

Introduction to the Book of Deuteronomy

The fifth book of Moses from the opening words of the book, is called **מִשְׁנֵה הַתּוֹרָה**

(*repetition legis*) or merely **מִשְׁנֵה** by the Hellenistic Jews and some of the Rabbins, with special reference to its contents as described in Deuteronomy 17:18.

The first of these titles has become current in the Christian Church through the rendering given by the LXX and Vulgate, *Δευτερονόμιον*, *Deuteronomium*; and although it has arisen from an incorrect rendering of Deuteronomy 17:18 (see the exposition of the passage), it is so far a suitable one, that it describes quite correctly the leading contents of the book itself.

The book of Deuteronomy contains not so much “a recapitulation of the things commanded and done, as related in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers” (*Theod.*), as “a compendium and summary of the whole law and wisdom of the people of Israel, wherein those things which related to the priests and Levites are omitted, and only such things included as the people generally required to know” (*Luther*).

Consequently it is not merely a repetition and summary of the most important laws and events contained in the previous books, still less a mere “summons to the law and testimony,” or a “fresh and independent lawgiving standing side by side with the earlier one,” a “transformation of the old law to suit the altered circumstances,” or “merely a second book of the law, intended for the people that knew not the law” (*Ewald, Riehm*, etc.); but a *hortatory description, explanation, and enforcement of the most essential contents of the covenant revelation and covenant laws, with emphatic prominence given to the spiritual principle of the law and its fulfilment, and with a further development of the ecclesiastical, judicial, political, and civil organization, which was intended as a permanent foundation for the life and well-being of the people in the land of Canaan.*

There is not the slightest trace, throughout the whole book, of any intention whatever to give a new or second law.

Whilst the laws as well as the divine promises and threatenings in the three middle books of the Pentateuch are all introduced as words of Jehovah to Moses, which he was to make known to the people, and even where the announcement passes over into the form of an address,—as, for example, in Ex. 23:20ff., Lev. 26, —are not spoken by Moses in his own name, but spoken by Jehovah to Israel through Moses; the book of Deuteronomy, with the exception of Deuteronomy 31–34, contains nothing but words addressed by Moses to the people, with the intention, as he expressly affirms in Deuteronomy 1:5, of explaining (**בִּיאַר**) the law to the people.

Accordingly he does not quote those laws, which were given before and are merely repeated here, nor the further precepts and arrangements that were added to them, such as those concerning the one site for the worship of God, the prophetic and regal qualifications, the administration of justice and carrying on of war, in the categorical language of law; but clothes them, as well as the other commandments, in the hortatory form of a paternal address, full of solemn and affectionate admonition, with the addition of such reminiscences and motives as seemed best adapted to impress their observance upon the hearts of the people.

As the repetition not only of the decalogue, which God addressed to the people directly from Sinai, but also of many other laws, which He gave through Moses at Sinai and during the journey through the desert, had no other object than this, to make the contents of the covenant legislation intelligible to all the people, and to impress them upon their hearts; so those laws which are peculiar to our book are not additions made to this legislation for the purpose of completing it, but simply furnish such explanations and illustrations of its meaning as were rendered necessary by the peculiar relations and forms of the religious,

social, and political life of the nation in the promised land of Canaan.

Throughout the whole book, the law, with its commandments, statutes, and judgments, which Moses laid "this day" before the people, is never described as either new or altered; on the contrary, it is only the law of the covenant, which Jehovah had concluded with His people at Horeb (Deuteronomy 5:1ff.); and the commandments, statutes, and judgments of this law Moses had received from the Lord upon the Mount (Sinai), that he might teach Israel to keep them (Deuteronomy 5:31ff.; comp. Deuteronomy 6:20–25). The details of the book also bear this out.

The *first* part of the book, which embraces by far the greater portion of it, viz., Deuteronomy 1–30, consists of three long addresses, which Moses delivered to all Israel, according to the heading of Deuteronomy 1:1–4, in the land of Moab, on the first of the eleventh month, in the fortieth year after the exodus from Egypt.

