



# DEUTERONOMY

Deuteronomy 6:8

## Background File

The book of Deuteronomy takes the form of a series of speeches given by Moses to the people of Israel. He speaks just before the conquest of the promised land of Canaan. Faithful scribes and priests wrote the core of this book around 700–640 B.C.E. At that time the power of Assyria was causing a crisis of faith in Judah. The authors of Deuteronomy wanted the people to stay faithful to God. A shorter form of this book was found during repairs on the temple in the time of King Josiah (640–609 B.C.E.). Josiah then put the laws of Deuteronomy into effect (see 2 Kgs 22–23).

## What's the Story?

You can read this book on two levels at the same time. On the one hand, Deuteronomy is a timeless theological book, meaning that it tells us about God and God's relationship with us and the world. The reader overhears Moses making God's law known to God's people before the conquest of the promised land. He wants to convince them to obey that law after they have entered the land. On the other hand, Deuteronomy grew out of a specific time in history. Its authors wrote for the people of Judah in the seventh century B.C.E. Chapters 18–23 in the book of 2 Kings describe this dangerous period. The Assyrian Empire had strengthened its control over Judah and appeared ready to destroy it. As a result, many people tried to mix loyalty to Yahweh, the God of Israel, with the worship of rival gods such as Baal. The popularity of Assyrian culture led others to adopt Assyrian religious practices. Small farmers and day laborers had fallen deeply into poverty and were sold into slavery because of their debts. To meet this crisis, the authors of Deuteronomy restated and revised older laws, particularly laws found in Exodus 20–23. They wanted to inspire readers to be loyal to God and obey God's law.

The theology, style, and language of Deuteronomy influenced the way other Old Testament books were written, particularly Joshua, 1 and 2 Kings, and Jeremiah.

Deuteronomy has five major sections:

- Moses reviews history from the time the people of Israel left Mount Horeb (Sinai) to their arrival in Moab, east of the Jordan River (chapters 1–4).

- Moses reminds the people of the Ten Commandments (chapter 5). Next he delivers a sermon to encourage the people to obey the law (chapters 6–11).
- Moses proclaims the law that the people of Israel are to follow in the land (chapters 12–26).
- Moses tells the people about the special relationship or covenant that God is making with them. Yet he also warns of punishment in the future if they disobey God (chapters 27–30).
- Moses recites two poems (chapters 32–33). The change of leadership from Moses to Joshua and the death of Moses (chapters 31, 34) prepare for the conquest of Canaan, recounted in the book of Joshua.

## What's the Message?

This book calls for obedience to God's law because of the unique relationship God has brought about with the people of Israel.

Deuteronomy describes the covenant or mutual agreement that God has made with the people. God wants to be their God, and they will be God's people (29:12–13). God has chosen them (4:37–38; 7:6–8) and given them a fruitful land (6:10–11; 8:7–10; 11:7–12). As God's covenant people, they have a duty to obey God's law. Every new generation must learn about God's grace and God's law (6:7, 20–25). The people are to worship the true God alone (6:4–5) and eliminate the temptation to worship idols and other gods (7:1–5, 25–26; 12:29–13:18).

Deuteronomy seeks to remake Israel into a just and humane society. It promotes concern for the poor and underprivileged, including slaves, women, and foreigners (15:1–18). Fair justice is everyone's right. Judges, priests, and the king should work together to make sure there is social fairness and faithfulness to God (16:18–17:20).

Deuteronomy is about mutual love. God has expressed love by choosing Israel as a special people and freeing them from Egypt (7:7–8, 13; 10:15). The people are to love God in return and show their love by obeying God's law (6:5; 7:9; 10:12; 11:1, 13; 13:3; 30:6).

Deuteronomy calls for joyous worship that includes everyone. To make sure that the people of Israel worship only the true God and no other gods, Deuteronomy demands that they offer sacrifice and celebrate festivals in only one place (chapter 12). Earlier practice permitted sacrificial worship at many local altars scattered around the country (see Exod 20:24–25). Requiring that people offer sacrifice only at a single central holy place was a radical change. Festive worship is to include everybody, regardless of social class, age, or gender (12:12; 16:11, 14).

Deuteronomy offers a choice to everyone who reads it. This choice is between disobedience leading to death and faithful obedience leading to life (30:15–20). Deuteronomy urges its readers to "Choose life" (30:19). If Israel fails to obey, the forces of history will destroy it (6:13–15). However, fear is not the right reason to obey God's law. Israel is to obey out of love for God and neighbor (10:12–13, 19) and because God freed the people from slavery in Egypt (24:17–18, 22).