

# DEUTERONOMY

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## WHAT IS DEUTERONOMY?

The title ‘Deuteronomy’ derives from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, where the Hebrew phrase ‘a copy of this law’ in Deut. 17: 18 was mistranslated as ‘this second law’ (*deuteronomion*). The Jews have followed their normal custom in calling the book after its opening phrase, in this case ‘These are the words’, or more simply ‘Words’. The ‘words’ are those of Moses speaking in Moab on the eve of Israel’s crossing of the Jordan into the promised land of Canaan. They are presented as his last will and testament, and the work concludes with his death and burial.

Deuteronomy takes the form of three separate addresses followed by a series of appendices. The first address (1: 1 – 4: 43) outlines the main events in Israel’s journey from Mount Horeb (the deuteronomic name for Sinai) to the plains of Moab, and concludes with the exhortation to observe the law. The second address (4: 44 – 29: 1) begins by reminding the Israelites of the terms of the Mosaic covenant set out in the Ten Commandments which demanded above all else Israel’s exclusive allegiance to her God. It is on obedience to this law that possession of the land depends. The major portion of this address consists of supplementary laws to the Ten Commandments, which although very varied in scope have the overall purpose of helping Israel to maintain the covenant relationship through which she receives divine blessing. Hence the law is not considered a burden, but a benefit. But as the concluding passage of this address makes clear with its lists of blessings and curses, failure to observe the divine law can only result in disaster. The third address (29: 2 – 30: 20) outlines the choice that faces Israel – obedience or disobedi-

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ence. But Moses reminds Israel that even if she is punished for failure to observe the law, on repentance she can still have her fortunes restored, including possession of the land. The appendices deal with the writing down of the law, its deposit in the Ark, and the appointment of Joshua as Moses' successor (31); the recitation of the Song of Moses (32); his Blessing (33); death and burial (34).

As with the first four books of the Old Testament, the Jews have traditionally regarded Moses as the author of Deuteronomy. But in fact Judaism was not so much concerned with maintaining a particular view about authorship, but rather with giving Mosaic authority to the deuteronomic law, and so seeing it as an integral part of the Torah (the Law), the Jewish name for the first five books of the Old Testament, which together are commonly called the Pentateuch.

However, close examination of the text of Deuteronomy shows that it has a completely different character from the other books of the Pentateuch. Indeed its style is so distinctive that it can be more readily identified than any other of the literary sources of these five books. It is therefore clear that originally Deuteronomy did not belong with the rest of the Pentateuch. Further, this distinctive style is not confined to Deuteronomy, but continues in the historical books Joshua to 2 Kings. Scholars have therefore been able to put forward the view that originally there were two quite separate literary works, the Tetrteuch (the four books Genesis to Numbers) and the Deuteronomic Work (Deuteronomy to 2 Kings). Only in the period after the exile was Deuteronomy detached and added to the Tetrteuch. In their subsequent handing-down, the two works have to some extent influenced one another, which explains why a few deuteronomic notes appear in Genesis to Numbers. Further deuteronomic literary activity is also found in the prose sermons inserted into the prophecies of Jeremiah.

Deuteronomy has long been connected with the finding of

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-09772-7 - Deuteronomy  
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the law book in the temple in Josiah's reign in 621 B.C. (2 Kings 22f.). On hearing of the contents of this book, the king was so shocked that he forthwith embarked on a radical religious reform which resulted in the centralization of all worship in Jerusalem, and the consequent destruction of every other shrine. Since such centralization of worship is the main innovation of the deuteronomic law, the majority of scholars hold that the book discovered in the temple must at least have contained the major legal material (12–26, 28) around which the original book of Deuteronomy comprising the second and third addresses (4: 44 – 30: 20) was formed.

That the present book of Deuteronomy is not the original book can readily be recognized from the fact that Deuteronomy now has two introductions, 1–4: 43 and 4: 44–11: 32. This is due to the deuteronomic historian who in the period of the exile used the original book of Deuteronomy for the introduction to his Work (Deuteronomy to 2 Kings), and wrote Israel's history from the conquest to the exile in the light of the deuteronomic law. Thus 1–4: 43 acts as the introduction to the whole Deuteronomic Work, while 4: 44 – 11: 32 is the introduction to the original book. Further, it has long been noted that while normally the author of the original book uses the singular form of address, there are a number of passages in which the plural form is adopted. These have also been identified as interpolations of the deuteronomic historian.

