

Introduction to Deuteronomy

Where is it in the Bible?

Deuteronomy is the fifth book in the Old Testament and, therefore, the fifth book in the Bible. It is the last book of the Pentateuch or Torah. Since the middle of the twentieth century, scholars have also seen Deuteronomy as a theological introduction to the historical books from Joshua through 2 Kings which follow it.

Who wrote it?

Like the other books in the Pentateuch, Moses is traditionally identified as its author; in fact, Deuteronomy 31:9 says that “Moses wrote down this law”. There are several indications in the text that indicate that this is probably not true. The most obvious is Moses could not have written the account of his death in chapter 34. The book is generally considered to be a compilation of various traditions that were gathered together and edited by later writers.

When was it written?

Although the events it describes would have occurred much earlier, most scholars think that the main body of the book was written sometime during the seventh century B.C. The rest was probably completed during the Babylonian exile in the sixth century B.C.

What is it about?

Our name for this book comes from the name it was given in the Septuagint (LXX) and means “second law”. This is the result of a mistranslation of Deuteronomy 17:18 which refers to “a copy of this law”. Deuteronomy is presented as a series of sermons given by Moses as the Israelites were camped on the plains of Moab just prior to entering Canaan. The first one reviews the history of the people from the time they were given the Ten Commandments. The next one reminds the people of their promise to obey God. The last one emphasizes the fact that those who are obedient to God will be blessed, but those who are not will be cursed.

How is it structured?

- I. Moses' First Sermon (1:1-4:43)
 - a. Review of the Journey (1:1-3:29)
 - b. Obedience (4:1-43)
- II. Moses' Second Sermon (4:44-28:68)
 - a. Introduction (4:44-5:33)
 - b. Obedience Encouraged (6:1-11:32)
 - c. The Deuteronomic Laws (12:1-26:15)
 - d. Covenant Renewal (26:16-28:68)
 - i. Ceremonies When Entering the Land (26:16-27:26)
 - ii. Blessings and Curses (28:1-68)
- III. Moses' Third Sermon (29:1-30:20)
 - a. Historical Review (29:1-29)
 - b. Restoration Promised (30:1-10)
 - c. Appeal to Live in Covenant Relationship with the Lord (30:11-20)

- IV. Leadership Succession (31:1-34:12)
 - a. Change of Leadership (31:1-29)
 - b. Song of Moses (31:30-32:47)
 - c. Moses Blesses the Tribes (33:1-29)
 - d. Death of Moses (34:1-12)

What are some of its themes?

- **Blessings and Curses:** God and Israel are bound together in a covenant relationship which is based on the fidelity of both parties and on the obedience of Israel to God. Deuteronomy emphasizes the blessings of obedience to God and the curses that result from disobedience. This is particularly true in chapter 28. Note that the blessings which are promised in vv.1-14 of that chapter are fulfilled as Israel occupies the land. The curses come about in the following years, culminating in destruction and exile at the hands of the Assyrians and the Babylonians.
- **Deuteronomic Laws and the Ten Commandments:** Some have seen the Deuteronomic Code in chapters 12-26 as an exposition of the Ten Commandments. This idea goes back at least as far as Philo, a first-century A.D. Jewish philosopher. Many scholars since then, including Luther and Calvin, have picked up on the idea in an attempt to structure the laws set forth in this part of the book. Although not all of the details fit, there is merit to this approach. Here is an example¹ of what they have come up with:
 - First Commandment: No other gods, 12:2-13:18
 - Second Commandment: Misuse of God's name, 14:1-21
 - Third Commandment: Observe the Sabbath, 14:22-16:17
 - Fourth Commandment: Honor father and mother, 16:18-18:22
 - Fifth Commandment: Do not murder, 19:1-22:8
 - Sixth Commandment: Do not commit adultery, 22:9-23:18
 - Seventh Commandment: Do not steal, 23:19-24:7
 - Eighth Commandment: Do not bear false witness, 24:8-25:4
 - Ninth Commandment: Do not covet neighbor's wife, 25:5-12
 - Tenth Commandment: Do not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor, 25:13-26:15
- **Social Justice:** This book brings out the necessity of social justice, especially for those on the margins of society. There is a relatively long section on financial ethics (24:10-22). It also addresses humane treatment for animals (22:6-7; 25:4).

¹ This list is by Mark Thronveit, Enter the Bible – Books: Deuteronomy at [Enter the Bible](#).