The *first* of these addresses (Deuteronomy 1:6–4:40) is intended to prepare the way for the exposition and enforcement of the law, which follow afterwards.

Moses calls to their recollection the most important facts connected with the history of their forty years' wandering in the desert, under the protection and merciful guidance of the Lord (Deuteronomy 1:6–3:29); and to this he attaches the exhortation not to forget the revelation of the Lord, which they had seen at Horeb, or the words of the covenant which they had heard, but to bear in mind at all times, that Jehovah alone was God in heaven and on earth, and to keep His commandments and rights, that they might enjoy long life and prosperity in the land of Canaan (Deuteronomy 4:1–40).

This is followed by the statement in Deuteronomy 4:41–43, that Moses set apart three cities of refuge in the land to the east of the Jordan for unintentional manslayers.

The *second* address (Deuteronomy 5–26) is described in the heading in Deuteronomy 4:44–49 as the law, which Moses set before the

children of Israel, and consists of two parts, the one general and the other particular.

In the *general* part (Deuteronomy 5–11), Moses repeats the ten words of the covenant, which Jehovah spoke to Israel from Sinai out of the midst of the fire, together with the circumstances which attended their promulgation (Deuteronomy 5), and then expounds the contents of the first two commandments of the decalogue, that Jehovah alone is the true and absolute God, and requires love from His people with all their heart and all their soul, and therefore will not tolerate the worship of any other god beside Himself (Deuteronomy 6).

For this reason the Israelites were not only to form no alliance with the Canaanites after conquering them, and taking possession of the promised land, but to exterminate them without quarter, and destroy their altars and idols, because the Lord had chosen them to be His holy nation from love to their forefathers, and would keep the covenant of His grace, and bestow the richest blessings upon them, if they observed His commandments (Deuteronomy 7); but when in possession and enjoyment of the riches of this blessed land, they were to remain for ever mindful of the temptation, humiliation, and fatherly chastisement which they had experienced at the hand of their God in the wilderness, that they might not forget the Lord and His manifestations of mercy in their self-exaltation (Deuteronomy 8), but might constantly remember that they owed their conquest and possession of Canaan not to their own righteousness, but solely to the compassion and covenant faithfulness of the Lord, whom they had repeatedly provoked to anger in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 9:1–10:11), and might earnestly strive to serve the Lord in true fear and love, and to keep His commandments, that they might inherit the promised blessing, and not be exposed to the curse which would fall upon transgressors and the worshippers of idols (Deuteronomy 10:12–11:32).

To this there is added in the more *special* part (Deuteronomy 12–26), an account of the most important laws which all Israel was to observe in the land of its inheritance, viz.: (1.) Directions for the behaviour of Israel towards the Lord God, e.g., as to the presentation of sacrificial offerings and celebration of sacrificial meals at no other place than the one chosen by God for the revelation of His name (Deuteronomy 12); as to the destruction of all seducers to idolatry, whether prophets who rose up with signs and wonders, or the closest blood-relations, and such towns in the land as should fall away to idolatry (Deuteronomy 13); as to abstinence from the mourning ceremonies of the heathen, and from unclean food, and the setting apart of tithes for sacrificial meals and for the poor (Deuteronomy 14); as to the observance of the year of remission, the emancipation of Hebrew slaves in the seventh year, and the dedication of the first-born of oxen and sheep (Deuteronomy 15), and as to the celebration of the feast of Passover, of Weeks, and of Tabernacles, by sacrificial meals at the sanctuary (Deuteronomy 16:1–17).

(2.) Laws concerning the organization of the theocratic state, and especially as to the appointment of judges and official persons in every town, and the trial of idolaters and evil-doers in both the lower and higher forms (Deuteronomy 16:18–17:13); concerning the choice of a king in the future, and his duties (Deuteronomy 17:14–20); concerning the rights of priests and Levites (Deuteronomy 18:1–8); and concerning false and true prophets (vv. 9–22).

