

The Message of Deuteronomy

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The Book of Deuteronomy has some very special qualities among the five books of the Torah, which most readers (should) notice when they consider Moses' admonitions to Ancient Israel. The Hebrew name of this text is *Devarim* or "Words," derived from its opening line "These are the words..." (1:1). In the Jewish theological tradition, it is often referred to as *Mishneh Torah*, meaning Repetition of the Torah. This is a concept that the Septuagint translators tried to capture when they labeled the book as *Deuteronomion*, meaning "second law." Deuteronomy does repeat much of the story of the Israelites—and indeed repeats much of itself—as Moses gives a final dissertation as the people prepare to enter into the Promised Land. Various sections of commandments are re-given, with new details added, and more than anything else the people are admonished to obey the Lord over and over again.

The Israelites are in the fortieth year of their wilderness journey, having just defeated Kings Sihon and Og in battle (1:3-4). The scene of Deuteronomy begins "East of the Jordan in the territory of Moab," and is specifically where "Moses began to expound this law" (1:5). Moses' life is coming to an end, and Deuteronomy composes his last address to Israel. He repeats the Lord's command to them, "Go in and take possession of the land that the LORD swore he would give to your fathers" (1:8). Yet, in order to truly possess such land, the Israelites must be conscious of their responsibilities. Deuteronomy is crafted as a long speech given by Moses to Israel, as they wait in Moab for God's permission to occupy the Promised Land.

What has led the Israelites to where they currently are is something that Moses intends to remind the people of. The people multiplied greatly, "as many as the stars of the sky" (1:10), and so Moses had to appoint leaders other than himself to manage the manifold disputes that would undoubtedly arise (1:13-17). As he says, "at that time I told you everything you were to do" (1:18). Spies are then sent out to survey the Promised Land (1:19-24), bringing back the report "It is a good land that the LORD our God is giving us" (1:25). But rather than remember the mighty acts of HaShem delivering them from Egypt, the Israelites—save Joshua and Caleb—are frightened at the prospect of having to invade Canaan (1:26-36). No person from the Exodus generation, save those two men (and even Moses!) will enter into the Promised Land (1:37-39). Israel must begin a period of wandering (1:40), and any attempt to go and take the Promised Land without the Lord's direct approval will fail (1:41-46).

Moses proceeds to explain the wanderings of Israel in the desert, as the older generation is replaced by a newer generation (2:1-13). Even though the generation that experienced the Exodus rebelled against God, Moses is clear to emphasize, "These forty years the LORD your God has been with you, and you have not lacked anything" (2:7b). It takes about thirty-eight of those forty years for the older generation to be replaced (2:14), and the newer generation is ready to take the Promised Land. They fight a number of battles with some of the peoples outside of Canaan, including the Zamzummites (2:20), the Horites (2:22), and the Avvites (2:23). Also detailed is the recent defeat of King Sihon of Heshbon (2:24-37), and King Og of Bashan (3:1-11), and how the Reubenites and Gadites took an allotment of land outside the Jordan River basin as their inheritance (3:12-20). These engagements are no doubt in preparation for the coming invasion of Canaan (see the Book of Joshua). Moses is explicitly forbidden by the Lord to go with the Israelites into the Promised Land,¹ and is instructed to pass on the mantle of leadership to Joshua (3:21-29).

The bulk of Deuteronomy, from 4:1-26:15, is a reemphasis or repetition of various commandments that have been previously given in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. Moses' emphasis is not a difficult one to understand: "Hear now, O Israel, the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you" (4:1). The principal instruction of Deuteronomy that Moses delivers is so that Israel can be prosperous and blessed by HaShem in the Promised

¹ This is later specified to be because of Moses breaking "faith with me [God] in the presence of the Israelites at the waters of Meribah Kadesh in the Desert of Zin and because you did not uphold my holiness among the Israelites" (32:51).

Land, and so that they do not commit the gross and evil sins of its current Canaanite inhabitants. Moses' decree is, "Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you" (4:2). What Moses gives Israel in the context of Deuteronomy is imperative to be followed if the people are to successfully occupy and prosper in the Promised Land.

One of the most significant reasons, why Ancient Israel was told to obey God and His Torah commands, is given very early in Moses' discourse. He says to "Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people'" (4:6). Israel's obedience to God's Torah would be a testament to others of the wisdom that such Instruction possesses, and consequently should draw outsiders to the God of Israel (4:7-8). As Israel should say, "What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him?" (4:7). Yet in order to see this imperative fulfilled, God's Torah must be taught to His people (4:9), who must be reminded of their connection to the significant theophany of Mount Sinai when the Ten Commandments were given (4:10-13). **Any motivation, for similarly following God's Torah by Messianic Believers today, must be tempered by us understanding that we are to bear witness of His wisdom to the world at large.** Torah observance just for the sake of Torah observance misses the point of proper obedience to God.