Since the last event recorded in the Deuteronomic Work is the release of the exiled King Jehoiachin from prison in Babylon in 561 B.C. (2 Kings 25: 28), but there is no mention of the advent of the Persian king, Cyrus, and the return from exile in 538 B.C., the deuteronomic historian must have completed his Work soon after Jehoiachin's release. Thus when Deuteronomy in its final form appeared, Israel had in fact already experienced the punishment which it constantly threatens. Whether the deuteronomic historian wrote in Babylon or Palestine remains a matter of dispute.

Cambridge University Press  
 978-0-521-09772-7 - Deuteronomy  
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*What is Deuteronomy's literary form?*

WHAT IS DEUTERONOMY'S LITERARY FORM?

2 Kings 23: 2 describes the book discovered in the temple as a 'covenant document' (better than the N.E.B's 'book of the covenant'). A considerable number of secular covenant documents have been discovered dating from the middle of the second millennium to the seventh century B.C. They take the form of political suzerainty treaties whereby one party, the suzerain, agrees to protect the other, his vassal, provided that the latter fulfils certain conditions specified in the treaty. While the treaties do not follow a strict stereotyped form, they generally include (i) preamble, (ii) historical prologue, (iii) statement of general principles, (iv) detailed obligations imposed on the vassal, (v) direction as to deposit of the treaty and future public reading, (vi) list of gods who witness the treaty, (vii) curses and blessings. Some scholars have argued that from the first Israel interpreted her relationship with her God inaugurated in the Mosaic covenant at Sinai in terms of these treaties. But because not all of the usual suzerainty treaty components can be found in the story of Sinai in Exod. 20, in particular the curses and blessings formula, other scholars have held that it was only later that Israel came to understand her relationship with her God in this way. Whether or not this is so, it is quite clear that in its present form Deuteronomy interprets the covenant relationship in terms of the political suzerainty treaties, whose literary form it follows closely. While the first commandment (Exod. 20: 3; Deut. 5: 7) prohibiting Israel from dealing with any other god prevented the inclusion of a list of gods as witnesses, all the other usual treaty provisions are present. So chs. 1-4 contain the preamble and historical prologue, 5-11 a statement of general principles, 12-26 the detailed obligations, 27-30 the curses and blessings, and 31-4 provisions as to the future including the deposit and public reading of the covenant document. Judah, as a vassal state of Assyria, was familiar enough with this kind of treaty: indeed just such a political

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 978-0-521-09772-7 - Deuteronomy  
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treaty may have acted as the actual model for Deuteronomy in its present form.

Thus Deuteronomy holds that obedience to the law determines Israel's very existence. While she formed the elect community chosen by God from all the nations of the world, her election contained within it a threat, the threat of rejection if she failed to carry out the obligations imposed on her, the chief of which was a total prohibition of any relationship with any god other than Yahweh, Israel's suzerain.

WHERE, WHEN AND BY WHOM WAS THE  
 ORIGINAL BOOK WRITTEN?

The fact that part of Deuteronomy can be associated with the book found in the temple in Josiah's reign does not, of course, indicate that the deuteronomic law is necessarily to be dated to his time. Indeed examination of the book shows that some of the laws are in origin much older. It has in fact long been argued that the traditions behind Deuteronomy originated in the northern kingdom and were brought south following the fall of Samaria to the Assyrians in 721 B.C. Recent scholarship has, however, shown the essentially southern interest of deuteronomic theology, and there can be no doubt that the original book reached its present form in Judah.

None the less, the loss of the northern kingdom and its incorporation into the Assyrian empire had a decisive effect on neighbouring Judah, who interpreted the disaster as the direct consequence of failure to keep the covenant law imposed by God at Sinai. The prophets had in fact proclaimed total judgement on the northern kingdom, and their message had now been dramatically confirmed. In order to avoid a similar fate, Hezekiah of Judah forthwith instituted a religious reform under which he purified the cult (2 Kings 18: 1-6). This resulted in some attempt to centralize worship in Jerusalem, though it seems that the ancient sanctuaries were still allowed to exist alongside the temple in Jerusalem.

