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The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy
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Deuteronomy 1:1–5



These are the words Moses spoke to all Israel in the desert east of the Jordan—that is, in the Arabah—opposite Suph, between Paran and Tophel, Laban, Hazeroth and Dizahab. ²(It takes eleven days to go from Horeb to Kadesh Barnea by the Mount Seir road.)

³In the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month, Moses proclaimed to the Israelites all that the LORD had commanded him concerning them. ⁴This was after he had defeated Sihon king of the Amorites, who reigned in Heshbon, and at Edrei had defeated Og king of Bashan, who reigned in Ashtaroth.

⁵East of the Jordan in the territory of Moab, Moses began to expound this law, saying:



DEUTERONOMY OPENS WITH A formal editorial introduction, which describes the nature and content of the book and provides a series of details that readers must take into account.

The authorities behind the book. Although Deuteronomy consists largely of proclaimed divine truth, the voice of God is heard directly only five times: 31:14b, 16b–21, 23b; 32:49–52; and 34:4b. This introduction alerts the reader to the voice of Moses, which we will hear throughout. But his voice is not an independent voice; he speaks only what Yahweh “had commanded him” (1:3). This man, who served as mediator of Yahweh’s covenant with Israel and as the human conduit of divine revelation at Sinai, speaks as the authoritative spokesman for God.

The addressees in the book. The addressees are identified as “all Israel” in verse 1 and “the descendants of Israel” in verse 3 (NIV “Israelites”), two expressions that are scattered throughout the book. The former suggests that Moses speaks to the community of faith; the latter highlights the nation’s ethnic cohesion (they are the descendants of Jacob/Israel).

The location of the events described in the book. The introduction locates the addresses of Moses geographically as “east of the Jordan” in general and “in the territory of Moab” in particular. Based on 32:49 and 34:1, these events happen at the northern edge of Moab.

The syntax of verse 1b creates the impression that Moses delivered these addresses in the desert, somewhere in the Arabah. The following list

of place names supposedly clarifies the location: "opposite Suph, between Paran and Tophel, Laban, Hazeroth and Dizahab." Since those places that can be identified are located south of the Dead Sea, this list seems to refer to a series of way stations along the route the Israelites took from Sinai/Horeb to Kadesh Barnea. Verse 2 notes that under normal circumstances the journey could be completed in eleven days. However, because the people had rebelled at Kadesh Barnea—the point of entering the Promised Land (Num. 13–14)—their entrance into Canaan had been delayed almost forty years.

The time of the events described in the book. The narrator fixes the time of Moses' address "in the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month." According to Exodus 12:2, the people's departure from Egypt marks the beginning of Israel's history (Gen. 15:7–21; Ex. 3:6–8; 6:2–8).¹ Now forty years later, a new generation of Jacob's descendants stands at the Jordan, ready to enter Canaan. Verse 4 adds a second chronological marker: Moses delivers these addresses after the defeat of the two Amorite kings east of the Jordan. The victories over Sihon and Og provide concrete proof that when Israel is faithful to Yahweh, he will fight for them.

The genre of the book. The book opens with "These are the words Moses spoke." Verse 3 reiterates that Moses "proclaimed" (*dibber*) to the Israelites all that Yahweh commanded him. This suggests that in this book Moses does not function primarily as a lawgiver but as a prophet (18:15; 34:10) and as the people's pastor (cf. Num. 27:17; Isa. 63:11), delivering his final sermons before he passes from the scene. The narrator's description of his activity as *bô'îl . . . bē'ēr* (NIV "he began to expound") speaks of more than mere verbal exposition. Through the proclamation and the performance of the covenant renewal rituals implied in the book, the Israelite covenant ratified at Horeb² is put in force with this generation.³

The expression "this Torah" (*battôrâ hazzô't*) characterizes what follows as instruction rather than legislation.⁴ This interpretation is confirmed by

1. The narrator's chronological marker is synchronized with the rest of the Pentateuch (cf. Ex. 16:1; 19:1; 40:17; Num. 1:1; 9:1; 12:11; 33:38).

2. Consistent with the common designations of the other biblical covenants (Abrahamic/patriarchal covenant, Noachian/cosmic covenant, Davidic covenant), throughout I will refer to this covenant as "the Israelite covenant." The covenant made at Sinai was not made *with* Moses, but *through* him; Moses was not the covenant partner.

3. Hebrew *bē'ēr* is cognate to Akkadian *burru*, "to confirm," that is, "to put a legal document in force". Cf. CAD 2 (1965), 127.

4. The noun *tôrâ* derives from the verb *bôrâ* ("to teach") (HALOT, 436–37). The word occurs twenty-two times in Deuteronomy: Deut. 1:5; 4:8, 44; 17:11, 18, 19; 27:3, 8, 26; 28:58, 61; 29:21[20], 29[28]; 30:10; 31:9, 11, 12, 24, 26; 32:46; 33:4, 10.

the way the book depicts Moses. He “teaches” (*limmēd*) the people (4:5, 14; 5:31; 6:1; 31:19) and they “learn” the Torah (4:10; 5:1; 17:19; 31:12–13). The bulk of the book consists of pastoral instruction and exhortation, and even when earlier laws are cited, they are surrounded with hortatory appeals.