The principal sin that Israel was to avoid was idolatry, something that the Lord specifically warned Israel against in the Ten Commandments *and* something that the people would immediately encounter as they occupied Canaan (4:15-24). Moses is clear to say, "Be careful not to forget the covenant of the LORD your God that he made with you; do not make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything the LORD your God has forbidden" (4:23). If the Israelites forget this, terrible consequences will ensue: "I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you this day that you will quickly perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess. You will not live there long but will certainly be destroyed. The LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and only a few of you will survive among the nations to which the LORD will drive you" (4:26-27). Mercy is only available for those who repent of such sins and if "you seek the LORD your God...with all your heart and with all your soul" (4:29). So serious is the sin of Israel falling into idolatry, that full restoration may not be achievable until the Last Days (4:29-31). God's power of creating man and delivering Israel is something that any of the other gods had not, or could not do (4:32-38), and Moses tells the people to "Acknowledge and take heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other" (4:39).

The repetition that occurs in Deuteronomy from this point onward is not difficult for one to follow. "Moses set aside three cities [of refuge] east of the Jordan" (4:41ff). It is then asserted, "This is the law Moses set before the Israelites. These are the stipulations, decrees and laws Moses gave them when they came out of Egypt..." (4:44-45). While additional details may be added here or there, the commandments given in Deuteronomy are still basically the same as appearing previously since the Mount Horeb/Sinai encounter, notably in Leviticus and Numbers.

Moses repeats the Ten Commandments, the guiding statutes that form the basis for the rest of the Torah's code of conduct (5:1-22). Moses reminds the Israelites of the fear they demonstrated when God gave him the stone tablets in a bone-shattering scene of fire and smoke (5:23-25), as they asked him "For what mortal man has ever heard the voice of the living God speaking out of fire, as we have, and survived? Go near and listen to all that the LORD our God says. Then tell us whatever the LORD our God tells you. We will listen and obey" (5:26-27). Hearing the audible voice of HaShem is too much for the Israelites to do, and so Moses is designated as the person who will have one-on-one contact with Him. The Lord approves, declaring "Everything they said was good. Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!" (5:28b-29). Knowing how serious the scene was in which God's Law was given to them, Israel is told, "So be careful to do what the LORD your God has commanded you; do not turn aside to the

right or to the left. Walk in all the way that the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live and prosper and prolong your days in the land that you will possess” (5:32-33).

While the Ten Commandments no doubt compose the most important of the statutes that God expects Israel to follow, they are by far not the only ones. What we commonly call the *Shema* was originally given in a context where the Ancient Israelites were entering into a Land of Canaan where polytheism and vile sexual sins and child sacrifice were observed—crimes against the Lord to be avoided at all costs! Moses calls to them, “Hear, O Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey” (6:3). Moses cries, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (6:4a), meaning that He is “the One and Only” (ATS).² Recognizing God as principal in their lives, the Israelites are to “Love the LORD with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (6:5). God’s commandments are to be impressed upon one’s children, being identified upon the hand, forehead, and one’s doorposts (6:6-8).

The *Shema* does not end at 6:8, but continues as Moses specifies more things that the Israelites are to never forget. They are to remember that after they enter into the Promised Land, it was the Lord Himself who provided them with it (6:9-12). Israel is to fear God (6:13), not following the gods of Canaan (6:14), and remember that if they fall into disobedience they will be fiercely punished (6:15-18). They are to tell the future generations about God’s deliverance and provision (6:20-24). Israel’s obedience to the Lord is a sign that they are in covenant relationship with Him (6:25).³

When Israel can understand their responsibility to place HaShem first, obeying Him and remembering what He has done—then Israel can accomplish the tasks that He has set before them! Moses gives the Israelites instructions on how they are to drive out the current occupants of Canaan, and how “you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them...for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD’s anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you” (7:2b-4). Trying to negotiate with the Canaanites, or even intermarrying with them with the hope of conversion, is futile. It will only lead to Israel rebelling against the Lord. Moses reemphasizes the Divine call upon Israel: “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession” (7:6). He is One who has shown His covenant faithfulness to the Patriarchs, and is now making sure that their descendants are brought into the Promised Land because of His great love (7:7-9). But if the people truly want to be blessed, then they must obey Him (7:11-15).

