DEUTERONOMY

THE PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY

PHILIP JOHNSTON

A BIBLE COMMENTARY FOR EVERY DAY

PBC Deuteronomy: Introduction

Where should you start in reading and studying the Old Testament? Genesis, at the very beginning? Exodus, at the birth of the nation? Psalms, the much-loved book of prayers? Isaiah, sometimes dubbed 'the fifth Gospel'? All these are great books, and worthy places to start. In Jewish tradition, however, the first book taught to children is none of the above, but Deuteronomy.

Why Deuteronomy, you might ask? For three related reasons:

- Judaism is founded on the Mosaic law, and the bulk of Deuteronomy is a presentation of this law. Chapters 5—11 present general issues, including the Ten Commandments, and chapters 12—26 give the detailed law.
- Deuteronomy is a reasonably complete compendium of Israelite laws. Many of them are also found scattered throughout Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, but Deuteronomy gathers up most of these laws into a coherent presentation. Sometimes there are interesting variations from the previous books, as we shall see.
- Deuteronomy is as much about encouragement as about rules. The English word 'law' is actually an incomplete translation of the Hebrew word *torah*, which really means 'teaching' or 'instruction'. In other words, it is not just rules and regulations. It is also guidance, help, exhortation, encouragement—in other words, all the positives that any good teacher will use along with rules and warnings. Deuteronomy stresses this repeatedly, with phrases more appropriate to the pulpit than the law court: hear, observe, obey, love, fear. And all this so that 'it may go well with you'.

No wonder Jewish children start their biblical study with Deuteronomy.

But why should Christians study Deuteronomy? This is actually a double question, relating to the Old Testament in general and Deuteronomy in particular. Christians see their main guide as the New Testament, the book of the new covenant established by Jesus Christ and explained by his apostles. But the new covenant builds on the old, and much of the theological basis of the Christian faith comes from the Old Testament. Of course our theology has changed in several crucial areas, and Christians must always read the Old Testament in the light of the New. But reading the Old Testament gives us a firm basis for

understanding the Gospels and epistles, and for discerning the elements of continuity and discontinuity between Jewish and Christian faiths.

And if we read the Old Testament, then the reasons given above for focusing on Deuteronomy apply to us too. Besides, Deuteronomy is one of the Old Testament three books most quoted by the New Testament writers, along with Psalms and Isaiah. It is one of the 'big three' for them, so well worth studying by us.

Deuteronomy in outline

A very good way to get to know any book is to work through it yourself and draw up your own outline before consulting any commentaries. Most of us would find that rather daunting for Deuteronomy, but do try it with a shorter biblical book some time! Actually, like a large, rich and mouth-watering cake, Deuteronomy can be divided in many different ways. The most helpful ways initially is by contents:

- Chs. 1—4 Historical review and introduction
- Chs. 5—11 General law
- Chs. 12—26 Detailed law
- Chs. 27—30 Blessings, curses and conclusion
- Chs. 31—34 Epilogue with Moses' last acts and words

This division partly reflects the text itself, which presents the book as three speeches of Moses, beginning in 1:1, 4:44 and 29:1, and a final section 'when Moses had finished speaking' (31:1).

This is very similar to the concentric literary pattern discerned by the American scholar Duane Christensen in his *Word Biblical Commentary*. His outline differs only by placing chapter 4 in the second part:

- Chs. 1—3 A: Outer Frame: A look backward
- Chs. 4—11 B: Inner Frame: The great peroration
- Chs. 12—26 C: Central Core: Covenant stipulations
- Chs. 27—30 B': Inner Frame: The covenant ceremony
- Chs. 31—34 A': Outer Frame: A look forward

This gives something of the literary movement of the book.

Christensen's structure highlights covenant. There is a noteworthy similarity in structure between Deuteronomy and international treaties of the time made by the dominant Hittites. These treaties (or

covenants) followed a set pattern, much like international treaties today, and this pattern is more or less followed in Deuteronomy.

