

Deuteronomy

The English title “**Deuteronomy**” is derived from two Greek words: *deuteros*, meaning “second,” and *nomos*, meaning “law.” Thus, the term signifies “**Second Law**” or “**Repetition of the Law**.” In Hebrew, the book is called “**Devarim**,” which means “**Words**” or “**Speeches**.”

As the Greek meaning suggests, the Book of Deuteronomy **revisits the Law** that was originally given at Mount Sinai and recorded in the preceding books of the Torah. This book recounts how **Moses declared the Law anew** before the new generation of Israel that they might understand the covenant of the LORD and walk in His commandments before entering the land of Canaan.

Herein, Moses **entrusts leadership to Joshua**, and beholds the Promised Land from the summit of **Mount Nebo** before his death.

Author

By longstanding tradition, **Moses is held to be the author** of this book. Even the opening verse of Deuteronomy points to Moses as the speaker. In the New Testament, **Jesus Christ divides the Hebrew Scriptures** into three parts—the **Law of Moses**, the Prophets, and the Psalms (Luke 24:44)—thus affirming the Mosaic authorship of the Torah.

However, the final chapter of the book records the **death of Moses**, leading scholars to conclude that this portion was not penned by him. According to Jewish tradition, **Joshua** wrote this concluding passage.

Date of Writing

There is variance among scholars regarding the date of composition. Some suggest it was written in the **seventh century B.C.**, but the more widely accepted view is that the book was **written contemporaneously with the events it recounts**, during the final days of Moses’ life and ministry.

Background

Two forms of **ancient Near Eastern treaties** provide the historical and cultural backdrop for understanding the Book of Deuteronomy. These treaties were typically made between two parties: the first, known in English as the “**suzerain**,” refers to the **dominant or sovereign ruler**—a king or lord who held supremacy over others. The second party was called the “**vassal**,” meaning **one who served under the authority of a greater lord**, often a tenant or a subordinate ruler.

Such covenants generally followed a six-part structure:

- (a) *The Introduction of the Suzerain* — the one who initiates the covenant.
- (b) *The Historical Prologue* — recounting the suzerain’s acts of grace and authority.
- (c) *The Stipulations* — the laws or obligations expected of the vassal.
- (d) *Provisions for Preservation and Public Reading* — instructions to preserve and rehearse the covenant regularly.

- (e) *The Witnesses* — often the names of gods called to bear witness.
(f) *Blessings and Curses* — promises of reward or punishment based on obedience.

In the Book of Deuteronomy, **the LORD is portrayed as the Divine Suzerain**, the Creator and Redeemer. The historical prologue recounts how **God brought Israel out of the bondage of Egypt**, revealed Himself at Mount Sinai, and **led them toward the Promised Land**, according to the oath made to their forefathers.

A large portion of the book contains **the covenant stipulations**. The people were commanded that when they entered the Promised Land, they should **set up stones and inscribe upon them the Law** (Deuteronomy 27:2–3). Chapters **31 and 32** contain the section corresponding to the **witnesses**, while **chapter 28** presents **the blessings and the curses**.

Thus, nearly **all elements of an ancient Near Eastern covenant** are found within Deuteronomy, though not always in the same order. This **structural resemblance** affirms that Deuteronomy may rightly be understood as **a formal legal document**, confirming the solemn covenant relationship between **God and Israel**.

Purpose and Message

The purpose of the book is to **formally ratify the covenant** which Israel entered into with the LORD at Mount Sinai. Deuteronomy offers a **comprehensive vision of God’s covenant** and calls the people to **faithful obedience**. It functions as a **charter document** for the renewed covenant, preparing **the second generation**—the children of those who departed from Egypt—to enter the land of promise.

Its message is the **message of the Law**, the **message of the Covenant**.

To the Jewish people, the identity of this book is forever bound to the sacred words known as the **Shema**:

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is One” (Deuteronomy 6:4).

