

Introduction

Background

- Name:** Deuteronomy means “second law-giving” and reflects that this is a reiteration of the law from Moses to the Israelites. The Hebrew name for the book is “These are the Words,” referring to words which Moses spoke in this farewell address.
- Author:** Primarily Moses (31:9, 22, 24), although there are frequent commentaries on Moses words (e.g. 2:20-23, 3:13-14) as well as an epilogue (34:1-12) which was written by another (most likely Joshua).
- Date Written:** 1410 BC.
- Audience:** A new generation of Israelites who are ready to enter the Promised Land, 40 years after their parents escaped from slavery in Egypt.

Structure

Deuteronomy contains three addresses given by Moses to Deuteronomy and an epilogue:

- First address: 1:1 - 4:43. Moses recounts their history.
- Second address: 4:44 – 26:19. Moses reiterates the law.
- Third address: 27:1 – 30:20. Moses reaffirms the covenant.
- In the epilogue, Moses prepares to leave the Israelites.

History Recounted	Law Reiterated			Covenant Reaffirmed		Epilogue		
	Covenant Life	Ceremonial Life	Community Life	Blessings & Curses	Covenant Proclaimed	Song of Moses	Blessing of Moses	Death of Moses
1-4	5-11	12-18	19-26	27-28	29-30	31-32	33	34

These addresses were arranged to follow the structure of the near eastern suzerain-vassal treaty (see notes on Exodus, page 14).

Purpose

Israel stands poised to enter the Promised Land. Forty years after the exodus from Egypt, the nation is about to cross the Jordan River to conquer Canaan. Moses, however, is about to die and will not go with the nation into the land. Deuteronomy is Moses’ farewell address to the nation.

Moses farewell address is a passionate plea for the nation to obey the commandments of God so that it will go with them in their new land (6:1-3, 17-19). The address reminds the people of who their God is (6:4) and what He has done for them (6:10-12, 20-23). Moses implores the people to pass these commandments on to the next generations (6:6-9).

Finally, The address reminds the people of their obligations under the covenant (6:5, 13-16, 23-24). Deuteronomy serves a reaffirmation of the covenant between God and Israel. In Exodus, God established a covenant with their parents. Now that generation has died off, and the covenant must be reaffirmed with this new generation (29:12-13).

Theme

An appeal for Israel to remember and keep their covenant with God so that it may be well with them when they enter the Promised Land (6:17-18).

Hear O Israel

The commandments in the book of Deuteronomy are based upon the character of God. The laws, regulations and morality outlined in Moses' address are reflections on the nature of their God. Obedience to the covenant, therefore, serves as a mechanism for revealing to the world a picture of who the God of Israel is.

There are three broad characteristics of Yahweh in Deuteronomy which from the foundation of the Law (10:12-22):

- The oneness of Yahweh (10:14, 17), which requires that Israel gives its full devotion to the Him (10:12, 20).
- The lovingkindness of Yahweh (10:15, 18), which requires that Israel pursue justice and provide for those who are less fortunate (10:19).
- The providence of Yahweh (10:21-22), which requires that Israel keep His commandments (10:13) and cease their stubborn grumbling about God's provision (10:16).

Yahweh is One!

The clearest statement of God's oneness in Deuteronomy, and in all of scripture, is found in Deuteronomy 6:4:

"Hear, O Israel! Yahweh is our God. Yahweh is one! (Deut. 6:4)

This statement is known by the Jews as the "Shema," which is the Hebrew word translated as "hear." It has become the core statement of faith for Judaism. This is a part of every modern Jewish religious service and is also recited nightly as a bedtime prayer. It is the foundational creed of the Jewish faith, and therefore, by extension, the Christian faith. Yahweh our God is one.

But what does it mean that Yahweh is one. There are three aspects to the oneness of God: 1) transcendence; 2) sovereignty; and 3) unity.

Yahweh is Transcendent

In Deuteronomy 10:14, Moses highlights that heaven and earth belong to God. God is not merely an extension of creation, but exists outside of his creation. Nothing exists except that which He has created. He is transcendent. Moses developed this point clearly in his account of creation in Genesis 1. Therefore, God is alone to be worshipped.

In Deuteronomy 4:12-19, Moses uses God's appearance on Mt. Sinai as evidence of His transcendence. God appeared in the form of a thundercloud and fire, but He had no form (4:12, 15). He should therefore not be compared or likened to any created thing. Therefore, Israel is not to make or worship any graven image (4:16-18), even if it supposedly represents Yahweh (Exodus 32:5,8). Furthermore, Israel was not to worship any part of creation, such as the stars or the sun, for those things were created by God for humanity (4:19, Genesis 1:14).

Deuteronomy 6:4 means that there is only one God, Yahweh our God. He is the only one, who is above and outside of creation, not part of it.