Deuteronomy involves two kinds of Torah: oral and written. Deuteronomy 1:5 and 4:8 obviously classify Moses’ first address as the former. However, within the reports of Moses’ second (6:6–9; 11:18–21; 17:18–20; 27:1–8; 28:58–61) and third (29:14–29[13–28]; 30:8–11) addresses, we find numerous references to a written Torah, which refers to the transcribed version of his oral speeches. As if to dispel any doubt about the genre of the book, the introduction concludes with a verb of speech (“saying,” *lēʾmôr*) rather than legislation. Moses stands before the people as pastor, delivering his final sermons at the command of Yahweh and pleading with the Israelites to remain faithful to their God once they cross the Jordan and settle down in the land promised to the ancestors.



MOST READERS OF SCRIPTURE recognize the significance of Moses in the history of Israel. Raised in the courts of Pharaoh but exiled for forty years in the Midianite wasteland, Moses reluctantly answered God’s call to lead his people out of Egypt. The prologue to the gospel of John captures his role in the history of revelation perfectly:

From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing [read “grace”] after another. For the law [read “Torah”] was given through Moses; grace and truth came through [read “happened in”] Jesus Christ. (John 1:16–17)

Here the contrast is not between law and grace, but between mediated grace (“through Moses”) and embodied grace (“in Jesus Christ”). John understood the revelation of the Torah through Moses as a climactic moment of grace, superseded only by the incarnation. As the interpreter of the covenant and the Horeb revelation, Moses served Israel as a mediator of divine grace.

But Moses’ authority derives from God himself. According to verse 3, Moses speaks to the Israelites according to all that Yahweh has commanded him. This is the Old Testament’s way of describing the process of inspiration. Since Moses functions as Yahweh’s mouthpiece, whatever he declares to the Israelites is as binding on them as the Sinai revelation, which Exodus–Leviticus consistently presented as direct divine speech. But the process

of inspiration does not stop with the oral delivery, or even with Moses' own transcription of his speeches (cf. 31:9). The same Holy Spirit who guided Moses as he proclaimed the Torah also guided the person who collated and edited the speeches and stitched them together with the narrative seams, including this narrative introduction. The inspiration of the Scriptures renders them authoritative for believers and guarantees their transformational effectiveness. In Deuteronomy we encounter the heart of the Scriptures that Paul characterized as an effective resource for instructing, rebuking, correcting, and training God's people in righteousness, so that they may be competent and equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

Indeed, the book of Deuteronomy offers a full-bodied portrayal of the meaning of the word Torah. As "authoritative instruction," it may indeed involve laws and commands (4:44–45),⁵ but the addresses that follow demonstrate that it is much more. It includes divine speeches (1:6–8); autobiographical reminiscences (1:9–18; 3:23–28); reviews of historical events (1:19–3:17); promises of blessing as a reward for fidelity to Yahweh (7:12–16; 11:18–27; 28:1–14); paraenetic exhortation (4:9–24); warnings against defection (7:25–26; 8:11–20; 12:29–13:18[19]), including the threat of curse for infidelity (11:28; 27:14–26; 28:15–68); recitation of the Decalogue (5:6–21); catechetical instruction (6:4–9, 20–25; 10:12–22; 26:1–15); invitations to regular fellowship in the presence of Yahweh (2:1–19); the granting of specific requests (12:20–28; 17:14–20); specific instructions on diet (14:1–21) and cultic worship (14:22–29; 16:1–17); administrative instructions (16:18–18:22); instructions on military policy (7:1–11; 20:1–20; 23:9–14[10–15]); specific instructions concerning the administration of justice (16:18–19; 17:2–13; 19:15–21); ecological, economic, and agricultural practices (19:14; 20:19–20; 22:1–11; 24:19–22; 25:13–16); sexual morality (22:13–30) and marriage (21:10–14; 24:1–5; 25:5–12); appeals for compassion toward those economically and socially marginalized (10:18–19; 15:1–18; 24:17–22); the national anthem (32:1–43); and Moses' final benedictions of the tribes (33:1–29).

All these fall under the rubric of "Torah." The semantic breadth of the term also explains how the designation Torah could so easily be extended to the entire Pentateuch, which is actually dominated by narrative rather than law. Surely when the Psalter opens with reference to delighting in the Torah (Ps. 1:2) the psalmist is not thinking primarily of "law," for without the gospel narrative in which the laws are embedded, the laws are a burden rather than a delight.

