

New Creation Teaching Ministry

Saturday Morning Classes—1991

An Introduction to the Book of Deuteronomy

By Geoffrey Bingham

An Introduction to A Course on This Book

The Book of Deuteronomy is generally known as ‘the fifth Book of Moses’ since it is the last of the five books—called ‘the Decalogue’—which have traditionally been ascribed to the authorship of Moses. We will later further discuss its title, authorship, time of writing and so on. The word ‘Mosaic’ in our study will be an adjectival use of Moses’ name, i.e. ‘Mosaic’ thinking, instructions, etc. are those given by Moses. That is, there is a way of writing and exhorting which is ‘Mosaic’ even if it could be shown that the book was not written by Moses. In fact, we assume in our studies that it was written by Moses. It seems natural to conclude that the last chapter—chapter 34—was added by some writer or editor to complete the story and nature of Moses’ life and ministry.

The Title of the Book

The Jews knew this fifth book of the law by the name ‘These Are the Words’ according to what is written at the beginning of 1:1. A shortened title was taken from 17:18, ‘Copy of this Law’. Our English title was taken from the Greek translation known as ‘the Septuagint’ or ‘the LXX, where the title *deuteronomion touto*—‘this second lawgiving’ arose from the impression that the law was given in such books as Exodus and Leviticus and that Moses was repeating much of it. This was not at all the case. We shall see when we look at the structure of the book, that Deuteronomy really represents a kind of treaty that Moses was setting out—a treaty by God for—and with—His people. Whilst this incorporates the law it is more than just a codifying of it. Scholars have noted the many resemblances—and even parallels—of Deuteronomic phrases and language with those of the Book of Exodus¹. Such language would be natural if Moses wrote the former books of the law. Some scholars see the five books as the works of a number of editors. Whatever may be the case, the book is essentially Mosaic.

The Structure of the Book

It is good for us, firstly, to get an over—all view of the book. It falls quite naturally into three sections, namely three addresses by Moses (1:1—4:43; 4:44—28:68; 29:1—30:210). Following these three sections there are, (1) the last words of Moses about his completed ministry, his death and his charge to renew the covenant each sabbatical year (31: 1—13), (ii) Moses’ charge to Joshua regarding the people and settlement in Canaan

¹ See Deuteronomy by J.A. Thompson (Tyndale Commentary IVP London. 1974. p. 26f.)

(31:14—23), (iii) the beautiful Song Moses sang in witness to the people (31:30—32:47). (iv) God's words to Moses on Nebo (32:48—52), (v) Moses' blessing to the children of Israel (33:—1—29), (vi) the death and burial of Moses 34:1—12).

Having seen this over—all structure we need to see it in more detail. First, however let us look generally at the three discourses of Moses. These discourses appear to have been given just prior to Moses' death, whilst the people are viewing the promised land. We must remember Israel had had some forty years in the wilderness after their remarkable exodus from Egypt. and now they were fashioned into a nation. Deuteronomy is a kind of review of this process, but the acts and experiences through which it had passed were significant in the light of God's covenant with them and the loyalty He demanded from them.

Discourse One—1:1—4:43

In this discourse—which is primarily historical—Moses reviews the dealings of God with His people as they left Egypt and travelled through the wilderness, speaking of the opposition they encountered, and God's overcoming of their enemies resulting in their possession of some of the land east of Jordan.. The discourse includes an appeal by Moses for the people to utterly reject idolatry and to be faithful to God. Also included is the mention of the making of three cities of refuge

Discourse Two—4:44—28:68

This is a long discourse¹ and contains the following: exhortations, the statements of laws, including the Ten Commandments, codes for worship, purity, tithes and offerings, the three annual feasts, the carrying out of justice, details concerning prophets, priests and kings, the personal and corporate living of the community. At chapter 27 begin the matters of the blessings and the cursings. The first follows obedience, the second follow disobedience. The law being set up on Ebal the curses are antiphonally ratified from Mt. Gerazim and Mt. Ebal. The warnings and exhortations are quite strong.