Yahweh is Sovereign

In Deuteronomy 10:17, Moses states that their God, Yahweh is not just another god. He is the God of gods and the Lord of lords. Yahweh is not one of many gods, He is the sovereign God.

In the Canaanite and Egyptian religions there were many gods, each with sovereignty over a specific domain. There was a god of the sun, a god of the rain, a god of the Nile River, a god in charge of fertility. But for Israel, there was only one God, and He is sovereign over the sun, the rain, the Nile, fertility, and all things.

Deuteronomy 6:4 means that there God is one God over all things, Yahweh our God. He is the sovereign one who has authority and power over all things.

Yahweh is Unified

God's oneness does not merely mean that there is only one God. It declares that God has unity in His character. All His characteristics work in complete harmony with each other. This complete unity of his character places Him in absolute control of absolutely all things, which is why He is sovereign.¹

Our Response

If the commands in Deuteronomy are based on the character of their God, and their God, Yahweh is One, how are the Israelites to respond? Moses gives three responses to Yahweh's oneness:

1. **Wholehearted devotion to Yahweh.** If there is only one God, and He is sovereign over all, then we are to love and serve Him with our whole heart, soul, and mind (6:5, 10:12b).

In Pantheism, you have divided loyalties. Since each god has a different domain, you can't afford to give your whole heart to any one god. You have to keep all the gods happy and you dare not offend any of the gods. Pantheism requires a balancing of your godly devotion across the pantheon of gods. However, if there is only one sovereign God over all, you can afford to wholeheartedly follow Him without fear of offending some other god.

Therefore, it is obvious that Israel should not follow other gods, especially the gods of Canaan and Egypt (6:14). To chase after these pretender gods would be foolishness, and would serve to offend the only God you can not afford to have against you (6:15). Israel should therefore fear only the one true God (6:13).

Today, we are not tempted to give our loyalties to the god of the sun or the god of the moon. Nonetheless, there are still things which tempt us to divide our loyalties from the one true God. But if we understand the oneness of God, we should be willing to let go of all those things which tempt us to turn away.

In John 6, Jesus has just completed a sermon where He has offended his audience and many have run away. In verse 67 Jesus asks, "You don't want to leave me also, do you?" Peter responds to Jesus and says, "Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life." If we truly comprehend the depth of Peter's response to Jesus, we can understand the futility of pursuing anything other than Christ.

Because God is sovereign over all, the great promise of both the Mosaic covenant and the New Covenant of Jesus, is that if we wholeheartedly pursue God, all those other pursuits will take care of themselves. In Matthew 6:33 Jesus promises that if we seek first the kingdom, all the worldly pursuits will be added to us.

If you are having difficulty with distractions, with committing yourself wholeheartedly to God, then you are having trouble believing that God is one. Our devotion to God is a response to the transcendent sovereign unity of God.

2. **Pass this truth to your children.** This truth is so profound, and our obedience so important, that it needs to permeate our hearts. But more than that, it needs to be passed on to the next generation, not just in words, but in the very way we live our life. This is one of the major themes of Deuteronomy which will be developed more fully later.
3. **Defend this truth.** This truth is so profound that anyone who teaches against it must face the stiffest of penalties. According to Deuteronomy 13:1-5, any prophet who encourages the worship of any god other than Yahweh is to be put to death. This is true even if that prophet is able to perform great signs and wonders and is able to tell the future (13:2). Such a false teacher is to be

¹ Patrick Taylor, from a lecture given to the Grace Institute, February 1, 1996.

executed even if they are a close relative (13:6). If an entire city or region is teaching anything other than monotheism, the rest of Israel is to rise up against them and utterly destroy them (13:12ff).

Obviously capital punishment is not the appropriate response for heretics and false teachers today. Nonetheless, the New Testament warns against false teachers and those who would lead us astray. Just as Moses warned that these false teachers could be as close as our own family, so also false teachers today are often among us, being called wolves in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15). We are told to refuse hospitality to false teachers, and to remove them from the fellowship (2 John 10).

The Lovingkindness of Yahweh

In pantheism, not only do you have to worry about not offending multiple gods, you also have to deal with gods who are vindictive and selfish. The gods of Canaan and Egypt are self-serving, not looking out for the people. But this is not true of Yahweh. He is full of lovingkindness.

God did not choose Israel as his chosen Israel to possess the promised land because of their righteousness (9:6) or because of their greatness as a nation (7:6), but because of the wickedness of the people in the land (9:5) and because of God's faithfulness to the Abrahamic covenant (7:6, 9:5).

Because God has been gracious to Israel, Israel should be faithful to God, keeping his commandments (7:12). Specifically, because God has demonstrated his justice and love for the less fortunate, so also Israel is to show love to the orphan, widow and alien (10:19-20). Likewise, just as God demonstrated His grace to the nation by freeing them from slavery, so also Israel is to set their slaves free in the year of jubilee (15:12-15).