When seeing the total destruction that the Israelites are to inflict upon the Canaanites (7:16-26), many modern Bible readers are distraught over what may appear to be Divinely-mandated genocide. Why does God tell Israel to utterly dispose of the Canaanite inhabitants of the Promised Land? It is important for us to remember the larger context in which these commandments are delivered. Moses is severely concerned that Israel remains loyal to the Lord, especially when he is gone. He wants them to remember God’s provision for and preservation of them in the wilderness (8:1-18), warning “If you ever forget the LORD your God and follow other gods and worship and bow down to them, I testify against you today that you will surely be

² The clause *ADONAI Eloheinu*, *ADONAI echad* in ancient times primarily regarded the exclusive allegiance Israel owed to HaShem, and was not necessarily a remark on the makeup of the Godhead. In later generations, Deuteronomy 6:4 became the principal verse on which Biblical monotheism was based. *Elohim* being a oneness of plurality is certainly foreshadowed by this verse (cf. Herbert Wolf, “אֱלֹהִים,” in *TWOT*, 1:30). Yet, the major thrust of Deuteronomy 6:4 is allegiance to the God of Israel, versus the pagan gods of Canaan.

For a further discussion, consult the author’s article “What Does the Shema Really Mean?”

³ Note the corporate dynamics of “righteousness” or *tzedaqah* here in Deuteronomy 6:25: “if we are careful to obey all this law before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness.” This is not a promise of commandment-keeping resulting in salvation, for if such is really the case—it is an impossible standard that Ancient Israel never lived up to. It is far better to look at 6:25 in light of Israel’s corporate relationship to God, with its obedience to His Torah as evidence of being in a covenant status with Him.

Cf. Harold G. Stigers, “צְדָקָה,” in *TWOT*, 2:754, and the FAQ entry on the TNN website “Deuteronomy 6:25.”

destroyed. Like the nations the LORD destroyed before you, so you will be destroyed for not obeying the LORD your God” (8:19-20). These are nations that are significantly more powerful and numerous than the Israelites (9:1-3), and they are to never forget **that the utter wickedness of those nations is why God has delivered them into Israel’s hands** (9:4-6). When one considers the historical practices of the Ancient Canaanites—an idolatry including both lewd sexual rites and child sacrifice—it is not that difficult to see why the Lord wanted them wiped out. Moses is clear to say, “it is not because of your righteousness that the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people” (9:6).

Ancient Israel has already fallen into idolatry in one of the most horrific scenes of the Exodus: the incident of the golden calf (9:7-21). Recalling this, Moses actually says “You have been rebellious against the LORD since I have ever known you” (9:24), and how he had to “lay prostrate before the LORD because the LORD had said he would destroy you” (9:25). It would be a terrible testimony for the Egyptians to hear that HaShem, having delivered the Israelites from them, only led the Israelites into the desert to eliminate them (9:28). God, of course, did not destroy Israel, and in fact instructed Moses to chisel out what would be a second set of Ten Commandments (10:1-11). As he summarizes, God’s commandments are given to them “for your own good” (10:13). Israel is told to “Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer” (10:16), as God’s ways of dealing with people are fair and just (10:17-22).

Love and obedience for God go like a hand in a glove throughout Deuteronomy, and because of what the Israelites are preparing to do, we get to hear this multiple times from the mouth of Moses: “Love the LORD your God and keep his requirements, his decrees, his laws and his commandments always” (11:1). This obedience will not only be a testimony that Israel loves the Lord, but also that they remember the mighty acts that brought them to the point of entering into the Promised Land (11:2-32). The need to be loyal exclusively to HaShem and not worship idols is again heard, as Israel is to teach God’s Torah to the successive generations (11:13-21). If God is obeyed, the blessing of the Promised Land will be inherited (11:22-25), but it is entirely up to Israel. Moses says, “See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse—the blessing if you obey the commands of the LORD your God that I am giving you today; the curse if you disobey the commands of the LORD your God...” (11:26-28a).

Part of being loyal to HaShem is recognizing that there is only one place where important business is to be conducted with Him. Unlike the Canaanites who have littered high places and Asherah poles throughout the Promised Land (12:1-4), “You must not worship the LORD your God in their way. But you are to seek the place the LORD your God will chose from among all your tribes to put his Name there for his dwelling” (12:4-5). We know that this place would first be Shiloh (Joshua 18:1; Judges 18:31; 1 Samuel 1:3), and later the city of Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6). The centrality of this place will bring unity to all of Israel (12:6-28). And the command to “not be ensnared” by the gods of the Canaanites (12:30), somehow worshipping the Lord in a manner that they do, is explicitly detailed: “[T]hey do all kinds of detestable things the Lord hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods” (12:31). The emphasis of “See that you do all I command you; do not add to it or take away from it” (12:32) is quite serious when understood in light of Israel being warned against the heinous ways of the Canaanites. This is followed up by warnings against false prophets and those delivering false omens that are designed to lead people away from the Lord (13:1-11), including the command to eliminate towns in Israel that might erupt in idolatrous rebellion against Him (13:12-18).