(3.) Regulations bearing upon the sanctification of human life: viz., legal instructions as to the establishment of cities of refuge for unintentional manslaughter (Deuteronomy 19:1–13); as to the maintenance of the sanctity of the boundaries of landed property, and abstinence from false charges against a neighbour (vv. 14–21); as to the conduct of war, with special reference to the duty of sparing their own fighting men, and also defenceless enemies and their towns (Deuteronomy 20); as to the expiation of inexplicable murders

(Deuteronomy 21:1–9); as to the mild treatment of women taken in war (vv. 10–14); the just use of paternal authority (vv. 15–21); and the burial of criminals that had been executed (vv. 22, 23).

(4.) The duty of paying affectionate regard to the property of a neighbour, and cherishing a sacred dread of violating the moral and natural order of the world (Deuteronomy 22:1–12), with various precepts for the sanctification of the marriage bond (Deuteronomy 22:13–23:1), of the theocratic union as a congregation (Deuteronomy 23:2–26), and also of domestic and social life, in all its manifold relations (chs. 24 and 25); and lastly, the appointment of prayers of thanksgiving on the presentation of the first-fruits and tenths of the fruits of the field (Deuteronomy 26:1–15); together with a closing admonition (vv. 16–19) to observe all these laws and rights with all the heart.

The *third* address (Deuteronomy 27–30) has reference to the renewal of the covenant.

This solemn act is introduced with a command to write the law upon large stones when Canaan should be conquered, and to set up these stones upon Mount Ebal, to build an altar there; and after presenting burnt-offerings and slain-offerings, to proclaim in the most solemn manner both the blessing and curse of the law, the former upon Gerizim, and the latter upon Ebal (Deuteronomy 27).

Moses takes occasion from this command to declare most fully what blessings and curses would come upon the people, according as they should or should not hearken to the voice of the Lord (Deuteronomy 28).

Then follows the renewal of the covenant, which consisted in the fact that Moses recited once more, in a solemn address to the whole of the national assembly, all that the Lord had done for them and to them; and after pointing again to the blessings and curses of the law, called upon them and adjured them to enter into the covenant of Jehovah their God, which He had that day concluded with them, and having before them blessing and cursing, life and death, to make the choice of life.—The

second and much shorter portion of the book (Deuteronomy 31–34) contains the close of Moses' life and labours: (a) the appointment of Joshua to be the leader of Israel into Canaan, and the handing over of the book of the law, when completed, to the priests, for them to keep and read to the people at the feast of Tabernacles in the year of jubilee (Deuteronomy 31); (b) the song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32:1–47), and the announcement of his death (vv. 48–52); (c) the blessing of Moses (Deuteronomy 33); and (d) the account of his death (Deuteronomy 34).

From this general survey of the contents, it is sufficiently evident that the exposition of the commandments, statutes, and rights of the law had no other object than this, to pledge the nation in the most solemn manner to an inviolable observance, in the land of Canaan, of the covenant which Jehovah had made with Israel at Horeb (Deuteronomy 28:69).

To this end Moses not only repeats the fundamental law of this covenant, the decalogue, but many of the separate commandments, statutes, and rights of the more expanded Sinaitic law.

These are rarely given *in extenso* (e.g., the laws of food in Deuteronomy 14), but for the most part simply in brief hints, bringing out by way of example a few of the more important rules, for the purpose of linking on some further explanations of the law in its application to the peculiar circumstances of the land of Canaan.

And throughout, as *F. W. Schultz* correctly observes, the intention of the book is, "by means of certain supplementary and auxiliary rules, to ensure the realization of the laws or institutions of the earlier books, the full validity of which it presupposes; and that not merely in some fashion or other, but in its true essence, and according to its higher object and idea, notwithstanding all the difficulties that might present themselves in Canaan or elsewhere." Not only are the instructions relating to the building of the sanctuary, the service of the priests and Levites, and the laws of sacrifice and purification, passed over without mention

as being already known; but of the festivals and festive celebrations, only the three annual feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles are referred to, and that but briefly, for the purpose of commanding the observance of the sacrificial meals which were to be held at the sanctuary in connection with these feasts (Deuteronomy 16).

The tithes and first-fruits are noticed several times, but only so far as they were to be applied to common sacrificial meals before the Lord.