- 1:1–5 Preamble
- 1:6—4:49 Historical prologue
- 5—11 General stipulations
- 12—26 Detailed stipulations
- 31:9–13, 24–26 Deposit and regular public reading
- 30:19; 31:26; 32:1 Supernatural witnesses
- 27—28 Blessings and curses

In other words, God's covenant with Israel followed much the same format as the Hittites' covenants (see p. 15) with their neighbours and with Egypt. The fit is not exact, but is close enough to suggest that a widespread model for political relationships was used to convey God's relationship with his people. God always reveals himself through recognizable customs and forms—as he did supremely in human form in Jesus.

Another approach notices that the detailed laws in chapters 12 to 26 follow to some extent the order of the Ten Commandments, as proposed by the German scholar Georg Braulik:

- 12—13 1st, 2nd, 3rd, about God: exclusive worship
- 14:28—16:17 4th, about sabbath: rhythms of life and care for poor
- 16:18—18:22 5th, about parents: human authorities
- 19:1—21:9 6th, about murder (opens and closes the section)
- 22:13–20 7th, about adultery: sexual offences
- 23—26 8th, 9th, 10th: compassion for the vulnerable (in this disparate section)

This is not an exact fit, but it does suggest that the Ten Commandments were foundational to Hebrew law, not only as a summary, but also as a general framework. Their influence was pervasive.

Deuteronomy in the ancient world

We are all children of our time and culture. The wider world has a huge effect on our language and customs, almost as much in church and religious settings as elsewhere. If you're unsure about this, note the illustrations and idioms used in the next sermon you hear, or consider church architecture and liturgy in different parts of the world.

Most of the time we don't recognize this effect because we live in our own culture, but any cross-cultural exposure makes us immediately aware of it.

It was the same in ancient times. However, the problem for most of us is that we know so little of ancient cultures. Hence we tend to assume that anything unusual or odd, or just different from today, was unique to ancient Israel. But the truth is quite different. Much of what we read in the Old Testament reflects an ancient Semitic culture encompassing the whole fertile crescent, from Israel in the west to Mesopotamia in the east. Many Israelite laws have parallels in Mesopotamian law, and many Israelite customs are seen among neighbouring peoples.

These parallels will often be noted as we proceed through Deuteronomy. Where possible, a reference will be given in the most widely available collection of texts in English translation: J.B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (3rd edn, Princeton University Press, 1969), commonly abbreviated as *ANET* (and with a, b, c or d added to indicate the quarter-page). This large volume can be found in all theological libraries, possibly also in some large public libraries. If you have the opportunity, do look up some of the texts and read them for yourself. It will open up a whole new world.

A few words of introduction to the relevant people groups may help:

- **Egypt:** While Egypt was geographically the closest large country, and was the land that Israel left in the exodus, it was never very influential culturally. Throughout its long history, the Egypt of the Pharaohs was notoriously xenophobic, and didn't seek cultural interaction with its neighbours. On the other hand, Israel was a Semitic people with a Semitic language, so looked more to the north and east.

- **Local peoples:** We know very little about the Canaanites, since there are no surviving texts and little other archaeological data. We know a little more about the immediate neighbours: Philistines to the south-west; Ammonites, Moabites and Edomites to the east; Phoenicians and Arameans (Syrians) to the north.

- **Ugarit:** This was a coastal trading city about 200 miles north of Palestine. Hundreds of tablets reveal its economic, social and religious life, by far the largest set of texts from any people of the ancient Levant (eastern Mediterranean coastlands), and these texts are often used to illustrate beliefs of the wider area.

- **Hittites:** This empire was based in what is now central Turkey, and flourished in the 14th to 12th centuries BC, with many Hittites spreading to neighbouring lands including Palestine. Many Hittite texts testify to their laws and culture.