The commands listed throughout much of Deuteronomy do not take on much of the same severity as do the ordinances against idolatry, and how the Israelites were not to fall into the ways of the Canaanites—even though they are certainly important for Israel to follow. The laws of *kashrut*, specifying acceptable and unacceptable meats for consumption, are repeated (14:1-21). How the Israelites are to tithe from their agricultural produce is detailed (14:22-29), including the setting aside of firstborn males from herds and flocks (15:19-23). “At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts” (15:1), a remembrance that “There will always be poor people in the land” (15:11a). Indentured servants are to be treated with equity (15:12-18).

Deuteronomy lists the three pilgrimage festivals of Passover (16:1-8), *Shavuot* (16:9-12), and *Sukkot* (16:13-17). Judges and officials are to be appointed in each of the Israelite towns, to administer proper jurisprudence (16:18-20). A warning against Asherah poles is given (16:21), along with the instruction that if a person is found committing idolatry “contrary to [God’s] covenant” (17:2), “then you must investigate it thoroughly” (17:4). It is specifically stated, “On the testimony of two or three witnesses a man shall be put to death, but no one shall be put to death on the testimony of only one witness... You must purge the evil from among you” (17:6-7). People committing idolatry were not just to be summarily executed; facts had to be properly established before the penalty could be enacted.

While Moses has previously stated that nothing should be added to God’s instruction (4:2; 12:32), something very important appears in 17:8-13 regarding the mediation of disputes. Here, the Lord says to “Go to the priests, who are Levites, and to the judge who is in office at that time. Inquire of them and they will give you the verdict. You must act according to the decisions that they give you at the place the LORD will choose. Be careful to do everything they direct you to do. Act according to the law⁴ they teach you and the decisions they give you. Do not turn aside from what they tell you, to the right or to the left” (17:9-11). If these officials are acting within the ethos of God’s Torah, then the decisions that they make regarding a matter or dispute are surely to be followed, or at the very least to be taken into serious consideration.⁵

The Book of Deuteronomy actually anticipates a time when Ancient Israel will want to have a king, specifically “a king over us like all the nations around us” (17:14). If Israel chooses a king, it is to be one of their own, “a brother Israelite” (17:15). He cannot amass great numbers of horses for himself, especially from Egypt (17:16). Polygamy is explicitly forbidden for Israel’s kings, as it will lead to the introduction of idolatry (17:17).⁶ And, perhaps most significant, kings of Israel are to write out a copy of the Torah they are to uphold (17:18-20), assuring them a long rule. Compared to the absolute monarchs contemporary to the period, the power of Israel’s kings was to be severely curtailed, with the monarch accountable before God and the people *just as one of the people*. Unfortunately following the later division of Israel into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, many of the kings that would rule *ruled as absolute monarchs*, often being accountable to no one.

Within the established nation of Israel, the Levites are to have some special treatment, particularly because they “have no allotment or inheritance with Israel” (18:1). They are to live off of various tithes by burnt offerings (18:1), various parts of animals that are sacrificed (18:3), various firstfruits of agricultural produce (18:4)—all because of the specific reason “the LORD your God has chosen them and their descendants out of all your tribes to stand and minister in the LORD’s name always” (18:5).

Repeated yet another time is the need to “not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations” (18:9) within Canaan. However, while prohibitions on idolatry have been the principal focus throughout previous admonitions, now the Lord is clear to not only include one “who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire,” but also one “who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD... You must be

⁴ Heb. *al-pi ha'torah*; lit. “upon mouth (of) the torah/instruction/law”; “According to the terms of the law” (NASU); “in accordance with the instructions” (NJPS); “According to the tenor of the law” (YLT); “the verdict they announce” (NLT).

⁵ What this means for Messianics today is that Rabbinic authority and common Jewish interpretations regarding how the Torah is to be followed *cannot be excluded* in our application (cf. Matthew 23:1-2; Romans 3:2). Yet this **does not mean** any kind of blind obedience to the Rabbis, for as our Lord taught, “you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach” (Matthew 23:3). The Rabbis are to be no more blindly followed than one’s home government (cf. Romans 13:1-7). The Rabbinic tradition is *one* of a number of factors—along with Hebrew linguistic exegesis, Ancient Near Eastern history, and the teachings of Yeshua and His Apostles—which are to assist us in accurately applying the Torah to our lives today in the Twenty-First Century.

