

The Book of Deuteronomy

Article for Unit Two

Introduction to the Book

Deuteronomy represents the final book of the Pentateuch (Torah). As Moses' farewell message, it provided the theological blueprint for how Israel was supposed to live in the land that God was giving them.

Name of the Book

The Book of Deuteronomy actually acquired its name from the Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint (symbolized by LXX). In the Septuagint, Deuteronomy is entitled, *deutero-nomos*, which literally means "second law." The title is significant since Deuteronomy reiterates, in a somewhat modified form, the laws Moses gave to Israel earlier at Mount Horeb/Sinai (Exodus 19-24).

Arrangement of the Book

The book is arranged into four major sections, and each is delineated by a distinct heading (1:1; 4:44-49; 29:1; 33:1). *The first section* (1:1—4:43) is composed of Mosaic memoirs recounting Israel's journey from Sinai to the Trans-Jordan region, with a discourse on Israel's destiny as God's people. *The second section* (4:44—11:32) includes a series of reflections and admonitions on the terms of the Sinai covenant. *The third section* (29:1—32:52) alludes to another covenant Moses made with the Israelites while they were in the territory of Moab, and it recalls the commissioning of Joshua. *The final section* (33:1—34:12) contains a testamentary blessing on the tribes of Israel, and concludes with Moses' death.

Basic Theology and Concerns of Deuteronomy

As Moses' final sermon to the people, Deuteronomy contains some of the richest and most profound theology in all the Old Testament. Some scholars have argued that Deuteronomy stands as the "theological center" of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Themes Emphasized in Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy emphasizes several themes: (1) God's role as Israel's Redeemer; (2) God's faithfulness to Israel throughout her history; (3) God's preeminent standing among the gods of the ancient world; (4) God's repeated invitation to a loving, intimate relationship with Him; (5) God's requirement for unwavering devotion and obedience; and (6) God's concern for a society built on the notions of justice, compassion, and love for one another.

Deuteronomical View of God

These theological themes essentially flow out of Deuteronomy's high view of God. The deep admiration and respect for God is evident, for example, in the verse known as the Shema (6:4) in Jewish tradition (in Hebrew this word means hear, the opening word of the verse). This verse reads, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." Scholars have argued that this statement can be interpreted in one of two ways. (1) This verse affirms that the Lord of Israel is one God. This implies that God is singular in nature. For Israel, Yahweh was much more than just the chief God in a hierarchy of deities; He stood alone in being superior to all other gods. (2) A second meaning can also be derived from the way other versions have translated this text: "Hear, O Israel! The

Lord is our God, the Lord alone" (NRSV, JPS). According to this translation, the Shema is not so much a statement about Yahweh's singular nature as it is about the confession that Yahweh, alone, was Israel's God. This confession included the demand to worship Yahweh exclusively. For Israel, Yahweh's "oneness" spoke to the uniqueness, incomparableness, and greatness of God to anything that humans worshiped in the celestial realm. In holding this belief, Israel practiced what is known in theological terminology as practical monotheism. Israel would have no other gods before/besides Yahweh (5:7).

God's Unique Being and Holiness

Deuteronomy reminds the reading audience that God has no visible form and only appeared to Israel's ancestors in the midst of the fire (4:12, 15-19). Moreover, specific legislation warned against the making of idols of any kind (4:1-40). The prohibition against idolatry stemmed from the notion that a physical object made by human hands could not adequately contain or represent God's character or being. Since Israel was enjoined to worship God exclusively, several articles of legislation sternly rebuked the toleration of pagan religious practices. Thus, if a prophet (13:1-5), neighbor (13:6-11), an individual (17:2-7), or an entire community (13:12-18) encouraged the worship of other gods, they committed a crime worthy of death (13:5, 9, 15; 17:5). In addition, all Canaanite altars, cult symbols, and sanctuaries had to be demolished (12:2-3), pagan practices were to be avoided (14:1-2), and participation in child sacrifice, divination, and magic was completely forbidden (13:9-13).

The Command to Love God

The stern warnings about disobedience, however, are tempered by the command to love God. Commands to love God and to keep covenant occur throughout the book (6:5; 7:9; 10:12-13; 11:1, 13, 22; 13:3-4; 19:9; 30:6, 16, 20). In Deuteronomy, God seeks relationship with the Israelites by reaching out to them and longs for Israel to respond in love and gratitude. Israel's love for God was to be exhibited in the way they worshiped God: by bringing their sacrifices to the place where God caused His name to dwell (12:14), by presenting their offerings out of thankfulness (14:22-27), by observing important festivals and Passover (16:1-17), and by "remembering" how God acted on their behalf (16:3). Israel's love for God was also to be expressed tangibly in the way they treated members of the community: ensuring the weak and vulnerable were cared for (5:16; 15:7-10; 24:14, 17-18, 19-21), justice was not perverted (16:19-20), political power was not abused (17:15-20), and parents were not disrespected (21:18-21). Thus, in the theology of Deuteronomy, love and respect for God was not only witnessed in Israel's uncompromising obedience, but it was to be translated into a caring and ordered community as well.

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