Just as the oneness of Yahweh serves as the foundation for the commandment to love God (Deuteronomy 6:5), the lovingkindness of Yahweh serves as the foundation for the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19:18). On these rest the entire law (Matthew 22:39-40), for the Ten Commandments are divided between these two commands, as is the reiteration of the law in Deuteronomy 5-26, with chapters 5-11 dealing with the love of God and chapters 12-26 dealing with the love of our neighbor.

The Providence of Yahweh

God most clearly demonstrates His love for Israel through His protection and provision. He has rescued Israel from slavery, led them through the wilderness, provided them with clothes and food and victory in battle (29:2-8). Moses reminds Israel of their heritage, bring to mind the story of Joseph in Genesis and how God brought a family of 70 people to Egypt only to make them into a multitude (10:22).

Israel's appropriate response to the provision of Yahweh is to serve Him and cling to Him (10:20), and to keep the covenant (29:9). If they keep the covenant, God will continue to provide for them, causing them to prosper in the land (29:9b).

However, Israel must be on guard, lest they take the providence of God for granted. When God causes the prosperity, Israel will forget the cause of this prosperity and begin to ascribe their blessings to their own efforts or to the favor of other gods (6:10-12).

God also has promised to provide for us (Matthew 6:25). But we too must watch out and never take his providence in our life for granted. We must be on guard for an attitude of arrogance which assumes our prosperity comes through our own effort rather than the grace of God.

Remember!

Remember The Law

Israel is commanded by Moses on 15 different occasions to “remember” and on another 9 occasions to “not forget” the Torah. Sometimes the command is to remember their history and the great works done by God. On other occasions the command is to remember the specific stipulations outlined in the law. In both cases, Moses is greatly concerned about Israel’s ability to remember his final words to them.

We must bear in mind that Moses command to remember Israel’s history and his command for them to remember the specific details of the law are not distinctly different. Because the stipulations come out the character of God as revealed through his entering into the history of Israel, one should remember not just the rules themselves, but also the narrative stories of Genesis, Exodus and Numbers which support, provide context, and illustrate the stipulations.

Pass on The Law

It is not just enough to remember the law. It needed to be passed on. In Deuteronomy 6, one of the responses to the sovereign unity of God was to remember and pass on this truth to future generations. The law was to be engrained on the heart of the people (6:6, 11:18), so much that the Law was part of every aspect of life (6:6-9). Passing on the law was not to be a formal lesson or schooling, but was to be a consistent pattern of living for every Israelite parent (6:7, 11:19-20).

But Moses also provided for more formal methods of reminding future generations of the law. In chapter 27, when Israel crosses the Jordan, they are to setup an altar of stones on Mount Ebal. On these stones the words of the law are to be written as a memorial for future generations. It is also from this mountain along with Mount Gerizim, that the twelve tribes of Israel are to hear the curses of the covenant as they are read by the Levites, responding to each one with “amen.”

In Deuteronomy 31:9-13, Moses commanded the elders of Israel to gather the whole nation every seven years at the Feast of Booths and read the law to people. Thus, every generation would become reacquainted with the covenant, reaffirming their adherence every seven years. Moses wanted the Torah to be passed down from generation to generation so that they might prosper in the Promised Land (Deut 32:45-47).

In Genesis 1 we saw that one of the purposes for which God created humanity was to bear the image of God in creation. The blessing to fill the earth was part of God’s desire to see his kingdom expanded upon the earth. Today, the raising of godly families continues to be one of the most effective methods we have of expanding the kingdom of God on the earth. Raising our kids to know and love God is one of the most effective evangelism strategies available to the church.

But to raise godly families, we must take Moses advice and pass on the precepts of God to the next generation. This needs to happen both formally and informally. Informally, our relationship with God needs to be visible to our children. They need to see us interact with God and his Word as we lie down and when we rise. We need to talk about spiritual things when we eat, when drive them to school, and while we watch television. The precepts of God need to be on the doorposts and gates of our house, and on the dashboard of our automobiles.

But formal education is also critical. Taking our children to Sunday School or Wednesday evening activities, as well as a regular reading of the scriptures together are also an important part of passing on to our kids the important principles of God.

Moses’ Example

The book of Deuteronomy is the ultimate example of Moses attempt to pass on the law. The entire book serves as his final attempt to remind the nation of the character of God and his history with the nation, and from this outline the commandments found in their covenant with God.

The first address of the book (chapters 1-4) are a reminder of the history of Israel with their God. Likewise, the Epilogue (chapters 31-34) end with Moses final exhortation, the two chapter long "Song of Moses," and an epilogue regarding the death of Moses. This final poetic interjection summarizes all the narrative of the Torah, reminding them of all the great things God had done for their nation. It is accompanied by the admonishment to obey this God who has done such wonderful things for them.