Discourse Three—29:1—30:20)

Moses again summons the people to hear him and then gives them final exhortation, describing again what God had done for them in their release from Egypt, their wanderings in the wilderness, their defeat of the kings of Heshbon and Moab and the taking of their land for settlement by the tribes of Reuben, Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh. There is a further warning against the danger of idolatry and God's consequent judgements on the land and the people. Exile will be Israel's lot but even then—when His people come to repentance—He will bring them back from the punishment of exile. Moses leaves them with the choice between trusting in the gods and other nations, and loving the Lord God Who has taken the initiative in loving them.

We have seen the contents of 31:1—34:12, i.e. the beautiful Song Moses sang in witness to the people (31:30—32:47), God's words to Moses on Nebo (32:48—52). Moses' blessing to the children of Israel and the death and burial of Moses 34:1 —12).

¹ D.M. Edwards and R.K. Harrison (ISBE. Eerdmans. Grand Rapids. Vol.1, p.935) see 2 discourse., in this section. the second commencing at chapter 27. J. Thompson see the Section as one discourse.

The structure in its sections and subsections will become more clear as we read and study the entire text of the book.¹

Some Concepts, Doctrines, and Elements of the Book

(i) The Book is a Treaty

J.A. Thompson (pp. 281—2) gives a chart and explanation of Moses discourses constituting a Treaty such as was a contemporary custom (c. 1400—1200 BC). especially within the kingdom of the Hittites. R.C. Craigie (Deuteronomy, *The New International Commentary*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1976, pp.22—24) discusses this same view.

According to this idea of treaty there was a preamble or prologue in which the people with whom the treaty was made, would know who was setting it out, namely the king or the god.² The people had received past benefits from the ruler or god, and should anticipate more benefits in the future. Since it was a treaty the people would have to follow certain stipulations (laws, conditions) and so a set of curses and blessings were stipulated, and the people would have to agree with these. Witnesses were needed on both sides to assure the deposition was legal, and then the treaty or covenant was sealed by an oath, ceremonies and sanctions. This assured a workable polity, a security for both rulers and peoples, and an understanding of the nature of obedience and the judgement of disobedience.

P.C. Craigie suggests that Deuteronomy could fit into the following order of a treaty,

1. Preamble (1:1—15); ‘There are the words which Moses addressed to all Israel’.
2. Historical I Prologue (1:6—4:49).
3. General Stipulations (chs. 5—11).
4. Specific Stipulations (chs. 12—26).
5. Blessings and Curses (chs. 27—28).
6. Witnesses (see 30:19; 31:19; 32:1—43).

It is simple enough to see the covenant God made with Israel, the agreement, the initiative and grace from God’s side, the agreement—as in Exodus 24—the ceremony, the stipulations and the curses and blessings that would follow. So many elements entered into this covenant—remembrance of past mercies and trust in God for them, remembrance of the awfulness of idolatry and its consequences, the delivering and sustaining power of the Covenant—God, and the whole matter of rich law, wonderful worship, prescribed and dynamic sociality, proper polity and purpose, and the true identity of the nation and its members. All of this helps the reader to understand that the book is a coherent whole.

Note: It is worth asking ourselves at this point, ‘What is the equivalent treaty or covenant under which we live?’ Do we as a nation—out of our Christian background—

¹ A detailed Outline of Contents is given in *The New Bible Commentary Revised* (IVP. London, 1970. p. 205). whilst a more detail analysis is given in the *Tyndale Commentary* by J.A. Thompson.

² Kings were representatives of the gods, or were themselves to be regarded as gods. This is clearly set out in the *Book of Daniel*.

somehow live under the New Covenant? Doubtless the matter is highly complicated, but certainly for Christians in the church there is a living under the New Covenant, whilst at the same time we are citizens of our own nation. This, too, is a complicated matter but it helps us to focus on reality. God is King. He has made a Treaty or Covenant with His people, and in the midst of what some may term 'secularity'¹ we have to keep in mind this multi—focal way of life that we have. The study of Deuteronomy should be most valuable in showing us how a community lived in covenant under God, and must have many helpful ideas and principles for us today. We will see that the essence of Deuteronomy is God's love for His people, His gifts to His people, the expectation by Him that they will love Him, keep His laws—which, anyway, are for their good—which are themselves the expression of love. This is exactly what we find in the NT.