- **Mesopotamia:** This vast area, now Iraq, was ruled at different times by Assyrians (more northerly) and Babylonians (more southerly) and a few other groups. Many law collections have survived from different periods. Their famous law codes, like that of Hammurabi (Babylonian king, c.1750BC), were studied in Egypt, so a trainee Egyptian official like the young Moses could have been familiar with them.

Deuteronomy in Israelite history

When did the events of Deuteronomy take place? Dating ancient history is a difficult exercise, and becomes increasingly hazardous the further back we go. There is one great help, however. The Assyrians and Babylonians were keen astronomers, and cross-referenced their historical records to eclipses, comets, and so on. Modern science can now give us exact dates for these events, and hence for much of Mesopotamian history in the first millennium BC. Their records occasionally mention battles fought in the Levant, and the names of various kings of Israel and Judah, so we can derive reasonably clear dates for the Hebrew monarchies back to David.

As we work back to the second millennium BC, however, dating is less easy. 1 Kings 6:1 says that Solomon started building the temple 480 years after the exodus, which puts the events of Deuteronomy and Joshua in the 15th century. But many scholars think that archaeology puts these events in the late 13th century. In this case, the figure of 480 years is figurative for twelve generations, which in reality would have spanned much less time. The arguments for and against these two views are too complex to enter here, and in any case don't really affect our study of Deuteronomy.

Century BC	*Events or people*
15th (1400s)	Events of Deuteronomy, taking 1 Kings 6:1 literally.
13th (1200s)	Events of Deuteronomy, according to many scholars.
10th (900s)	David and Solomon.
	931: Solomon's death and division of kingdom.
9th (800s)	Elijah and Elisha (in Israel).
8th (700s)	Amos and Hosea (in Israel);
	Micah and Isaiah (in Judah).
	722: fall of Samaria, capital of northern Israel.
	729–686: Hezekiah king of Judah.
7th (600s)	640–609: Josiah king of Judah.
6th (500s)	587: fall of Jerusalem, and exile of many Judeans to Babylon.
	539: Persians conquer Babylon, and allow Jews to return.

Deuteronomy in modern scholarship

When was Deuteronomy written? The traditional view is that Moses wrote it himself, including the account of his own death! Some early rabbis attributed the ending to Joshua, and other Jewish scholars gradually noticed occasional verses and phrases that reflected a later historical period. A few early and medieval writers also suggested that Deuteronomy was 'the book of the law' which was found during Josiah's temple repairs and prompted his reform (2 Kings 22:8).

The development of critical scholarship from the early 18th century AD gave great impetus to the study of Deuteronomy. There is now substantial agreement that the book was largely responsible for Josiah's reform in 622BC, but there remain significant disagreements as to when and through what process the book achieved its present form. Many weighty articles and volumes have been written on this, and again the arguments are very complex. Nevertheless, they can be summarized into three views.

- **Radical:** Some scholars argue that the core of Deuteronomy was written up shortly before 622BC as a reform document. Many features of Josiah's reform reflect its laws, particularly the centralization of all worship in Jerusalem, which comes at the start of the detailed laws (Deuteronomy 12).

- **Moderate:** Some laws, however, seem to reflect earlier times, when local leaders were more important than the king (for example, see comments on chapters 16—18). So some scholars posit a gradual process by which a collection of laws from the early monarchy was gradually expanded, and that this collection (or at least the faith it expressed) lay behind earlier reforms, including the one instigated by Hezekiah a century before Josiah.

- **Conservative:** The book itself is set in the Mosaic period, and consistently reflects this perspective. In particular, it tells Israel to build an altar on Mount Ebal (see ch. 28), which would be strange in a document written after the temple had been built. Also, as shown above, the book follows the Hittite treaty form, which disappeared after the twelfth century. (Suggested parallels with later treaties are less clear.) For all these reasons, conservative scholars still argue that the book accurately records the time in which it is set. Nevertheless, it records a developing legal tradition, and the material was updated, probably several times. Even in modern times, reference works can be significantly updated while still carrying the name of their first writer, for example, *Gray's Anatomy* in medicine (now in its 39th edition).

