

# DEUTERONOMY

(*deuteros*, second; *nomos*, law) the “second law

The Book of Deuteronomy recalls the main event at the end of Israel’s forty years wandering in the desert. At the end of the Book of Numbers, the Israelites are about to enter Canaan or the Promised Land. Moses warns them of the temptations they will face, and begs them to remain loyal to God. To make his point, Moses recalls their recent exodus from Egypt; the giving of the Ten Commandments; and how God fed them in the desert wanderings—all so that the people are grateful for what God has done for them. For the land they are about to enter, Canaan, is rife with idol worship and abominable rituals. Given Israel’s recent history with the Golden Calf and apostasy at Beth-Peor, Moses has good reason to warn them.

When Moses finally addresses the people on the plains of Moab, their last stop before the Promised Land, he calls out the new generation of Israelites; that is, those who were under the age of twenty when they first left Egypt. As the law is read out, the Lord is saying that His covenant with them is an everlasting covenant (29:13). Moses repeats the precepts and directives of the Law because he wants them engraved on the minds and hearts of the people. Especially Moses wants this younger, second generation to be loyal to the commitment their parents made but failed to keep. To solemnize their commitment, Moses instructs them to “. . . **set up large stones, and plaster them with plaster; and you shall write upon them all the words of this law, when you pass over to enter the land which the Lord your God gives you. . . .**” (27:2-3). In sum, Moses gives speeches in the Book of Deuteronomy, promulgates groupings of laws, offers a farewell with a long canticle or song, and finally concludes with various blessings.



Deuteronomy is believed to be the work of several authors who assembled and composed the final book from various historical and legal sources. Deuteronomy, inspired by Holy Spirit, is considered the first great theological work of the Chosen People. The immediate background of the composition of Deuteronomy is the cultural situation of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, when Israel’s faith had been corroded by Canaanite culture and by Assyrian religious practices. Deuteronomy insists upon exclusive loyalty to Yahweh. Thus the purpose of writing Deuteronomy is to summon Israel to a renewal of her covenant relationship with God.

The basic message of Deuteronomy is: one God, one people, one Temple, one land, and one Law. One God demands worship offered in one place or sanctuary—the Jerusalem Temple (12:1-32). One people must not permit divisions of class or family or tribe to divide them. As the People of God, they are to be brothers and sisters with one another.

And this one people must never forget all that God has done for them, for God’s covenant with Israel is *conditional*: “**See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you this day, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his way, . . .**” (30:15-20). For the promise of land was never an absolute one. If the Israelites are faithful to the covenant, they will settle the land God is giving them; however, infidelity to the covenant would mean their exit from the land. This is key to understanding Israel’s ancient history; for Israel’s tendency was to enjoy the benefits of the land as if she were *entitled* to such blessings. In the end, Israel would not be able to blame God for not

keeping His promises; rather, Israel would have to blame herself for not keeping her promises. Indeed by 721-722 B.C., it was Israel's sins which brought about the exile of at least ten of her twelve tribes. Yet God is ever patient and merciful; for this cycle of rebellion-punishment-repentance-salvation will occur again and again in the Old Testament.

Deuteronomy functions as the conclusion of the *Torah* (Hebrew, "instruction") or Pentateuch (Greek, *pente*, five; *teuchos*, tool, book), that is, Israel's early history (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). It rounds off the first stage when Israel is within sight of the Promised Land, and concludes by opening the way to the Book of Joshua and the final conquest of the land until the period of the exile (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings). Deuteronomy marks the transition from the pre-history of Israel (Patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the Exodus) to the history of the people of the covenant and of the Prophets.

### Three divisions of the Book of Deuteronomy

1. First section. Moses recalls their journey from Mt. Sinai; the sending of the spies who scouted out Canaan; their journey in the wilderness; and finally their conquest of Canaan. Note: in conquering Canaan the Israelites defeated the Amorites, the largest of the seven nations that comprised Canaan. ("**When the Lord your God brings you into the land where you are entering to possess it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and stronger than you.**" 7:1).

Unfortunately, despite this great victory, Moses is saddened at being denied entry. Still, Moses gathers himself to admonish the people that their own success at settling the land would depend upon them remaining loyal to God's covenant. The first section concludes with Moses designating three "Cities of Refuge" from the lands east of the River Jordan, leaving to his successor, Joshua, the task of designating these "Cities of Refuge."



2. Second section. Beginning in chapter five, Moses gives a lengthy explanation of the Pentateuch and recalls the giving of the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai. Then Moses describes the many additional commandments, namely, the various ritual, civil and holiness laws to be obeyed. Moses wants to impress upon the people that soon they will face great challenges as they cross the River Jordan into Canaan, and that their success will depend upon their perseverance and unswerving loyalty to God's instructions.

3. Third section. The final section of Deuteronomy, from chapter 27:9 until the end, is the formal sealing of the covenant with God. Here are many expressions of parting, many intimations of Moses' death as he bids the people farewell. Moses details the terms of the covenant, the so-called "Blessings" and "Curses" (27:9-29:8), and then calls the people together so that they may ceremoniously accept the covenant's terms (29:9-28). As the covenant is sealed, Moses prepares to take his final leave. He gives his parting speech (30:1-20) and hands over the leadership of the people to Joshua (31:1-30). Moses' last words conclude with a song that, again, recalls Israel's history and destiny (32:1-52). Moses then blesses the people and ascends to Mt. Nebo's summit where he dies (33:1-34:12).

