning, “second law.” The name is fitting since Deuteronomy's readers encounter the Torah (law, instruction) that God gave to Israel for a second time. God delivered the first instructions at Mount Sinai (see Exodus--Leviticus). Forty years later, Deuteronomy narrates the final days of Moses' life after Israel's wanderings in the wilderness (Numbers). This transitional point in the life of God's people provided a natural opportunity to review and clarify God's expectations of Israel. With that intent, Moses taught God's Torah, again.

Deuteronomy presents itself as the final words of Moses (1:1) and most scholars would agree that it rehashes and draws upon biblical traditions associated with Israel's time at Mount Sinai and subsequent wilderness wanderings (see, Deuteronomy 16:1–17; Exodus 23:14–17; and Deuteronomy 2:32–37; Numbers 21:23–26).

Deuteronomy's Place in Scripture

By providing the dominant theological framework for Joshua--Kings, Deuteronomy functions as a sort of introduction to the historical books. In this regard, it looks forward into Israel's future. Deuteronomy even warns Israel about the exile (28:64–65) and offers hope for a return from exile (30:1–5).

Of course, Deuteronomy's instructions also rely on an articulation of Israel's past. Looking backwards, Deuteronomy concludes the story of Genesis--Numbers. Its first three chapters rehearse Israel's time in the wilderness and Deuteronomy 12--26 repeats and adapts much of Israel's earlier legal material, such as the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 20:1–17; Deuteronomy 5:6–21).

The characteristic of looking both backwards and forwards positions Deuteronomy as a hinge within the story of the Old Testament. This is a clue to its purpose: to instruct Israel how to live as God's people in the promised land by reviewing Israel's history. Within the larger context of the Old Testament, Deuteronomy concludes the story of the first half of God's promise to Abraham (making him into a great nation) while also anticipating and instructing Israel in how to enjoy the fulfillment of the second half of that promise (inheriting the land of Canaan).

Themes and Content

Deuteronomy deploys several rhetorical tactics in service to its purpose of instructing Israel in how to live as the people of God.

1. Which Generation?

First, Deuteronomy motivates faithfulness within its audience through a creative retelling of history. Deuteronomy draws relentlessly on the story of Israel, but the manner of the storytelling differs substantially from an ordinary history lecture. Deuteronomy does not ramble on about what God did in previous generations. Instead, it blurs the lines between generations. Even though Deuteronomy's story transpires after the demise of the exodus generation (Deuteronomy 1:34–37; cf. Numbers 26:63–65), Moses addressed the new generation as if they themselves had participated in the departure from Egypt (Deuteronomy 29:2) and stood at Mount Sinai in exodus (Deuteronomy 5:3–5). Likewise, the “you” Moses addresses includes the generation to return from exile centuries after Israel's entry into Canaan (Deuteronomy 30:1–5).

Deuteronomy conflates these generations in order to show that obedience to God's law is required of Israel in every generation. The generation that entered Canaan under Joshua was to understand themselves as having participated in the exodus and the covenant at Mount Sinai. Likewise subsequent generations were to see themselves as under God's covenant.

2. Covenant

Deuteronomy's rationale for Israel's obedience to God's law relies on God's covenant with His people. Israel must obey God's law because Israel entered into a covenant with God at Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:3–8), and done so again on the plains of Moab (Deuteronomy 29:1).

A covenant is an agreement that governs the relationship between different individuals and peoples. This concept is so foundational to Deuteronomy that some scholars have classified Deuteronomy as a covenant document. While there are some similarities to Assyrian treaties, Deuteronomy in its current form is not a covenant document. Rather, it reports the existence of the covenant and uses a homiletic style (see below) to encourage Israel's obedience to that covenant.

Ancient covenants and treaties included blessings for fidelity to the terms of the agreement and curses for disobedience. Deuteronomy 27--28 includes both of these components and commanded they be rehearsed at Shechem following Israel's entry into Canaan (Deuteronomy 27:12–13; cf. Joshua 8:30–35).

The blessings and curses outline the results of God's faithfulness to His people and to the covenant. If Israel obeyed the covenant and its stipulations detailed in Deuteronomy's legal material (chs. 12--26), God would bless them. Conversely, disobedience—especially in the form of idolatry—would incur God's punishment of sin and, ultimately, destruction and exile from the promised land.