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 978-0-521-09772-7 - Deuteronomy  
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Naturally at this time the literary traditions of the north were brought to Judah by those anxious to preserve them. It seems that either in Hezekiah's reign, or shortly afterwards, these traditions were combined with those of the south into a new work called by scholars the JE redaction (or revision). The letters J and E stand for two of the literary sources found in the Tetrateuch. J is so called because it was written in Judah probably in the time of Solomon and uses the divine name Yahweh (Jehovah), while E is associated with the northern kingdom, often called Ephraim, and uses the general term Elohim for God. While a definite connected literary strand can be found for J, this is now seen to be much less certain for E. But it can still be recognized that blocks of material which may be termed collectively E, and which came from the north, were incorporated into J, and a combined work using the traditions of the two kingdoms came into being. This included that part of the Sinai narrative contained in Exod. 18–24, 32–4. Indeed Exod. 32–4, with its polemical treatment of the story of the golden calf, readily identifiable with the bulls of Jeroboam I (1 Kings 12: 28f.; cp. Hos. 8: 5f.; 10: 5; 13: 2), and its fierce anti-Canaanite legislation, seems to reflect Hezekiah's reform. Further, the provision that at the three main feasts all males are to appear at the central shrine (Exod. 34: 22–4) must result from Hezekiah's centralization policy, for earlier they would undoubtedly have attended their local sanctuaries (cp. Exod. 23: 17). It was this JE narrative of the Sinai events which served as a historical model for the deuteronomic historian, as the frequent parallels and some significant differences make plain.

Hezekiah's reform was short-lived, for Assyria quickly reasserted her political control over Judah, and Manasseh, Hezekiah's successor, remained her vassal throughout his long reign. It would seem most likely that it was at this time that the deuteronomic law was developed by building on ideas contained in Hezekiah's reform, but which were now sup-

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pressed. A casual glance through Deuteronomy reveals at once that it is no straightforward law code, for legal enactments are continually punctuated by material in sermon form. Deuteronomy has in fact been described as 'preached law'. Clearly those who were responsible for its authorship must have fulfilled a preaching or teaching office in their daily lives.

In fact all three professional offices in ancient Israel were associated with teaching and preaching: the priests, the prophets and the wise (Jer. 18: 18). It is therefore not surprising that different scholars have attributed the authorship of the deuteronomistic literature to each of these circles. Thus some scholars see the deuteronomistic style as a continuation of the work of the prophetic movement. But while Deuteronomy certainly betrays prophetic influence, it none the less treats prophecy with a certain reserve (cp. 13: 1–5; 18: 20–2). Other scholars find the authors of Deuteronomy among the Levites, there regarded as Israel's only legitimate priests. But in addition to their priestly functions, the Levites were also responsible for the teaching of the law (33: 8–10), which Deuteronomy assigns to their keeping (17: 18; 31: 9, 24–6). Thus, many years later, when Ezra read the law to the people, it was the Levites who were entrusted with the task of expounding it (Neh. 8). Yet other scholars feel that since through the centralization of worship, the chief innovation of the deuteronomistic reform, the majority of the Levites lost their livelihood and became like the widow, orphan and resident alien dependent on charity, the Levites could not possibly have instituted the reform. Instead these scholars find the deuteronomists among the wise prominent in court circles dealing with political affairs of state, and who would certainly have been familiar with the suzerainty treaty form. In addition the widely acknowledged humanism of Deuteronomy, its stress on the doctrine of reward as the reason for the observance of the law, and its didactic approach are all typical of wisdom thought (cp. Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job).

Cambridge University Press  
 978-0-521-09772-7 - Deuteronomy  
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*What is the purpose of the completed work?*

The identity of the authors of Deuteronomy and the deuteronomic literature is then still an open question. But what can be maintained with reasonable certainty is that the original book of Deuteronomy (4: 44 – 30: 20) or its prototype (12–26, 28) came into existence some time between the reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah. It was this book which was discovered in the temple, and after receiving prophetic approval (2 Kings 22: 14–20), led to Josiah's reform.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE COMPLETED WORK?

It may at first appear ironical that Deuteronomy in its completed form appeared at a time when the covenant relationship was thought to have come to an end through the Babylonian conquest. But in publishing his Work, the deuteronomic historian had a double purpose. First he sought to identify the point at which the chosen people had gone wrong, and so forfeited their election, and second he wanted to point out the course Israel should take if she were ever given another chance.

