

Deuteronomy—

A stepping stone to Christ

1. Background and introduction

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*This short series of articles considers how the book of Deuteronomy gave insight to the people of Israel concerning the spiritual significance of the Law already given through Moses. In so doing it provides lessons for us in how God's Word should affect our hearts and influence the way we live. There are four articles: In **Part 1** Deuteronomy is shown to be different from the earlier books of the Law, requiring faith by all the people. There is no reference to the tabernacle but a strong emphasis on individual responsibility to take the Word into the heart.*

***Part 2** shows the prominence of love as a theme in Deuteronomy, a love that stimulates obedience and has eternal life as the outcome.*

*In **Part 3** the significance of particular words and phrases in Deuteronomy is brought out, showing how they fit the overall theme.*

***Part 4** shows the importance of Deuteronomy in the life and teachings of Jesus, and how it anticipates the way in which we can draw near to God through him.*

UNDER THE providential hand of God, a new generation of expectant Israelites had finally reached the eastern banks of Jordan, and was poised to enter the Promised Land. During the six-month period when they waited in the plains of Moab, not only were they to encounter the events detailed from Numbers 22 onwards, but also the aged Moses would deliver his final message to God's people before his own death. Deuteronomy is that message.

Though separated by time, we too stand on the threshold of a new era, awaiting the coming of a greater Joshua and the establishment of an eternal Kingdom. It is no surprise, therefore, that we find much exhortation in Deuteronomy, both in principle and in practice, which will help

and encourage our own generation to prepare to "enter into that rest" (Heb. 4:11).

Deuteronomy provides the reader with an inspired insight as to how the Law of Moses can and should be understood in terms of its spiritual significance, for both nation and individual, in their worship of God. This book highlights how God is concerned with conscience, not just compliance, and encourages the reader and hearer alike to write God's words upon living hearts rather than leave them etched into cold slabs of stone or on the printed page. The Law delivered in the mount served the people well as far as it went in terms of worship and practical daily living; but without the eye of faith the important principles contained in the Law would remain veiled, and it would not be able to save.

Deuteronomy distills from the Law some of the essential ingredients enabling us to view Christ, and brings to our attention the "weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith" (Mt. 23:23). It also opens up to the reader how the Law really can and should project our minds forward in faith, in terms of it becoming a schoolteacher to bring us to Christ (Gal. 3:24), and thus invoke a personal response from each of us.

This study aims to examine certain key words and ideas found in Deuteronomy, sometimes recorded for the first time in Scripture. It is not possible to isolate the many and varied themes in Deuteronomy, nor is it desirable, as they form a matrix of complementary themes. The titles that I have chosen are mere labels under which I strive to capture relevant passages relating to a

particular theme. The reader will soon see that the themes covered (and there are many more) are all interrelated in some way; such is the character of the inspired Word.

For clarity during this study, when I refer to the 'Law' I am referring to that which was delivered to Israel on Mount Sinai, as recorded in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers.

Different in character

Evidence that Deuteronomy is intended to be different in character from the other books that make up the Pentateuch is summarised as follows:

- 1 The sixteen occurrences of the phrase "this law" are unique to Deuteronomy (apart from one reference in Numbers 5:30, in which specific reference is being made to the law of jealousy), which causes us to ask, Why? We can only conclude that God intends us to view "this law" (that is, Deuteronomy) as distinct from the Law given in Sinai.
- 2 It is stated that Deuteronomy was delivered "beside the covenant which He made with them in Horeb" (29:1). The word "beside" (Heb. *bad*) means 'something separated'; thus this book in some way was to be seen as separate or different in character from the other books of the Law, perhaps due to the emphasis which we see in chapter 29 on the importance of faith in the true worship of God (vv. 12-15), which we will consider later in this article.
- 3 In Deuteronomy 1:5 we read, "on this side Jordan . . . began Moses to declare [Heb. *ba'ar*] this law", *ba'ar* meaning 'to dig out the sense' or 'to explain something'. This would indicate that Deuteronomy, at least in part, is about *explaining* the Law to the people of Israel, developing the spirit and aim of what had been delivered in Sinai, with particular emphasis on individual responsibilities, as they were now to begin a new life in the Land.¹

Perhaps we can also see a spiritual significance in the words "turn you, and take your journey" (v. 7). Their journey should be not only a physical one but also a spiritual one, where progression is made on a spiritual plane, as it should with ourselves as we strive to follow in the steps of our Lord.

A message for all Israel

Deuteronomy gives us the first record in Scripture of "all Israel" being addressed. (Although the phrase occurs once in Exodus and once in Numbers, these are not in connection with *ad-*

ressing "all Israel".) The phrase occurs thirteen times throughout Deuteronomy, and emphasises how it was a message to be received by *every* individual standing on the plains of Moab, not just the rulers and priests. A fourteenth reference occurs in Romans, which we will consider later.