There is one further question to address: did the events of Deuteronomy actually take place? If we limit this question to the book itself, set after the exodus and before the conquest, the answer by everyone is that we simply do not know. Travel through a wilderness leaves few traces for later archaeology to find, and no other ancient text clearly supports or contradicts the story. So we simply accept it in faith, or reject it in scepticism. Obviously, the later the book is thought to have been written, the less likely it is to be accurate.

If we expand the question to the events that precede and follow the wilderness journey, there is more external evidence, but it is again complex and largely inconclusive. As before, there is a range of scholarly views, with radicals arguing for no historicity, moderates for some, and conservatives for the biblical account being substantially accurate when read appropriately.

Deuteronomy and this commentary

My own view on these issues is that Deuteronomy and its adjacent books authentically record the story of early Israel. However, like

many books even today, they have been augmented and edited over the years, expanding on but remaining faithful to the original traditions. Whether specific laws reached their final form in the thirteenth, tenth or seventh centuries is mostly impossible to determine, so I do not discuss it. Instead I offer comments on the book in the form we have it, as Moses' final speeches. The material was relevant to Israelites, whether of his day or later, and we need to ponder that relevance and ask how it applies to our own time.

In preparing these comments, I owe much to many others, and in particular to two books:

- The large *Torah Commentary* (Jewish Publication Society, 1996) by Jeffrey Tigay, a moderate Jewish scholar who furnishes a wealth of detail on the ancient world and on later Jewish interpretations.
- The shorter and more applied *New International Biblical Commentary* (Hendreickson and Paternoster, 1996) by Chris Wright, an evangelical Christian scholar who combines extensive knowledge of ancient Israel with a keen interest in mission.

These have been my constant companions, and I have benefited far more from their insights than the occasional acknowledgment implies.

Any version of the Bible can be used with these notes. I have always consulted the NRSV and the NIV, probably the two most popular, and I quote from the former. But there are very few places where translation affects interpretation. A Bible Dictionary would also be helpful. I've given brief explanations of key terms and concepts, but it would be well to supplement these from other sources.

One key term that needs brief explanation is the name of God himself. Most English versions follow Jewish tradition and give this as LORD (in small caps). However, the Hebrew word is not the title 'Lord' but rather the name *yhwh*, which is usually pronounced as Yahweh. By New Testament times, religious Jews avoided pronouncing the name at all, in order not to break the third commandment, and used instead a word meaning 'Lord'. Christian tradition has followed this practice. Reverting to 'Yahweh', as I have done, emphasizes that Israel's God is personal and has his own name.

The only other requirement for you to benefit from these notes is a willingness to engage with the text, in order to understand it in its

context and to apply it to our own. Deuteronomy looks backwards and forwards. It addresses many great issues on all levels: personal relationships, village life, justice, authority, war and peace. Above all, it encourages an ancient people to love and serve the God who redeemed them and offered them new life. With study and prayer, it can continue to encourage us whom God has redeemed in Jesus Christ to love and serve him.

1

DEUTERONOMY 1:1–4

WORDS *in the* WILDERNESS

We often remember significant moments in history by great speeches associated with them. And we remember those speeches by distinctive phrases. Churchill's 'we will fight them on the beaches' encapsulated his radio broadcasts, which both expressed and strengthened British resistance to invasion in World War II. Kennedy's 'Ich bin ein Berliner' epitomized Western resolve to face up to Soviet power in the Cold War. And Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream!' symbolized the hopes and aspirations of the American Civil Rights movement.

Similarly at this turning point in Israel's story, when the people are poised to enter the promised land after decades of aimless wandering, Deuteronomy is essentially a speech by Moses. Actually, there are several speeches through the book (compare the new headings at 4:44; 5:1; 27:1; 31:1), but the effect of bringing them together is to make a single 'super-speech', a sort of last will and testament by Moses to Israel. The Hebrew title of the book, 'Words' (the first noun in verse 1), aptly summarizes it. These are great words of challenge, warning and encouragement.