⁶ If polygamy is forbidden for Israel’s kings, it is surely forbidden for the common man.

blameless before the LORD your God" (18:10-13). Built upon this instruction is the word that "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him" (18:15).⁷ Anyone who does not listen to such a prophet will face some serious consequences (18:17-19). And, anyone claiming to be a prophet who speaks for the Lord, and who does not, will face the death penalty (18:20). Those who speak presumptuously claiming the authority of HaShem are not to be feared (18:21).

The purpose for establishing cities of refuge are laid out in further detail, with some possible examples given of how these places can be used to hold persons in protective custody prior to trial, notably for some kind of manslaughter (19:1-14). It is also stated again, "One witness is not enough to convict a man accused of any crime or offense he may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses" (19:15), a principle that has since passed into the Jewish theological tradition as *multiple witnesses always being required to establish facts* (cf. Matthew 18:16; John 8:17; 2 Corinthians 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:19; Hebrews 10:28). **Multiple witnesses are most especially required when someone is being tried for murder** (19:16-21).

Some specific regulations are given in anticipation of the battles that will take place in the next stage of Israel's history. These include Moses' admonition for Israel not to be fearful of the armaments of their enemies, as "the LORD your God, who brought you up out of Egypt, will be with you" (20:1ff). Various groups of people are exempt from fighting, such as those who have a new house (20:5), those having recently planted a vineyard (20:6), those who are engaged to be married (20:7), and even those who are afraid (20:8). General regulations regarding how a city is to be attacked are listed, first with an offer of peace in exchange for forced labor (20:10-12), but secondly with how a city is to be destroyed by killing the men (20:12-13) but sparing women and children and various kinds of plunder (20:14). The Lord is quite specific, though, in stating "This is how you are to treat all the cities that are at a distance from you and do not belong to the nations nearby" (20:15). Those in the immediate vicinity of the Promised Land were to be completely destroyed (20:16-17), "Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshipping their gods, and you will sin against the LORD your God" (20:18). The Lord even details how the trees surrounding a city are to be treated during siege (20:19-20).

Human life is to be very highly regarded by the people of Israel. This is why Deuteronomy included instruction on what to do should a person be found killed, and the death remains unsolved (21:1-9). A heifer is to be offered in memorial for the slain (21:3-6), and the people of the town nearest where the body was found shall declare, "Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it done. Accept this atonement for your people Israel, whom you have redeemed, O LORD, and do not hold your people guilty of the blood of an innocent man" (21:7). Even if the person is unknown and he died with or of an unknown cause, a proper rite is to be observed.

Respect is to be shown to the woman who is captured by an Israelite male in battle, and taken as a wife, as her people have been defeated (21:10-14). The firstborn son is to be given proper inheritance if a man has had a first wife who he did not particularly love, and later a second wife who he did love. The son of the first wife is still the firstborn son, deserving a greater share of inheritance (21:15-17). A rebellious son who fails to respect his parents, and who does not learn from their instruction, will be stoned to death when taken before the elders of a town. This is not just any son, but one who "is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a profligate and a drunkard" (21:20). And, various commandments regarding respect and a great deal of common sense are taught by Moses to Israel (21:22-22:12). They are quite practical, especially how "When you build a new house, make a parapet around your roof so that you may not bring the guilt of bloodshed on your house if someone falls from the roof" (22:8), as many houses from this period were built with flat roofs (as opposed to the slanted roofs of today).

The estate of marriage is to be thoroughly honored, including the respect of a young woman's virginity (22:13-30). This is especially true given the religious rituals of the Canaanites

⁷ Deuteronomy 18:15 is quoted by the Apostle Peter in Acts 3:22, with Moses' word of a prophet arising like him being applied to Yeshua the Messiah.

that often involved improper sex. Certain kinds of people may be excluded from the Lord's assembly (23:1-8), most importantly "No Ammonite or Moabite or any of his descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD, even down to the tenth generation" (23:3), a reflection of the negative influence Baalam had in leading the Israelites astray (23:4-5). Interestingly enough, Moses instructs Israel to be kind to Edomites and Egyptians (23:7), as "The third generation of children born to them may enter the assembly of the LORD" (23:8). Concurrent with the laws regulating marriage and virginity, specific commandments are also given detailing uncleanness and ritual purity (23:9-14), followed by some miscellaneous commandments that pertain to: prohibitions on prostitution (23:17-18) and charging interest (23:19-20; cf. 24:10-13), making vows to the Lord (23:21-23), and gleaning from one's field (23:24-25; 24:19-22). Commandments regarding divorce are listed (24:1-4). And, an emphasis is placed on fairness for the widow and the fatherless (24:17-22).

