



## **The Book of Deuteronomy**

By Pauline A. Viviano

The Book of Deuteronomy stands as the conclusion of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) with its narration of the death of Moses. But it is both an ending and a beginning, as it sets the stage for what follows by spelling out the relationship between the people of Israel and their God, providing a new theological perspective and legal requirements that will guide the telling of Israel's history in the books of Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, and 1-2 Kings.

Deuteronomy contains a law code (chapters 12-26) within a speech of Moses (4:44-28:68) and surrounded by speeches of Moses (1:1-4:43; 29:1-30:20); these speeches are given to the Israelites before they cross over into the land of Canaan. To these speeches is added an appendix of diverse material (31:1-34:12). The frequent use of motivation clauses attached to the laws and the sermonic style of the Mosaic speeches show a concern to persuade and encourage Israel to obey the law, thus making the book of Deuteronomy an exhortation, rather than a recounting of the law. Broadly understood, the book of Deuteronomy can be considered Moses' farewell speech.

### **The Formation and Date of the Book of Deuteronomy**

#### *The Deuteronomistic Law Code*

At the core of the Book of Deuteronomy is the Deuteronomistic Law Code, (Deut 12-26) which is a rewriting and updating of an earlier law code, the Covenant Code (Exod 20:22-23:33). It is often identified as the "book of the law" discovered in the Temple of Jerusalem in the course of King Josiah's reform (2 Kings 22:8). It continues to be debated whether the story of the discovery of the "book of the law" reflects actual historical events or is a story created to support King Josiah's reform, but what is clear is that deuteronomistic **theology** emerges in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE and it will play an influential role in shaping much of the Hebrew Bible and its content for several centuries.

#### *Deuteronomistic Editing*

There is considerable debate regarding the shaping of book of Deuteronomy, but there are broad lines of agreement. The original core of the book was probably Deut 4:44-28:68 which was supplemented by chapters 1-3 and chapters 29-30. Chapter 4:1-40 was added at the later stage of deuteronomistic editing. The Song of Moses (Deut 32) and the Blessing of Moses (Deut 33) as well as parts of Deut 31, the provision for the future, and Deut 34, the death of Moses were added at still later stages in the development of the book.

#### *Influence of the Suzerainty/Vassal Treaty Form*

The form and terminology of ancient treaties, particularly the Hittite suzerainty treaty form and the later **vassal** treaties of the Assyrian period heavily influenced the writing of the book of Deuteronomy. As in these ancient treaties the opening chapters of Deuteronomy introduce the parties involved in this treaty, **YHWH** and Israel, with Moses as mediator. After recounting the history of Israel that leads to the making of this treaty (Deut 1-11), the laws or stipulations of the treaty are found (Deut 12-26). The provisions for preserving and making known the laws of the treaty follow (Deut 27:2-8) and the treaty concludes with sanctions (blessings and curses) in

Deut 27:11-28:68. The Hebrew term *berît*, which means treaty, is frequently translated by the English word **covenant**.

Terms characteristic of ancient treaties/covenants, such as “love,” “know,” “walk after,” “fear,” “obey the voice of,” “serve,” “cleave,” “peace,” and “prosperity” are found throughout the book of Deuteronomy. “Love” is the loyalty owed by vassals to the treaty **overlord** (Deut 6:5); it includes respect and obedience. To “know” the overlord is to legally recognize his authority over you and your status as vassal. To “walk after,” as well as to “fear,” “obey the voice of,” “serve,” and “cleave” are suggestive of the kind of relationship that exists between the overlord and vassal, that is, a relationship of obedience, respect, and loyalty. If this kind of relationship exists between the overlord and vassal, then “peace” and “prosperity” are guaranteed.

#### *Date*

Perhaps some form of the Deuteronomistic Law Code existed as early as the mid 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE or even earlier, but the book of Deuteronomy begins to emerge after Jerusalem was destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BCE and its leading citizens were exiled to Babylon. The book of Deuteronomy probably reached its final form in the post-exilic period, which began in 538 BCE after the exiles were allowed to return to their homeland.

### **Dominant Themes of the Book of Deuteronomy**

The book of Deuteronomy is a sustained exhortation to Israel to worship YHWH and YHWH alone. Israel is YHWH’s elect people, called to live in a covenant relationship centered on the worship of YHWH and YHWH alone. Israel is to obey YHWH’s law as it is set forth in the Deuteronomistic Law Code; this will ensure a peaceful and prosperous life in the land that YHWH has given them. Thus the theology of the book of Deuteronomy is found in a set of interconnected ideas: **election**, covenant, **holiness**, **law**, and land.

#### *Election and Covenant*

That Israel is YHWH’s elect or chosen people is not unique to the book of Deuteronomy, but the connection of election with YHWH’s love is distinctively deuteronomistic. YHWH’s choice of Israel is not based on anything that Israel has done, indeed they are described as a stubborn and stiff-necked people and often rebellious. YHWH’s choice of Israel is based only upon YHWH’s gratuitous love (Deut 7:7-8). Covenant, a term that derives from the political realm of treaty-making, is used to define the relationship between Israel and its God: Israel is an elect people bound to its one overlord, YHWH.