The speaker

Moses is, of course, the towering figure behind Deuteronomy. He had been Israel's leader in the tumultuous confrontation with Pharaoh and the exodus from Egypt, and then in the foundational events of receiving the law and instituting the tabernacle and the priesthood. Just as important, he had also been their leader during the 40 long years of waiting. The lengths of office of today's political leaders—a decade at most—pale in comparison. It's much harder to maintain a vigorous and active faith during apparent inactivity and stagnation than during bustling activity, and Psalm 90 captures the wistfulness and sense of futility of this period. Yet Moses maintained his faith and strength (see 34:7), and could still ask God to 'prosper the work of our hands' (Psalm 90:17).

The setting

Here in Deuteronomy the people are still in the wilderness. They are still outside the promised land. There is still all to play for. They have

come round the south of the Dead Sea, and at this point are encamped east of the Jordan, more or less opposite Jericho. The term 'Arabah' (v. 1, NIV), meaning 'dry', can refer to the whole rift valley stretching from the Sea of Galilee to the Red Sea. Here it indicates that the Israelites were in the wide river valley, rather than up on the higher ground further east. The location of Suph and the other places listed in verse 1 is unknown, so we don't know the exact position of their camp. Some of these names also occur in the journey accounts in Numbers, but probably refer to different places there.

The background

While setting the scene, these opening verses already hint at both the negative and the positive in Israel's travels. On the one hand, verse 2 starkly reminds them that it could all have been so much shorter: eleven days rather than 40 years! It only took eleven days to travel from Mount Horeb (another name for Sinai), where they received their 'national constitution', to Kadesh Barnea, on the southern edge of Canaan. But instead it had taken them 40 years, and they had now travelled round to Canaan's east. Such has been the huge cost of their disobedience.

On the other hand, verse 4 reminds them that God has certainly not abandoned them. He had just defeated Sihon and Og, the two kings who had blocked their recent progress (see 2:24—3:11). Here, as in the later passage, it is not so much the people as God who wins the victory. So he could certainly be trusted for the future battles against the inhabitants of Canaan, the very people whose earlier intimidation of the spies (see 1:28) had led to the futile years of wandering.

Thus the opening of the book sets the scene as a decisive moment, the opportunity to move forward with God. The chance was missed in the past, but God continues to work through and for his people, and now gives them another chance. All is indeed still to play for.

PRAYER

Pray for leaders of churches and nations, for perseverance in times of little change, and for courage to seize opportunities when they arise.

In some Jewish traditions, Deuteronomy is the first book of scripture taught to children. It presents the law of Moses as a coherent whole, including material from Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. But Deuteronomy is as much about encouragement as about rules, and is full of guidance, help and exhortation. This is stressed repeatedly with phrases more appropriate to the pulpit than the law court, such as 'hear', 'observe', 'love' and 'obey'.

For Christians, Deuteronomy is one of the three books most quoted in the New Testament, along with Psalms and Isaiah. Studying it is a key part of seeing how the Bible fits together as a whole, and how the Old Testament lays a theological basis for Christian faith.

Dr Philip Johnston has taught the Old Testament studies for over twenty years in colleges in Belfast, Cambridge, St Andrews and now Oxford, where he is Director of Studies at Wycliffe Hall. He has written or edited several theological books, notably Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament *(Apollos, 2002).*

The People's Bible Commentary is planned to cover the whole Bible, with a daily readings approach that brings together both personal devotion and reflective study. Combining the latest scholarship with straightforward language and a reverent attitude to Scripture, it aims to instruct the head and warm the heart. The authors come from around the world and across the Christian traditions, and offer serious yet accessible commentary. *The People's Bible Commentary* is an invaluable resource for first-time students of the Bible, for all who read the Bible regularly, for study group leaders, and anyone involved in preaching and teaching Scripture.

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