Continuing with a litany of regulations that are to govern Israel, Moses describes flogging someone as a proper penalty for a crime (25:1-3), not muzzling a treading ox (25:4), the rules of levirate marriage (25:5-10), and even how a wife is not to defend her husband by grabbing his assailant's "private parts" (25:11-12). Proper weights and measures are to be observed in trade (25:13-16). The Israelites are not to forget what the Amalekites did to them (25:17-19). The specific commandments issued in Deuteronomy end with a reference again to the firstfruits of the Promised Land that are to be offered to the Lord (26:1-15), as "you and the Levites and the aliens among you shall rejoice in all the good things the LORD your God has given to you and to your household" (26:11).

In the rest of Deuteronomy, from 26:12-34:12, the scene shifts away from Moses repeating God's commandments to the Israelites to some specific admonitions from him to the people, finally ending with Moses' death. The significance of obeying the Lord is repeated yet another time:

"The LORD your God commands you this day to follow these decrees and laws; carefully observe them with all your heart and with all your soul. You have declared this day that the LORD is your God and that you will walk in his ways, that you will keep his decrees, commands and laws, and that you will obey him. And the LORD has declared this day that you are his people, his treasured possession as he promised, and that you are to keep all his commands. He has declared that he will set you in praise, fame and honor high above all the nations he has made and that you will be a people holy to the LORD your God, as he promised" (26:17-19).

Deuteronomy chs. 27 and 28 are two of the most significant chapters of the Torah, outside those dealing with the Exodus and theophany of Mount Sinai. Here, Moses tells the Israelites to build a special altar to HaShem on Mount Ebal when they enter into the Promised Land (27:1-8). When they enter in, half of the Israelite tribes are to assemble on Mount Gerizim (27:12), and the other half on Mount Ebal (27:13). The Levites are to issue a series of decrees upon Israel that will curse the people if they fail to live up to them, which all include high crimes (27:15-26). These decrees end with the word, "Cursed is the man who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out" (27:26a). And with each declaration, "Then all the people shall say, 'Amen!'" (27:26b).⁸

But as important as the curses are for disobedience to these high crimes against the Lord, Moses says there are blessings that "will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God" (28:2). Moses tells Israel that obedience to God will bring significant agricultural prosperity (28:3-5), that "You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out" (28:6). Israel will also have its enemies defeated before them (28:7). "The LORD will send a blessing

⁸ The Apostle Paul makes reference to Deuteronomy 27:26a in Galatians 3:10, noting that "as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse" (NASU). These *ergōn nomou* compose a sectarian *halachah* (cf. 4QMMT or 4Q399 in the DSS) that can deliberately skew God's mandate for His people being a blessing to others as seen in the Torah, previously referenced by Paul in Galatians 3:8 (cf. Genesis 12:3), and certainly implied by Deuteronomy 4:5-7. By failing to follow such an obvious imperative of the Holy Scriptures, one will find himself cursed by God.

For a further discussion, consult the author's commentary *Galatians for the Practical Messianic*, second edition, and his article "What Are 'Works of the Law?'"

on your barns and on everything you put your hand to. The LORD your God will bless you in the land he is giving you” (28:8). Such a blessing will result in other nations fearing Israel because of God’s provision (28:10). But in order for Him to “open the heavens, the storehouse of his bounty” (28:12) and shower down His great magnanimity—the same condition that Moses has delivered is again stated: “If you pay attention to the commands of the LORD your God that I give you this day and carefully follow them, you will always be at the top, never at the bottom” (28:13). And this most especially includes being loyal to HaShem and no other gods (28:14).

The severity of the curses for disobedience to the Lord is at last detailed by Moses. They do not just include not receiving God’s blessing, but include plague and disease (28:21-24), military defeat (28:25-29), everything will go wrong in the lives of the people (28:30-35), and “The LORD will drive you and the king you set over you to a nation unknown to you or your fathers. There you will worship other gods, gods of wood and stone. You will become a thing of horror and an object of scorn and ridicule to all the nations where the LORD will drive you” (28:36-37). Disobedience to the God who blessed them will bring Israel lower and lower (28:38-43) to the point where “The alien who lives among you will rise above you higher and higher, but you will sink lower and lower...He will be the head, but you will be the tail” (28:43-44).

Moses’ warning is not idle: “All these curses will come upon you. They will pursue you and overtake you until you are destroyed, because you did not obey the LORD your God and observe the commands and decrees he gave you” (28:45-46). The reason why all this will be “a sign and a wonder” (28:47) is “Because you did not serve the Lord your God joyfully and gladly in the time of prosperity,” and so “hunger and thirst...[and] nakedness and dire poverty” (28:47-48) will be sent instead. It will be so bad that a foreign nation will be sent upon Israel, besieging all of its towns, inflicting devastating damage (28:49-52). While this judgment is being issued, the people will turn to cannibalism (28:53-57)!