5. Cf. 4:1; 5:1; 6:1; 11:1; 12:1; 26:17; 30:11. Note the sole application of the term to the Decalogue in Ex. 24:12.



FOR MANY CHRISTIANS THE Old Testament in general and Deuteronomy in particular is a dead book. Consequently, the favorite book of Jesus is ignored, the source of much Johannine and Pauline theology is discarded, and the life-giving power of the Word of God is cut off. Unless we rediscover this book, we will not treasure the Old Testament as a whole. As we will see in the commentary, this book presents the gospel according to Moses. This is a gospel of divine grace lavished on undeserving human beings. Moses' vision for his own people serves as a microcosm for the divine vision of humanity as a whole. The book points the reader to the Lord God, who has redeemed his people and assigned them the mission of radiating his grace to the world.

At the same time, in the book we catch a glimpse of pastoral ministry at its finest. The speeches represent the farewell address of a man who had pastored this congregation for forty years, guiding them in exciting times and caring for them when circumstances were difficult. We will hear reminiscences of Moses' frustrations with his own people (1:37; 3:26; 4:21), of Yahweh's rebuke for his own sins (32:48–52), and of his refusal to grant a personal request (3:24–26), but in many respects Moses functions as a model pastor. He knows his audience well; they have been rebellious from the day he first knew them (9:24), and as soon as he has exited from the stage they will apostasize (31:27–29).

Unlike many pastors today, Moses also knows his role as their teacher (Deut. 4:1, 5, 10, 14). He challenges them to keep alive the memory of Yahweh's gracious acts and instructs them in the dimensions of covenant life. He also pleads with them to guard their very beings against spiritual lethargy and defection. But most important, Moses introduces them to God. Fulfilling the ideals of Malachi, the last in the train of prophets that he heads, Moses worked tirelessly as pastor to bring about his parishioners' life and peace; he stood in awe of the name of Yahweh; he taught truth; he walked with Yahweh in *shalom* and uprightness; and he turned many from iniquity (Mal. 2:5–6).

But Moses also knew his role in relation to Yahweh. He was a voice, crying in the desert, "Prepare the way of the LORD" (Isa. 40:3; John 1:23). But he was also a righteous intercessor through whose prayers much was accomplished (9:19–20; cf. James 5:16). And as he faced his own death, he was not preoccupied with personal legacy; his energies were focused on his flock. Here was a man who pastored "according to God" (*kata theon*), that is, as God would have done were he physically present (1 Peter 5:2).

Deuteronomy 1:6–18



Introduction to Moses' First Address (Deuteronomy 1:6–4:40)

BEFORE WE COMMENT ON specific segments of Moses' first address, we must examine the nature and rhetorical strategy of chapters 1–4. Structurally this speech divides into two parts, 1:6–3:29 and 4:1–40 respectively. The transition to the second is signaled formally by "Hear now, O Israel" (4:1) and by a marked shift in style and tone. Whereas 1:6–3:29 consists largely of historical recollections, 4:1–40 bears a distinctly sermonic stamp as Moses calls on his people to guard themselves lest they forsake Yahweh and go after other gods. Even so, chapters 1–3 and 4 are linked by at least four theological themes: Yahweh's presence,¹ Yahweh's election of Israel,² obedience as the appropriate response to divine grace,³ and the land of Canaan as Yahweh's gracious grant to his chosen people.⁴

In developing these themes Moses tells Israel's story backwards in four stages: (1) Yahweh's care and guidance of Israel from Horeb to the plains of Moab (1:6–3:29); (2) Yahweh's revelation of his will (4:1–8); (3) Yahweh's covenant relationship with Israel (4:9–31); (4) Yahweh's salvation of Israel from the slavery of Egypt (4:32–38). In 4:37 Moses actually identifies a fifth and even earlier stage: Yahweh's love and election of their ancestors. By recounting significant events in Israel's recent past and concluding with an impassioned appeal, Moses calls his people to not be rebellious like their ancestors (1:6–3:29), but to respond to Yahweh's amazing grace with wholehearted devotion. Only then will their future be secure (4:39–40).

We noted earlier that the overall structure of Deuteronomy is patterned after the order of ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaties. Following

1. Compare 1:30–33, 42; 2:7 and 4:9–14, 36–39.

2. Although chap. 2 casts a broader vision, declaring that Yahweh has allotted their respective lands to the Edomites, Moabites, and Ammonites (2:5, 9, 19), Israel's title to the land is based on the election of the ancestors and the divine promise of land to them (1:8, 21, 35). The rescue of Israel from Egypt is the decisive proof of Israel's elect status (1:27, 30; 3:24; 4:32–33).

3. In 1:19, 26–46 obedience means heading for and entering the land of Canaan; in chapter 4, obedience involves adherence to Yahweh's will revealed at Horeb, especially the prohibition of idolatry (vv. 1–8, 15–24, 40).

4. Compare 1:7–8, 20, 36; 2:29; 3:20, 24–28; and 4:1–5, 21–26, 38–40. To these features we should add Moses' expressed disposition toward his people (1:37; 3:26; 4:21).