Outline of the Book of Deuteronomy (Biblical English Translation)

The Book of Deuteronomy – Outline

1. Moses’ First Speech (1:1 – 4:43)

- *Historical Review* (1:6 – 3:29)
- *Exhortation to Obey the Law* (4:1 – 4:43)

2. Introduction to the Second Speech (4:44 – 5:5)

3. Stipulations and Commandments (5:6 – 26:19)

- *Writing of the Covenant Terms* (27:1–10)
- *Blessings and Curses* (27:11 – 28:68)

4. Moses’ Second Speech (4:44 – 28:68)

5. Moses' Third Speech (Chapters 29 – 30)

6. Various Matters and Final Words (Chapter 31)

7. The Song of Moses (Chapter 32)

8. The Blessing of Moses (Chapter 33)

9. Death of Moses and Transition to Joshua (Chapter 34)

Total: **14 Sections**

Final Words of Moses: (Chapters 31 – 34)

Key Themes

(a) The Law (Torah)

In our present age, we are accustomed to drawing a contrast between *Law* and *Grace*. But had we asked the ancient Israelites, they would have found such a contrast quite bewildering. To them, there was scarcely a greater demonstration of God's **grace** than the giving of the Law.

In the cultures of the ancient Near East, the gods were not known for consistency or clarity. Priests often lived in uncertainty, not knowing what actions might please or displease their deities, for the preferences of the gods were thought to shift unpredictably.

But the Law changed everything for Israel. Their God revealed Himself not in ambiguity but in clarity. He chose to **make Himself known** and told His people plainly what He desired from them. This revelation was not seen as a burden, but as a profound **act of divine love**.

Thus, within the Old Testament, we do not see Israel complaining about the burden of the Law. Instead, they considered it a **gift**—a blessing to be treasured. They rejoiced in knowing what their God required. The Law was not viewed as restriction but as **freedom**, not as bondage but as **delight**.

When in the New Testament we encounter the Apostle Paul's severe critiques of the Law, they are **not directed against the Law itself**, but against the misuse of the Law by certain Jews of his time. These individuals insisted that Gentile believers must **submit to the Law** for salvation—thus **turning the Law from a covenantal gift into a salvific requirement**.

Paul opposed this distortion. But the **original purpose of the Law** in Deuteronomy was to express God's love, to define His covenant relationship with His people, and to provide guidance—not to become a condition for earning salvation.

(b) The Central Sanctuary

The notion of a *central sanctuary* in Israel was deeply symbolic of the concept of the One True God. In the Ancient Near East, many cities had their own patron deities, and in their honour, numerous temples were erected. But Israel, having but **one God**, it was fitting that there should be but **one dwelling place** for Him.

Moreover, this command had a divine purpose: to preserve Israel from the idolatrous practices of the nation's round about, who had many temples for their many gods. Thus, the central sanctuary became a safeguard against apostasy.

(c) History as Theology

To Israel, history was not merely the record of events, but a revelation of the **mighty acts of God**. They beheld in history the proof of their **divine election**, even as it is written:

"And I will take you to Me for a people, and I will be to you a God: and ye shall know that I am the LORD your God, which bringeth you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians."
—Exodus 6:7

It was neither coincidence nor human endeavour that brought them out of bondage after four hundred years and led them to the land promised unto Abraham. To them, history was a **manifestation of God's covenant**, and therefore of utmost importance.

Because the LORD had acted in their history, they were called to **hear His Law and walk in obedience**. Thus, in Deuteronomy chapter 4, Israel is exhorted to learn from their history. Likewise, the New Testament reminds the faithful to behold God through the revelation of sacred history:

"Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition..." —1 Corinthians 10

"For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning..." —Romans 15:4

In all these, the covenant remained conditional: **reward for obedience**, and **judgment for rebellion**. Such is the manner of the LORD with nations, and so with individuals. For He is a righteous Judge.

(d) The Law of Retribution

The Law, as given in Deuteronomy, revealed that **reward** is meted unto them who walk according to God's commandments, and **punishment** falls upon them who violate His statutes. This was no blind fate, but divine justice—a *law of recompense* established by the LORD.

Christ in Deuteronomy

How then doth the Christ appear in the Book of Deuteronomy?

1. **A Prophet like unto Moses** (Deuteronomy 18):
The LORD promised to raise up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto Moses. This prophecy is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who spake the words of God and revealed the Father.
2. **The Fulfilment of the Law**:
Whereas Deuteronomy exhorts Israel to obey the Law, Christ came **not to destroy the Law, but to fulfil it**. In Him, the Law was made perfect.

3. **The Renewal of the Covenant:**

Deuteronomy called the people to **renew the covenant** before entering the Promised Land. Even so, Christ came to **establish a New Covenant**, sealed with His own blood—yet in continuity with the holy Law given through Moses.