The warnings of not obeying God’s Torah and falling into rebellion are apparent (28:58-62). Moses declares, “Just as it pleased the LORD to make you prosper and increase in number, so it will please him to ruin and destroy you” (28:63a). The warning of being scattered “among all nations, from one end of the earth to another” (28:64) should cause the Israelites to never consider disobeying God, as such diaspora will never bring them peace or prosperity (28:65-68). And so Moses is clear that the covenant that HaShem has made with them is renewed (29:2-21)—emphasizing what has befallen the people in Egypt and how the Lord has faithfully brought them to the point of entering the Promised Land. But even though Canaan may be shortly occupied by them, Moses expects that later generations will rebel against the Lord and abandon His covenant (29:22-28).

One of Moses’ most intriguing remarks is “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law” (29:29). While this surely gives us a glimpse into the secret council of the Almighty, “the things revealed” no doubt *include Israel’s future and inevitable rebellion against Him*. But how Israel’s full and complete restoration is accomplished, however, may very well be something that is secretive—meaning that HaShem will not reveal *all* of His plan to Moses, or even later to the Prophets. As the Apostle Paul asserts in the First Century, “understand my insight into the mystery of Messiah, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets” (Ephesians 3:4-5). Only in Paul’s day could the manifold plan of God be fully revealed, embodied in the person of Yeshua, as all of the puzzle pieces finally came together.

Moses anticipates that a day will come when Israel will be brought back from its captivity. While in diaspora, God’s people will “return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today” (30:2). As this happens, the scattered exiles will be returned home to the Promised Land and God will make them prosperous once again (30:3-9). But this return and promise of prosperity is conditional: “if you obey the LORD your God and keep his commands and decrees that are written in this Book of the Law and turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (30:10).

Moses tells Israel that obedience to the Lord is not intended to be something that is too difficult (30:11-14). Obeying God is choosing life, and disobeying God is choosing death (30:15-16). This is especially true when one chooses to deny HaShem's covenant faithfulness to Israel, and instead worship other gods (30:17-18). As Moses urges Israel, "Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life..." (30:19b-20a)—*ki hu chayakha!* And so the Book of Deuteronomy now prepares to close.

Moses will not be entering into the Promised Land, and so Joshua is chosen to succeed him (31:1-8). He delivers a powerful word to his successor: "Be strong and courageous... The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged" (31:7-8). We see that Moses writes down the instruction that he has just given to Israel to the Levites (31:9),⁹ and issues the instruction that it is to be read at every Feast of Tabernacles (31:10-13). What follows shortly thereafter is the issuing of a particular song by Moses, with the anticipation that Israel would abandon its covenant with the Lord (31:16-22). It is given because "they will turn to other gods and worship them, rejecting me and breaking my covenant. And when many disasters and difficulties come upon them, this song will testify against them" (31:20b-21a). Moses writes down the song (31:22), and the Book of Deuteronomy is instructed by him to be placed in the Ark of the Covenant as a witness against Israel (31:24-29).

The song that is composed by Moses (32:1-43) is actually spoken by Moses, with Joshua right beside him, before the entire assembly of Israel (32:44-45). It is a song that tells the story of Israel: God's blessing Israel (32:1-14), Israel's rebellion (32:15-18), God's rejection of Israel and subsequent judgment (32:19-38), and the urge for Israel to return to God for its deliverance (32:39-43). As Moses is clear to tell the people yet again: "Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law. They are not just idle words for you—they are your life" (32:46-47). This is not a decree that by following the Torah one can inherit *eternal life*, but rather that the sphere of the Israelites' lives is to be firmly rooted in God's Instruction.¹⁰ HaShem then tells Moses to go up the slope of Mount Nebo to see the Promised Land with his own eyes before he dies (32:48-52). But before Moses dies, he issues a blessing upon each of the tribes of Israel (33:1-29).

Joshua or the Israelites scribes are presumably the ones who compose the final chapter of Deuteronomy, as it details Moses' death (ch. 34). The Lord is the one who buries Moses, and as the author of this chapter, or a future editor, claims, "but to this day no one knows where his grave is" (34:6). And the significance of Moses is also highlighted at the end of Deuteronomy: "Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face... For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel" (34:10, 12).

No one can deny the fact that of the books of the Torah, Deuteronomy possesses something very special and important for God's people. If we are not convicted of sin as we read through Deuteronomy, wondering whether or not we have fallen out of God's blessing—is it proper to ask whether or not we have the Holy Spirit in us to convict? Deuteronomy calls people back to God's Instruction so that they do not disobey Him *and* so that He does not have to punish them. These are lessons that form the foundation of the rest of the Biblical narrative, and whether you are aware of it or not, the themes seen throughout Deuteronomy have considerable influence that we need to be aware of.