For the deuteronomists, Israel's primary sin was her apostasy. Contrary to the first and fundamental commandment she had sought to enter into relations with other gods. Although God had continued to exercise patience, even giving Judah the fate of the northern kingdom as a warning (2 Kings 17), in the end he could do no other than bring a similar judgement upon her too. But it is the deuteronomists' view that Israel would never have been tempted into apostasy in the first place had she on entry into the promised land utterly destroyed the Canaanite population. It was through this fundamental failure on her part that Canaanite religious practices and institutions had been allowed to continue alongside her own religion, and had led Israel to reject her special covenant relationship. As a result her God had in his turn rejected her. This explains the enormous stress throughout Deuteronomy on the danger of fraternizing with the



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Canaanites. They are to be utterly exterminated, thereby guaranteeing Israel's freedom from their polluting influence.

Undoubtedly on entry into Canaan, Israel did take over much of the indigenous religion and absorb it into her own. This was inevitable when a simpler culture encountered a much wealthier and more sophisticated environment. Indeed throughout the period before the exile the Old Testament witnesses to the tension between what was considered genuinely Israelite and what could be traced to Canaanite influence. This is clearly seen in the prophetic books. In the deuteronomists' eyes the affluence of life in Canaan led Israel to minimize the power of her God who had freed her from slavery in Egypt, and through whom alone she had gained possession of the promised land. For their part they maintain that Israel had no need to resort to Canaanite practices. Her religion brought with her from Horeb (Sinai) was quite sufficient to meet the new situation of life in Canaan.

But this overall deuteronomistic assessment is decidedly one-sided, for the influence of Canaanite religion on Israel was by no means entirely negative. As the Psalter clearly indicates, Israel's religion was a synthesis between the pre-conquest exodus traditions associated with a God who acts in history, and Canaanite ideas related to a God who governs nature and fertility. It was with the help of these Canaanite ideas that Israel was led to recognize that her God was not merely a tribal deity who aided her in her military encounters, but was also lord of the universe, which he himself both created and controlled (cp. comment on 11: 1-32). Although there were minority puritan sects like the Rechabites (Jer. 35) who totally renounced everything to do with life in Canaan, they were not representative of the mainstream of Israel's religious thought. Thus while Hosea attacks the excesses of Canaanite religion and the fact that Israel's God was being treated as if he were Baal, he none the less draws on Canaanite theological ideas concerning nature and fertility to reinterpret Israel's religion for his contemporaries.

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But the Deuteronomic Work is not only concerned with the past but also with the future. While eager to point out Israel's past mistakes, the deuteronomic historian also aims to give her encouragement for the future. While he recognizes that the exilic generation are experiencing judgement under the Mosaic covenant, he still envisages the possibility that their merciful God might one day again lead his people across the Jordan into the promised land: there might yet be a second exodus. But this could only happen if despite her present misfortune Israel remained loyal to her God. So the deuteronomic historian sets out the deuteronomic law as an introduction to his Work. Israel knows what is required of her: she cannot blame God if through her disobedience he should ultimately reject her.

It is probable that the Deuteronomic Work was in fact inspired by the release of Jehoiachin. This must have caused considerable excitement throughout Judaism both in Babylon and Palestine. Was this the prelude to another mighty act of Israel's God, leading to the resumption of her special relationship with him summed up in the Mosaic covenant?

But as it turned out, Israel's theology did not develop along these lines. So fundamental was the judgement brought about by the Babylonian conquest that a totally new way of understanding Israel's covenant relationship with her God arose. This was achieved through the work of Ezekiel and the Priestly theologians who, adding their own literary strand known as P to the JE redaction, produced the other post-exilic literary work, the Tetrateuch. They saw the elect community of Israel reborn entirely due to God's grace (Ezek. 37). Her continued existence was no longer to depend on obedience to the covenant law, but was to exist irrespective of the law. The cult, with its Day of Atonement (Lev. 16), was to provide the means whereby Israel might ever renew and reform herself, and thus be in continual relationship with her God. Thus for post-exilic Israel the covenant relationship no longer contained both threat and promise.