(ii) Things Secret and Things Given

Deuteronomy 29:29 is a fascinating verse. In its context it appears to mean that the matters of idolatry, cursing and blessing are God's choice, i.e. God's decision from the depths of His own being, and even though they may not be always intelligible to His people, they 'belong to Him', i.e. He knows why He does what He does—and He does it! Well, then, whatever our thoughts on the matter we must leave these things with Him. As for us there is enough to occupy us to the fullest. Firstly, we know God—or can know God—as much as is necessary for a human being. Secondly, we have been given the law. We know what it is: we know what we should do regarding it. This gift of law has been given, not only for now but for our children forever. Let us, then do it! As Koheleth has said, 'To fear God and keep his commandments—this is the whole of man.' To accept this principle means we will not be busybodies, always insisting we must know the why and wherefore of everything. Again, Koheleth is helpful here when he says, 'That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out.'

Undoubtedly the Book of Deuteronomy is busy telling us the things we can know, need to know, and which we Must do.

(iii) The Covenant God and the Covenant

When we recognize that Abraham—as Abram—belonged to a family that was idolatrous (Josh. 24:2ff. and that God—"the God of glory"—appeared to him (Acts 7:1—2), so that Abraham believed Him, then we realize Abraham's family was in a unique relationship with God. As a people this family had little or nothing in regard to its future, its identity, its security and its heritage in this world, but God's promises were vast. A covenant—universal in nature and intent—had been forged with Abraham by God. Henceforth that family lived under that regime. For them there was the certainty of hope, born out of faith in the promises of God. Hebrews chapter II deals at great length with this theme.

¹ Since God created all things, and all things belong to Him and he gives us 'all things' (Rom. 8-12: I Cor. 3:21-23). then nothing is 'secular'. When persons ignore God and take the creation to themselves—for themselves—then they 'secularize' it. Some recent theology has sought to de-secularize what has been put into a sacred category—usually a religious one—and this has been all attempt to show that nothing is secular, except, of course, evil. The NT speaks of 'the natural man' and this is the person who pursues secularity a., a rejection of the essential spirituality of all things.

Biblically, God's covenant is a unilateral arrangement made with those He has chosen to be His people, and so it is 'all of grace'¹. He takes a nation which lived virtually without any basic hope and has guaranteed its future—even its eternal future. Other nations develop by growth, by increasing warlike capacity, by conquest and domination. History has shown us the rise and fall of nations—the constantly changing scene—so that no nation ultimately dominates the world. Only Israel is promised that it will inherit the whole of the world (Rom. 4:15; cf. Psa. 25:13; 37:9—29).

As we have seen Moses reminds the people of what has already happened in regard to the covenantal promises, hence for them—along with the rituals of remembrance (the festivals)—the covenant is at one a revelation of the gracious nature of God and an assurance of continuing security.

(iv) The Love of God and the Love of the People

We may argue that since God is love then He has created all things in love, and love is the order of the creation. Therefore as God loves Man, so Man ought to love God and his fellow—creatures. Whatever the truth of this may be. the Book of Deuteronomy shows that God loves Israel. Israel then, ought to love God. It ought also to love the strangers in the land, since they—Israel—were once strangers. The verb *aheb*—'to love', is used at least 20 times in the book in regard to these different relationships of love. The term 'loving kindness' (*chesed*) is also used a number of times. Love, then, is shown in the following ways—ways which Moses communicates in his writing,