⁹ This is internal Biblical evidence that while Moses wrote down much of the Torah himself, he surely also employed scribes. To accept Mosaic authorship of Deuteronomy and the rest of the Pentateuch *does not* mean that Moses had to write down every single "jot and tittle," and that there has indeed been some (albeit limited) post-Mosaic editing (cf. b.*Sanhedrin* 21b).

Cf. T.D. Alexander, "Authorship of the Pentateuch: Summary of Main Issues Arising out of Survey of Scholarship," in T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), pp 62-67.

¹⁰ Indeed, as the Prophet Habakkuk puts it: "the righteous will live by his faith" (Habakkuk 2:4). This is something to be compared against trust in human idols (Habakkuk 2:18-20).

During the reign of King Josiah (641-610 B.C.E.), as the Temple is being refurbished (2 Kings 22:3-7; 2 Chronicles 34:9-12), a scroll of the Book of the Law is discovered. As the High Priest Hilkiah testified, "I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the LORD" (2 Kings 22:8; cf. 2 Chronicles 34:15). **Most scholars are in agreement that this is the Book of Deuteronomy.** When it is read to King Josiah, we see that "he tore his robes" (2 Kings 22:11; cf. 2 Chronicles 34:19), and he issues the instruction, "Go and inquire of the LORD for me and for the people and for all Judah about what is written in this book that has been found. Great is the LORD's anger that burns against us because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written there concerning us" (2 Kings 2:13; 2 Chronicles 34:21). What proceeds is a period called the Josianic Reforms—a period of repentance and religious renewal for the Southern Kingdom of Judah which followed the general outline of the Book of Deuteronomy.

Why is it likely that Deuteronomy is that Book of the Law which was discovered? T.D. Alexander gives us a clue:

"It is hardly surprising...that knowledge of the 'book of the law' should have been neglected, if not deliberately suppressed, by the Judean and Israelite monarchies. As the book of Kings reveals, the contents of Deuteronomy offer a serious indictment of the practices of many kings. To take but one example, Solomon's desire for wealth (1 Kings 9:10-10:29), horses from Egypt (1 Kings 10:28-29) and many wives (1 Kings 11:1-8) stands in marked contrast to the advice given in Deuteronomy 17:16-17. Given the overall spiral of spiritual and moral decline that followed on from the reign of Solomon and eventually led to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Babylonians, it is hardly surprising that specific references to the 'book of the law' are few and brief."¹¹

The themes of Deuteronomy are seen elsewhere in the Tanach Scriptures, and are so critical for us to understand, that theologians often consider the books following it: Joshua, Judges, and Samuel-Kings to actually be "**Deuteronomic.**" *That's a fancy way of saying that the message of Deuteronomy is carried on throughout a significant chunk of the Old Testament's historical books.* Indeed, so important is Deuteronomy, that it is sometimes thought that one cannot adequately understand the Apostle Paul without first understanding its message.¹²

I have been in the Messianic movement since 1995, and feel that our corporate engagement with Deuteronomy has not been what it should be. We read through parts of Deuteronomy every year on the Torah cycle. There is a command from Moses that Deuteronomy is to be considered during *Sukkot* or the Feast of Tabernacles (31:10-13), and many do this. Yet, how many of us when *Sukkot* is over and we celebrate *Simchat Torah*—are going to return to a cycle of Torah study—and we forget the Deuteronomic literature of Joshua-2 Kings? Is it because it is too painful for us to see that what Moses warned Ancient Israel about actually took place? While we may not be putting Deuteronomy aside as the kings of Israel did—our faith community does not largely examine the Deuteronomic books that carry forward the message of Moses. I believe that as our engagement with the Scriptures improve, that this needs to change. Perhaps one year your Messianic congregation or fellowship will choose to limit its engagement with the weekly *parashah*, being brave enough to take a serious look at the histories that take the message of Deuteronomy forward. If Deuteronomy has not caused any of us to consider our sin, then perhaps Joshua-2 Kings will!

In the short term, however, I find a very encouraging word in knowing that "The LORD our God has secrets known to no one" (29:29a, NLT)—secrets that thankfully have now been revealed to the saints! That secret is our Heavenly Father's plan of redemption via His Son, Yeshua the Messiah. As the Apostle Paul's greeting to the Colossians should remind us, this is "the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Messiah in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:26-27). Unlike the Ancient Israelites who would only have been aware of their sin or the sin of their posterity—we **now know the Solution**

¹¹ Alexander, "Authorship of the Pentateuch," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, pp 68-69.

¹² And likewise, the Books of Isaiah and the Psalms.

of that sin! Let us never forget this when we turn to Deuteronomy, and the supernatural power that this final book of the Torah indeed does possess.

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