## Shema (Hebrew, *Sh'ma Yisrael*)

The *Shema* is the core of the Law: **“Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might”** (6:4-4). Israel’s first responsibility is to love God completely; and she is to love God not for any ulterior motive but because God first loved her. This is one of the key characteristics of Deuteronomy: the gracious and undeserved love of God for Israel as manifested in His deeds (6:20-23). Such divine benevolence should in turn awaken Israel’s response of love and, as a result, her love of neighbor. Therefore love is the **“fulfillment of the law”** (Romans 13:8). However, Israel’s love of God must be combined with reverence or “fear;” for God is a “jealous” God who will not tolerate Israel turning to other gods (6:10-15). Thus while God’s love for Israel is a holy love, it is also a wrathful love that becomes a consuming fire if she is unfaithful to the covenant.

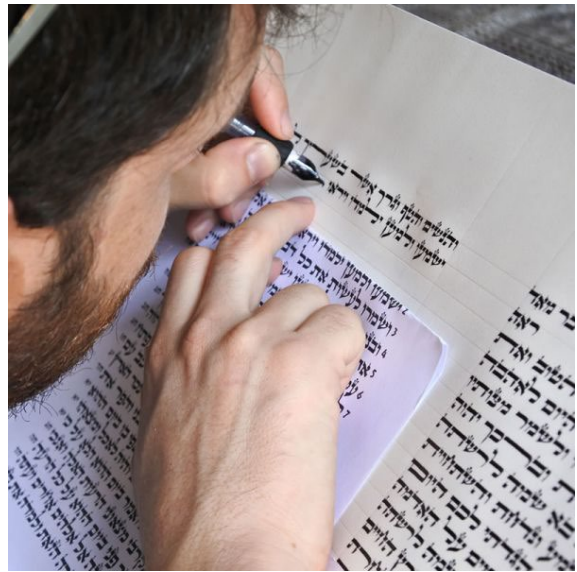
## Torah Scrolls

Though the Book of Deuteronomy contains “laws,” Deuteronomy is not strictly a code of rules but an “exposition” of them (1:5). In other words, Deuteronomy is a *proclamation* of Israel’s covenant faith with God, a proclamation directed to the whole community of Israel. This proclamation includes both the good news of Yahweh’s liberating deeds, and the requirements that are binding upon the people who have been liberated.

The large scrolls that a rabbi carries in a synagogue are the Five Scrolls that are kept in the synagogue’s cabinet or “ark” and read each Sabbath: the Song of Solomon; the Book of Ruth; the Book of Lamentations; the Book of Ecclesiastes; and the Book of Esther.

In addition to these “standard” scrolls, other Torah scrolls include the five books of Moses or Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The scrolls are hand-written in biblical Hebrew. The parchment is made of calf skin. The entire process of preparing the parchment and actually writing of the words can take up to 18 months to complete. If a mistake is made in the writing, the entire scroll will be invalid and must be started again. A Torah scroll is considered sacred; if one is accidentally dropped in the synagogue, the entire congregation must fast for forty days.

According to Deuteronomy every Jewish male is to write a Torah scroll: **“Now therefore write this song, and teach it to the Israelites; put it in their mouths, in order that this song may be a witness for me against the Israelites. . . .”** (31:19). If a man writes the Torah scroll himself, it is viewed by his fellow Jews as if he received it from Mt. Sinai. However, there is also the option to commission a professional scribe to write the scroll. As one might expect, such a labor intensive commission is extremely expensive, with prices ranging from \$26,000 to \$55,000 for a single scroll. Ready-made scrolls may be purchased but they do not fulfill the obligation; that is, unless the purchaser “fixes” at least one letter of a scroll that had been previously declared invalid.



writing a Torah scroll

## The Canaanites

“Canaanites” is a general term for a wide variety of people who lived throughout the Middle East, including various peoples east of the River Jordan and as far north as Babylon (Iraq). These peoples

are sometimes referred to as Amorites. Aside from their living in the same general area, what the Canaanites held in common was their worship of nature and fertility gods.

### **Holy War**

The conquest of Canaan by Israel should not be confused with modern notions of religiously sanctioned warfare, or with a brand of fanaticism known as “jihad.” The biblical holy war that conquered Canaan was different from other kinds of warfare. For example, the wars waged by King David and King Solomon were marked by military conscription and a professional officer corps in command of a standing army. However “holy war” was a kind of guerrilla warfare based on a voluntary response to a call to arms in the name of a deity or “divine warrior.”

### **Violence in the Old Testament**

The books of Deuteronomy and Joshua contain violent stories that may shock the casual reader. Some of these stories call for not only the slaughtering of enemy combatants but also innocent civilians, which our modern sensibilities naturally condemn. Biblical scholars refer to these accounts of total destruction as the *herem* or *ban*.

God’s nature is not to destroy but to redeem. But the transformation of Israel as a people did not happen all at once. It took nearly a thousand years before Israel would fully abandon the polytheism that defined Canaanite culture, and the cultures of other nations that directly influenced Israel. As such, the *ban* was also God’s judgment upon the Canaanites and their abominable rites and practices (9:4-5).



Moses’ view of Canaan—the Promised Land—from Mount Nebo (Jordan)