- (a) Yahweh is the Lord, is the God of the covenant, is the One who has liberated Israel from Egypt, has defeated Israel's enemies, and who continues to do saving acts for Israel. Hence He is their King, Judge, and Warrior.
- (b) God has [inexplicably] loved Israel with His elective love, and as a result Israel will naturally love God, and so be obedient to Him. This leads on to the principle of love and the law: God has given the law for Israel's good (10:13), it is unique amongst the laws of all nations (4:10), and the keeping of these laws will bring wisdom (*chokma*; 4:6), peace (*shalom*) and life (*hayyim*). Notice the emphasis on the giving of the law (33:1—5)
- (c) In Romans 9:4 Paul speaks of God's gifts to Israel such as the law (Deut. 33:1—5), the sonship (cf. 1:31; 8:5; 14: 1; '52:6) the worship (10: 12)—and so on. These were all the gifts of God's love to Israel. They were also all of the one piece. Law and worship cannot be separated. Worship was a gift of the highest order, especially when we compare it with the worship of the Canaanite tribes.
- (d) Deuteronomy 6:4 (the *shema*) pronounced Yahweh as 'one Lord'—'The Lord our God is one Lord' (cf. Exod. 3:14). Monotheism has been found elsewhere in history, but not this kind of personal, loving, relational, elective monotheism.

¹ One description of covenant is. 'A bond in blood sovereignly administered' and its mode is (a) a statement of ideas made known (agreed upon), (b) the agreement sealed with and by an oath. (c) the invocation of a curse to guard the solemn statute. and (d) the agreement ratified by some external act, i.e. a ritual. See **God's Covenant: Man's Crisis** (NCPI, 1985). It can be seen that this is somewhat Jmi1ji to the Treaty spoken about above, although the Treaty is more a form of government imposed upon the people from above.

Because Yahweh was One, all idolatry, and all political looking to other lords was forbidden¹.

- (e) The Ten Commandments comprise (1) love to God, and (2) love to others. The commandments issued out of grace—God had delivered Israel from Egypt and hence commanded them on the basis of grace—hence their keeping of them kept them in love to God and to their fellow—creatures.

(v) The Blessings and the Cursings

These took up many chapters, and were extremely important. Since the covenant was given out of love, and was to be obeyed out of love, and since Israel was to love God out of love (4:4, 30:6) it meant that when other loves intervened, then the covenant was infringed. Covenant—breaking could be forgiven by true change of heart and use of the sacrifices as Leviticus shows us. The curses in Deuteronomy chapter 27 are strong ones. God naturally blesses His people (28:1—15) but rebellion and disobedience will be visited by terrible judgements—failure in crops, in season, and the bringing of horrible diseases upon flocks and people and the land. In some cases—where there is not repentance—it will punishment by exile. Chapter 18 is of great importance since it forbids all links with the occult, and sets out the nature of true prophecy².

Even so, Israel is God's people, and when His judgements have run His course He will restore the people and the land. In this there is hope: God will not utterly reject His people—they are His in perpetuity. It has been pointed out that Moses' way of speaking is not harshly legalistic, but father, loving and warm. Even so, whilst a gracious lawgiver he was a powerful prophet. Even his injunctions are forms of prophecy in the sense that promises of blessing and predictions of cursings would be irrelevant Israel was not needing warnings and incentives.

Conclusion to the Introduction to the Book of Deuteronomy

As we read and study the text we will find that our Introduction has not included many elements of the book. Even so, it gives us some orientation to the book, and should provide an incentive to read and understand it.

¹ Nations always saw their deities as their lords. As their deliverers and defenders, and even as their giver of good seasons and crops. Their laws and their rituals were along such lines. Often their worship was sensual and immoral. Israel was always tempted towards such worship, especially if they misread God's chastisement of them in times of rebellion, and so they sought the other gods which were—after all—local deities, having their rule in the locality. The prophets were alert to this idolatry and condemned it. Moses was the prophet par excellence in this respect.

² We need to understand that divination and such practices show that human beings wish to know what will happen in the future. In this sense what evil or [so-called] neutral powers tell human beings tell what will happen is a practice which is against God's prophecy and His prophets. This opposition is culpable and will bring terrible judgements, even to the point of being lethal.