There is also a sevenfold repetition of the phrase "Hear, O Israel" or "Hearken, O Israel" (4:1; 5:1; 6:3; 6:4; 9:1; 20:3; 27:9), calling all Israel to hear what God had to say, which again addresses all people without distinction. There was no exception; each individual had a responsibility to hear and act upon this message, as is made clear in 29:10,11: "Ye stand this day all of you before the LORD your God; your captains of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, with all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and thy stranger that is in thy camp, from the hewer of thy wood unto the drawer of thy water".

Perhaps most telling of all, we find a most striking imbalance within the books of the Law of the phrase "Thy God".² The pronoun 'thy' is singular, and the phrase occurs 200 times in Deuteronomy but only eighteen times in the rest of the Law. This surely places emphasis on an *individual* relationship with God. It is true that the singular can legitimately refer to the nation (Heb. *am*), but this still does not account for the substantial increase in its use throughout this book.

It seems that a spiritual lesson of personal rather than corporate accountability is being encouraged. This message, then, looks forward to those who are 'in Christ', and stresses to true believers of all ages that we have a responsibility, both as individuals and also as members one of another in our ecclesial lives, to serve the living God.

Emphasis on faith

God describes Himself for the first and only time in Scripture as "the faithful God" in Deuteronomy 7:9, and in so doing sets a standard for His people to follow as they grow in faith. From the very first chapter of Deuteronomy it can be seen that God aligns this message through Moses with

1. A similar expression is used by Jesus in Luke 24:27, where he "expounded" or 'thoroughly explained' things concerning himself from the Law, Psalms and Prophets.
2. It is interesting to note that six out of the seven occurrences in the New Testament of this phrase "thy God" are quotations from Deuteronomy made by Jesus (Mt. 4:7,10; 22:37; Mk. 12:30; Lk. 4:8,12; 10:27). The other is Hebrews 1:9, which is not found in some manuscripts.

the promises that were to be received in faith by the fathers (Gen. 15:6): “Behold, I have set [the Hebrew means ‘given’] the land before you: go in and possess the land which the LORD swore unto your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give unto them and to their seed after them” (Deut. 1:8).

Similar explicit references to the promises abound through this book (6:10; 9:5,27; 29:13; 30:20; 34:4). Additionally, the words ‘give’ and ‘possess’, used in connection with the giving of such promises, become independent key words in their own right through the rest of Deuteronomy, and as such constantly remind reader and hearer alike that the Land would be a gift from God. This gift was based on the promises He had made, and not on any intrinsic virtue of the recipients, just as God has “*given* unto us exceeding great and precious promises” (2 Pet. 1:4). Again, the words of Jesus reassure us that it is “[our] Father’s good pleasure to *give* [us] the kingdom” (Lk. 12:32).

The people had to learn that the basis of any victory during their subjugation of the Land would only be possible through *faith in God*, a lesson that was lost on the previous generation, “the word . . . not being mixed with faith” in them (Heb. 4:2). Thus in Deuteronomy we are being urged to see how important faith is when attempting to understand the meaning and significance of the Law (Rom. 3:31), and, leading on from this, to be able to show faith by works (Jas. 2:18).

The principle of faith is one that has spanned all dispensations this side of the Kingdom. The Law had been “added [Gk. ‘to place additionally or lay beside’] because of transgressions” (Gal. 3:19; cf. Rom. 4:13-15), and was not a replacement

for faith. It should have been a schoolmaster to bring to Christ (Gal. 3:24), and to help develop a faith that understands that the forgiveness of sins could only be through the sacrifice of the Son of God. The word given to the people of Israel in Deuteronomy could be the basis of that faith, as Paul explains: “faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17). Perhaps this is why the Law, for the first time in Scripture, is described as *righteous* in Deuteronomy 4:8, for if it is viewed with Christ in mind then such developed faith might be reckoned as righteousness (Rom. 4:9).

It is of no small significance that Paul, when exhorting the Romans concerning faith, underpins his inspired discourse by sustained references to Deuteronomy. The table below identifies the connections.

No reference to the tabernacle

It may strike the reader as strange, initially at least, that the word ‘tabernacle’ (Heb. *mishkan*) does not appear in Deuteronomy at all (“tabernacle” in 31:14,15 is the different Hebrew word *ohel* and refers to the tent of the congregation). Something that had been such a focus over the previous thirty-eight years needed a replacement, something to fill the void. It would seem that this is just another indicator of how God was encouraging a change of focus in their worship. The emphasis on seeking God was no longer to be via a structure which man pitched, but rather that “which the Lord pitched” (Heb. 8:2).