The appointment of judges is commanded in all the towns of the land, and rules are given by which the judicial form of procedure is determined more minutely; but no rule is laid down as to the election of the judges, simply because this had been done before.

On the other hand, instructions are given concerning the king whom the people would one day desire to set over themselves; concerning the prophets whom the Lord would raise up; and also concerning any wars that might be waged with other nations than the Canaanites, the extermination of the latter being enforced once more; and several things besides.—And if this selection of materials indicates an intention, not so much to complete the legislation of the earlier books by the addition of new laws, as to promote its observance and introduction into the national life, and secure its permanent force; this intention becomes still more apparent when we consider how Moses, after repeating the decalogue, not only sums up the essential contents of all the commandments, statutes, and rights which Jehovah has commanded, in the one command to love God with all the heart, etc., and sets forth this commandment as the sum of the whole law, but in all his expositions of the law, all his exhortations to obedience, and all threats and promises, aims ever at this one object, to awaken in the hearts of the people a proper state of mind for the observance of the commandments of God, viz., a feeling of humility and love and willing obedience, and to destroy that love for merely outward legality and pharisaic self-

righteousness which is inherent in the natural man, that the people may circumcise the foreskin of their heart, and enter heartily into the covenant of their God, and maintain that covenant with true fidelity.

It is in this peculiar characteristic and design of the legislative addresses which the book contains, and not in the purpose attributed to it, of appending a general law for the nation to the legislation of the previous books, which had reference chiefly to the priests and Levites,¹ that we are to seek for that completion of the law which the book of *Deuteronomy* supplies.

And in this we may find the strongest proof of the Mosaic origin of this concluding part of the *Thorah*.

What the heading distinctly states (Deuteronomy 1:1–4),—viz., that Moses delivered this address to all Israel a short time before his death in the land of Moab, on the other side of the Jordan, and therefore on the threshold of the promised land,—is confirmed by both the form and contents of the book.

As *Hengstenberg* has well observed (*Ev. K. Z.* 1862, No. 5, pp. 49ff.), “the address of Moses is in perfect harmony with his situation.

He speaks like a dying father to his children. The words are earnest, inspired, impressive. He looks back over the whole of the forty years of their wandering in the desert, reminds the people of all the blessings they have received, of the ingratitude with which they have so often repaid them, and of the judgments of God, and the love that continually broke forth behind them; he explains the laws again and again, and adds what is necessary to complete them, and is never weary or urging obedience to them in the warmest and most emphatic words, because the very life of the nation was bound up with this; he surveys all the storms and conflicts which they have passed through, and, beholding the future in the past, takes a survey also of the future history of the nation, and sees, with mingled sorrow and joy, how the three great features of the past—viz., apostasy, punishment, and pardon—continue to repeat themselves in the future also.—The situation

throughout is the time when Israel was standing on the border of the promised land, and preparing to cross the Jordan; and there is never any allusion to what formed the centre of the national life in future times—to Jerusalem and its temple, or to the Davidic monarchy.

The approaching conquest of the land is merely taken for granted as a whole; the land is dressed throughout in all the charms of a desired good, and no reference is ever made to the special circumstances of Israel in the land about to be conquered.” To this there is to be added what makes its appearance on every hand—the most lively remembrance of Egypt, and the condition of the people when living there (cf. Deuteronomy 5:15; 7:15; 11:10; 15:15; 16:12; 24:18; 28:27, 35, 60), and an accurate acquaintance with the very earliest circumstances of the different nations with which the Israelites came into either friendly or hostile contact in the Mosaic age (Deuteronomy 2); together with many other things that were entirely changed a short time after the conquest of Canaan by the Israelites.

And just as these addresses, which complete the giving of the law and bring it to a close, form an integral part of the *Thorah*, so the historical account of the finishing of the book of the law, and its being handed over to the priests, together with the song and blessing of Moses (Deuteronomy 31–33), form a fitting conclusion to the work of Moses, the lawgiver and mediator of the old covenant; and to this the account of his death, with which the *Pentateuch* closes (Deuteronomy 34), is very appropriately appended.