Choose Life! (Le Chaim)

The Prosperity of the Promised Land

Moses' desire for Israel to keep the commandments of the covenant are tightly related to the blessings of the covenant. Woven all through Deuteronomy are the blessing for those who will keep the commandments. Specifically, these blessings involve prosperity in the Promised Land.

(Deuteronomy 6:18) "You shall do what is right and good in the sight of the LORD, that it may be well with you and that you may go in and possess the good land which the LORD swore to give your fathers."

Obedience to the law will result in long life for the people (6:2), and that the nation may continue to possess the land for a long time (11:8-9) and receive prosperity in the land. However, disobedience will bring drought and famine and ultimately dispossession of the land (11:17).

The very geography of the Promised Land requires obedience to God and dependence on his blessing.

(Deuteronomy 11:10-11) "For the land, into which you are entering to possess it, is not like the land of Egypt from which you came, where you used to sow your seed and water it with your foot like a vegetable garden. But the land into which you are about to cross to possess it, a land of hills and valleys, drinks water from the rain of heaven."

Canaan will not be like Egypt, which is watered by the Nile River (11:10). In Egypt, the land was irrigated by extensive canals and irrigation ditches. Water, and thus prosperity, only required that you pump the water out of the canal by foot pedals.² However, Canaan doesn't have a large river from which to irrigate the land. Prosperity would be dependent upon the rains (11:11). If the people obey God, and love Him wholeheartedly, God will provide rain, both the early season and late season rains, and thus their will be good harvests (11:13-14). But if Israel strays from God and begin worshipping other gods, He will withhold the rains, bringing drought, famine, and death (11:17).

Blessings & Curses of the Covenant

The bulk of Moses' third address to the nation is a powerful reiteration of the blessing and curses that come from obedience or disobedience to the law. In chapter 28, if the people obey the law, God will bring blessings to those in the city and those in the country (28:3). God will bring great prosperity (28:11-12), and he will defeat all their enemies (28:7). God will put them in a position of power and influence in the world (28:13).

² Jamieson, Robert, A.R. Fausset and David Brown. *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*. (Electronic STEP File: E-Sword Software).

However, disobedience will result in just the opposite. Disobedience and idolatry will bring curses to both the city and the country (28:16). God will bring about famine and pestilence (28:21-23), and they will be defeated by their enemies (28:25). God will walk over by all the nations, and treated as a joke by the world (28:37, 44).

Ultimately, disobedience will result in a reversal of the blessings which God has already provided. Whereas God had taken a small family and turned it to a great multitude, their disobedience will take a great multitude and turn it into just a remnant (28:62). Whereas God had given them the promised land, their disobedience will cause them to lose the land and be scattered amongst all the peoples (28:63-64). Whereas God had redeemed them from slavery, their disobedience will result in the people wanting to return to slavery, but they will be held in such contempt that no one will even want them as slaves (28:68).

In chapter 31, God tells Moses that indeed Israel will break the covenant, and that all the curses which he had just outlined will be realized by the nation (31:16-17). But even when this happens, the nation will see the devastation of disobedience and choose to return to God (29:22-29). When they do so, the Lord will bring Israel back from their dispersion (30:3) and return the land to them (30:4-5). Furthermore, God will change their heart so that they will love God wholeheartedly and receive the blessings of the covenant (30:6).

Choose Life!

It is not that God has set before them a standard they can not keep (30:11-14). The law provides for them mercy of God and His forgiveness. All they need is to hold onto the covenant, to walk in it, to trust it, and they will receive the blessings.

As Moses concludes his third address you can almost hear the passion in his voice. The choice to obey or disobey seems clear. Obedience brings life. Disobedience brings death. So choose life!

(Deuteronomy 30:19) "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants,

This is the Hebrew phrase "le chaim." When we choose to follow God, we are choosing life. When we choose to reject God, we are choosing death. So choose life!

While we are not part of the Mosaic covenant, and these blessings and curses are not specifically going to be fulfilled for us today, the concept remains the same. Those who choose God are choosing life. Those who choose disobedience are choosing death. In John 14:6, Jesus proclaims that He is "the way, the truth and the life." In John 6:68, Peter affirms that Jesus has the "words of eternal life." If life is found in Jesus, then choosing to be a disciple of Jesus brings life. Likewise, rejecting Christ brings death.

The choice is simple. So choose life!

Bibliography

Baylis, Albert H. *From Creation to the Cross*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. 1996.

Jamieson, Robert, A.R. Fausset and David Brown. *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*. Electronic STEP File: E-Sword Software.

Kalland, Earl S. "Deuteronomy." *Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1998. Electronic edition, STEP file.

Taylor, Rick. From a lecture given at the *Grace Institute*, February 1, 1996.