This articulation God's justice—blessings for obedience, curses for disobedience—can lead to misunderstandings of suffering in our world. Like Job's friends, some Christians can use Deuteronomy's theology to look at those who suffer and conclude they must have sinned. Such conclusions reflect superficial applications of Deuteronomy that assume readers have a God's-eye-view of the world. Thankfully, God is the one who is responsible for ascertaining our faithfulness to Him.

3. Sermonic Persuasion

The reality of God's faithfulness to the covenant occasions another strategy for motivating faithfulness on Israel's part: sermonic persuasion (or, homiletic style). Whereas most of Genesis—Numbers and Joshua—Kings narrates Israel's history in the third person (they did this, then God did that, then this happened, etc.), Deuteronomy is very sermonic in that it addresses its readers directly: "Hear, O Israel (Deuteronomy 6:4); See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse (Deuteronomy 11:26); You are to seek the place the Lord your God will choose from among all your tribes to put his Name. . ." (Deuteronomy 12:5).

By addressing readers directly, Deuteronomy does what thousands of pastors do every week around the globe on Sunday mornings: to call the people of God to faithfulness. Deuteronomy fulfills this task most pointedly in 30:19 with the command: "This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live." One can almost hear the pleas of modern evangelists urging people to choose life with God.

4. Communal Worship

One might read the sundry laws of Deuteronomy and conclude that covenant faithfulness regards an individual's obedience to God's instructions. Certainly, that is included, but Deuteronomy also insists faithfulness is a corporate matter. God promised to mete out the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy 27–28 to the people of God (as a whole), not to individuals.

As with any social group, Israel required shared practices to unify the 12 tribes as one people. Deuteronomy offers Israel this unity through spiritual formation that directs Israel's worship to God as His people. Two spiritually formative practices merit mentioning here.

The first practice is praying the *shema* (pronounced shi-MAH). In Jewish practice, this involves a prayerful recitation of Deuteronomy 6:4–9 (*shema* is the initial Hebrew word in 6:4; translated, Hear). Although not originally written as a prayer, by the third century AD Jewish people prayed this Scripture every morning and evening (one way of applying Deuteronomy 6:7). The *shema* is a wonderfully concise summary of the faith of the Old Testament: the Lord is Israel's

God and has sole claim over Israel's worship. Because it gets so well to the basics of the relationship between God and His people, this was also the verse Jesus cited as the greatest commandment (Mark 12:29).

Such repetitious confession of one's identity in God becomes spiritually formative. Another formative practice for the people of God is to remember God's salvific acts in history. Israel's calendar of feasts provided opportunity for this with Passover remembering the exodus. Likewise, the feast of firstfruits included a liturgical recitation of Israel's origins and God's work on Israel's behalf to explain the reason for the worshiper's offering (Deuteronomy 26:1–11). In essence, the Israelite farmer in Deuteronomy 26 would say, "I'm here because God saved my ancestors, brought us into the promised land and has blessed me with the harvest."

One important component of that worship was that the worshipers did not go just anywhere they wanted for the feast. Rather, they gathered at the place of God's choosing (Deuteronomy 26:2). That centralization of Israelite worship at the temple in Jerusalem was another key theme in Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 12:5–7). This centralization was another way to facilitate social and religious identity for a people that struggled to achieve cohesion in such matters.

Conclusion

As we conclude our overview of Deuteronomy, it is worth reflecting on the question of "Why?" Why would God choose Israel and offer His covenant to them? In Wesleyan circles, we sometimes shy away from conversations about divine choosing, especially in relation to whether God predetermines an individual's eternal state. Deuteronomy does not opine on the election of individuals, but its conviction that God chooses a people is unavoidable.

What Wesleyans sometimes miss is that Deuteronomy explains election in terms at home with our theological framework: God's choice of Israel was an act of grace. God's people then—like the disciples and church of the New Testament—were not chosen because they were worthy or more numerous than anyone else; God chose them because He loved them (Deuteronomy 7:7–8). In God's choice to love an undeserving people, Deuteronomy reveals an important characteristic of the God we worship: He calls an unsuspecting people into life with Him in the promised land. Like Israel, Christians today receive that call through Jesus—not because we are deserving (1 Corinthians 1:27–31), but because God is continuing his project of sanctifying a people for himself.

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