As the people moved forwards, eventually to become dispersed in their own land, it is made

Theme	Romans	Deuteronomy
Righteous Law	10:4,5	4:8
Word of faith	10:6-8	30:11-15
Call upon God	10:13	4:7
Faith from the Word	10:17	32:20
Hearing	10:18	4:1
Provoke to jealousy	10:19	32:21
Stretched-out arm	10:21	4:34 (key phrase)
Election	11:5	7:6-7 (“choose”)
Eyes and ears	11:7,8	29:4
Goodness and severity	11:22	32:39-43
Beloved for the fathers’ sakes	11:28	10:15
All Israel	11:26 and 9:6, the only references in the New Testament	1:1 (key phrase)

clear to them throughout Deuteronomy that it was the Word of God itself that should become the focus of their attention, and which should 'travel' with them in their hearts. The knowledge of God's Word was no longer to be the sole responsibility of the priests, though this was still required, but each person was now instructed to take responsibility for spiritual education within their own families and beyond, as they sought individually and collectively to worship God in spirit and in truth.

It is therefore no coincidence that, as the teaching mechanism of the tabernacle is 'removed' from the pages of Deuteronomy, we are introduced for the first time in Scripture to a new word with respect to teaching, the Hebrew word *lamad*, which subsequently becomes the commonest Old Testament word for 'teach'. It carries the idea of a tutoring or learning process, and is translated 'teach' ten times in Deuteronomy.³

The Word of God in the heart

Individual, family and congregational teaching of God's Word becomes a substantial theme in Deuteronomy, and was to become the order of the day in their new circumstances. God's Word(s) had hitherto been kept in the ark within the tabernacle, and the dissemination of its message was largely the responsibility of the priests (Mal. 2:7), but emphasis now is being placed upon writing the law of God upon the "fleshy tables of the heart" (2 Cor. 3:3), every person's heart: "And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up" (Deut. 6:6,7). God wanted His glory to be revealed not just in a single place (that is, the tabernacle), but rather through the individual lives of those who have associated themselves with His Name.

The distinction between what the tabernacle stood for and what Deuteronomy is emphasising is well shown in the following prophecy concerning Christ: "Sacrifice and offering Thou didst not desire; mine ears hast Thou opened: burnt offer-

ing and sin offering hast Thou not required . . . I delight to do Thy will, O my God: yea, Thy law is within my heart" (Ps. 40:6-8).

Just as the tabernacle had been in their midst as a nation, the Word of God is now described as being "very nigh" unto them (Deut. 30:14; cf. Rom. 10:8), so there was to be no excuse regarding lack of availability or accessibility. We in our generation are privileged to have the Word of God very nigh us, giving us the opportunity to allow it to build us up and to "give [us] an inheritance among all them which are sanctified" (Acts 20:32). The words 'tabernacle', 'word' and 'glory' converge perfectly in our Lord: "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt [Gk. 'tabernacled'] among us, (and we beheld his glory . . .)" (Jno 1:14).

A complementary observation is found if we glance at the word 'wisdom' in the Law. All the occurrences of 'wisdom' in the Sinaitic law occur in the context of the making of the tabernacle (Ex. 28:3; 31:3,6; 35:26,31,35; 36:1,2), and refer specifically to the gift of God (just as the Holy Spirit gifts were given for the purpose of establishing God's spiritual house in the first century). Now, in Deuteronomy, we see that wisdom is to be derived from God's Word: "Behold, I have taught you statutes and judgments . . . Keep therefore and do them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations" (Deut. 4:5,6).

From this we again see that the principles enshrined in and around the building of the tabernacle were to be transferred to people's hearts, as they moved into the new land. Wisdom based on the Word of God was now to be the principal thing, as it should be with us, as we become 'living stones' in a 'spiritual house'. Paul summarises this principle in writing to Timothy, a child schooled in the Word of God, reminding his hearers that "the holy scriptures . . . are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15).

(To be continued)

3. Prior to Deuteronomy, the Hebrew word *zahar* is used once (Ex. 18:20) and *yarah* six times (Ex. 4:12,15; 24:12; 35:34; Lev. 10:11; 14:57).

"Deuteronomy is unique in its very character. It is highly poetical, although very little of it is written in verse. It is not entirely history, nor is it prophecy, though both history and prophecy form the basis of what Moses has to say. It is not strictly narrative; it is neither a legal code nor a devotional work. Nevertheless from it we may understand God's law and be moved to worship by the tale it has to tell".—Alfred Nicholls, *Deuteronomy for Disciples*, p. 1