#### *Holiness*

The root meaning of *qōdeš*, the Hebrew word for holiness is “to be set apart.” Israel is to be a holy people, that is, a nation set apart from the other nations as the object of YHWH’s special concern (Deut 7:6; 14:2). For its part, Israel is to give YHWH its total and undivided loyalty, most clearly expressed in Deut 6:5: “You shall love YHWH, your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Cf. also 10:12; 11:1, 13, 22). The various laws of the Deuteronomistic Law Code are meant to show Israel how to live as a holy people in the land that YHWH has given them. As they confront social, political, and religious issues in their life as a nation, they are to take the deuteronomistic law, a law more just than that of surrounding nations (4:8), as their guide to holiness.

#### *Law*

Law is a dominant and central concern of the book of Deuteronomy, for over a third of the book is taken up by the Deuteronomistic Law Code, and much of the rest of the book is a sustained

exhortation to obey the law. The context of this law is the covenant and the various laws address how Israel is to live its relationship to YHWH and to one another. The Ten Commandments are set out in 5:6-21 and the laws in chapters 12-26 are thought to flesh out these commandments for the daily life of the people of Israel. The innovative aspects of the Deuteronomic Law Code include the prominence given to the worship of YHWH at one sanctuary and the introduction of laws concerned with the conduct of war, the behavior of kings, and the role of prophets.

### *Land*

The “land” pervades the book of Deuteronomy as one of its most important theological concepts. As the book opens Israel is about to enter the land of Canaan, a land that was promised to their ancestors (Gen 12:7; 13:15, 17; 15:7; 17:8; 24:7; 26:3-4; 28:4,13; 35:12; 48:4). This land is seen as a gift, but at the same time it is a reward for their obedience to the laws of the covenant and the place where those laws are to be lived. The loss of the land is seen as the result of sin, in particular the sin of **idolatry**. The very first demand of covenant is loyalty to YHWH and Israel’s repeatedly going after other gods is presented in the book of Deuteronomy as the principle sin that will cause Israel to be exiled from the land. Obedience to the law provides the only guarantee for holding onto the land and returning to the land after exile. Obedience to the law ensures that Israel will live in peace and prosperity in the land; disobedience leads to the loss of the land.

### *Conclusion*

The significance of the book of Deuteronomy is seen both in the laws themselves and in setting these laws in the context of a covenant relationship between a people and its God. The book of Deuteronomy takes earlier laws and modifies and expands them to address a new age. It takes the Ten Commandments and shows how these apply to the daily life of the people. It brings to the fore the notion of covenant that will ever after define the relationship between YHWH and the people of Israel. Echoes of Deuteronomy’s message regarding election, covenant, holiness, law, and land are found throughout the historical and prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible.

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## **Glossary**

**Covenant:** A covenant is an agreement between two or more parties. It involves an obligation on all parties of the covenant and the taking of an oath. When referring to an agreement between nations the Hebrew term for covenant (*berît*) is often translated as treaty. With the emergence of deuteronomic theology covenant becomes the primary way to refer to the relationship between YHWH and the people of Israel.

**Election:** Election is used to refer to the choice of Israel by YHWH to be his people.

**Holiness:** In the Hebrew Bible “to be holy” is “to be set apart” from other persons or objects. YHWH is holy for he is totally set apart from any aspect of creation. Israel is called to be a holy nation, that is, a nation set apart from other nations; Israel is set apart for worship of and service to YHWH alone (cf. Exod 19:6; Lev 20:26; Deut 14:2).

**Idolatry:** An idol was a representation of a god or goddess by means of a physical object, such as a statue or stone pillar. The making and use of idols in worship was prohibited in Israel, but was common practice in the religions of the ancient Near East. For Israel idolatry is not simply

the making and use of idols, but is focused in particular on the worship of the gods represented by these idols.

**Law:** A law is a rule or regulation. In the Hebrew Bible all laws of the Pentateuch are said to come from YHWH and are mediated to the people by Moses, with the exception of the Ten Commandments that come directly from God to the people (Exod 20:1-19). Laws were viewed as a gift from YHWH (cf. Ps 119) and guided the people in the day to day living of their covenant relationship with YHWH.

**Overlord:** An overlord is one who is in a position of domination over another person or nation. In the ancient Near East smaller nations were often defeated by larger empires and forced to accept the emperor or suzerain as overlord and to become a vassal state. With the adoption of covenant language to speak of Israel's relationship to its deity, YHWH becomes identified as Israel's overlord.

**Theology:** In its most basic meaning theology is the study of God. When used with reference to the Hebrew Bible it refers to how the biblical text presents God, God's relationship to the people of Israel, and the implications of that relationship for how Israel is to live as a nation and as individuals.

**Vassal:** A vassal is one who is subordinate to and dependent upon an overlord. Smaller nations were often forced into a position of subservience to larger empires as a result of war. Israel understood itself to be YHWH's vassal when it defined its relationship to YHWH in terms of covenant.

**YHWH:** YHWH is a way to designate the personal name of Israel's God. The original vowels that accompany these letters are unknown as they were not written in the ancient Hebrew script and in the course of time the name of God was viewed as too holy to be spoken and was replaced by the Hebrew word for Lord (*'ādōnāy*).

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