

## Lesson 24: Deuteronomy Form and Structure

### Introduction

We have come to the last book of the Jewish Torah, Deuteronomy. And I realize that I have not talked about the titles of the books. I mentioned that the word Torah, which usually gets translated as Law in the New Testament, is the Hebrew term for the books of Moses, though it is more than law in the narrow sense of dos and don'ts. It is law in the broader sense of covenant and instruction. We have also been using the term Pentateuch for Torah. Penta means five in Greek, as in pentagon. And teuchos is the word for scroll. So, Pentateuch simply means five-scroll work.

The English titles for the books of the Pentateuch come from the Greek Septuagint (LXX). These titles were probably given around 250 BC when the Torah portion of the Septuagint was translated from the Hebrew text by Jewish scholars into a Greek version. And these Greek titles are a little more descriptive than the Hebrew titles. The Hebrew names for the books stick very close to the text, using the first significant word of each book as a title. The book of Genesis in the Hebrew is simply titled with a word that means "In the beginning." The book of Exodus is titled "Names." The book of Leviticus is titled "Called." The book of Numbers is titled "In the desert." And Deuteronomy is titled "Words." And the titles do not make sense until you look at the first few words of each book and then you see that the title is simply the first significant word that occurs. And in a sense are not really titles. They are references to the initial words of the text.

English takes its titles from the more descriptive Greek titles. Genesis comes from the Greek word for creation. Exodus, in Greek, means "the way out." Leviticus means "having to do with the duties of the Levites." Numbers is the one book where the Greek did not stick. Instead of the Greek word for numbers "Arithmoi," which you can hear sounds like arithmetic, English scholars went with the English word Numbers instead. And finally, we have Deuteronomy, which is literally translated "second law" but probably means "repeated law."

So, what is Deuteronomy? How ought we think about this final book of Moses? Does the title help or is it misleading?

"Second law" or "repeated law" are not bad titles for this fifth book of Moses, if we understand what that means from our study of the book itself. It is good to recognize that we have some repetition of the law code given from the previous books, particularly in Exodus at Mount Sinai. And it is good to recognize that this law code is being given to the second generation of Israelites out of Egypt. It is a second giving of law. But we need to define more precisely the relationship between the first law given at Mt Sinai and this second law code given on the plains of Moses. How do these two codes or covenants relate to one another?

I am going to start our interpretation of Deuteronomy where I usually start. I am starting with the structure of the book.

### Determining the Literary Structure of Deuteronomy

Traditional scholarship recognizes in Deuteronomy a series of speeches by Moses. The Bible Project video overview on Deuteronomy, which you can check out on youtube or at [observetheword.com](http://observetheword.com), takes this approach, calling Deuteronomy one long speech by Moses to the people of Israel. Recent scholarship has also suggested that interpreters consider the presence of suzerain-vassal covenant features in Deuteronomy. And we have to take into account the presence of chiasm in Deuteronomy. We are going to consider all three approaches, taking three passes through the entire book, starting with the speeches of Moses.

#### 1. The Speeches of Moses (Literary Style of Deuteronomy)

For each approach to the structure of Deuteronomy I'll give you one scholarly resource. Gleason Archer in his book *A survey of Old Testament Introduction* published in 1996 outlines Deuteronomy in six parts, according to the traditional speeches approach. The first three sections are called the first, second, and third discourse of Moses. The last three sections are the song of Moses, the final charge

and farewell, and the death of Moses. I'll include the outline in the notes at [observetheword.com](http://observetheword.com) if you want to check out where the breaks are in the text.<sup>1</sup>

Recognizing that Deuteronomy is delivered in a series of speeches from Moses directed to this second generation of Israelites out of Egypt helps us get a feel for the book. The voice of the book is technically third person narrative. A narrator tells us in chapter 1:5, "Across the Jordan in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to expound this law, saying ..." That's 3<sup>rd</sup> person. The author, Moses himself in this case, is speaking about Moses, telling us what Moses said. But not much of Deuteronomy is narration. The narration leads quickly into sections where Moses is speaking, giving us a series of really long quotes. In those quotes, which make up most of the book, Moses is speaking in first person directly to the Israelites. So, here is an example of how this works in 1:5-6, "Moses undertook to expound this law, saying, 'The Lord our God spoke to us at Horeb, saying, "You have stayed long enough at this mountain. Turn and set your journey, and go to the hill country of the Amorites..."'" Those words of Moses start in verse 6, that's where he begins to say, "The Lord our God spoke to us at Horeb," and they continue all the way to chapter 4 verse 40. And that's one long quote. There are 5 verses of narration at the beginning of chapter 1 before we get into the quote and 9 verses of narration at the end of chapter 4 after we finish the quote. But in between those few verses of narration there are 147 verses of speech. In all of that text Moses is speaking in first person to the Israelites. He said, "the LORD spoke to us." Or, for example, he says in 1:9, "I spoke to you at that time..." The "I" is Moses and the "you" are the Israelites. Most of Deuteronomy is in this first person voice of Moses speaking to the people.

The second discourse is even longer and with less narration. After chapter 4, Moses resumes speaking in 5:1. And just the first half of the verse is narration. "Then Moses summoned all Israel and said to them, 'Hear, O Israel the statutes and the ordinances which I am speaking today in your hearing, that you may learn them and observe them carefully.'" This speech continues for 22 chapters, without stopping. That's a really long quote. It goes all the way to the end of chapter 26. And in all of that text Moses is speaking as the "I," I Moses am speaking to "you" Israel.

The third discourse picks up in 27:1, "Then Moses and the elders of Israel charged the people, saying, 'Keep all the commandments which I command you today.'" Archer has this discourse running from chapter 27 through chapter 31. This section, however, is not one long quote, but a series of speeches set side-by-side. There is a little narration through the text indicating each new beginning of a speech. So, along with the first beginning of the speech in 27:1, we also have:

In 27:9, "Then Moses and the Levitical priests spoke to all Israel, saying ..."

In 27:11, "Moses also charged the people on that day, saying ..."

In 29:1-2, "These are the words of the covenant which the LORD commanded Moses to make with the sons of Israel in the land of Moab, besides the covenant which He had made with them at Horeb. And Moses summoned all Israel and said to them ..."

In 31:1-2, "So Moses went and spoke these words to all Israel. And he said to them, ..."

In 31:7 "Then Moses called to Joshua and said to him in sight of all Israel, ..."

In 31:9-10 "So Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel. Then Moses commanded them ..."

<sup>1</sup> I. First discourse: historical prologue, 1:1–4:49  
II. Second discourse: laws by which Israel is to live, 5:1–26:19  
III. Third discourse: warning and prediction, 27:1–31:30  
IV. Song of Moses: Israel's responsibility to the covenant, 32:1–43  
V. Final charge and farewell, 32:44–33:29  
VI. Death of Moses and his obituary, 34:1–12

This third discourse section is different from the first two discourse sections in that it is not just one long speech, but it is this series of about seven speeches linked together. Though, it is similar to those sections in that the great majority of the text is a record of Moses speaking to the Israelites.

The next two sections, in chapter 32 and 33, consist of a poem each. Both are preceded with narration that tells us these poems were delivered verbally by Moses to the people of Israel. So, even with the poetry, we still have speech that is going on from Moses to the people.

The last verse of chapter 31, sets up the poem of chapter 32 this way, “Then Moses spoke in the hearing of all the assembly of Israel the words of this song, until they were complete.”

And the first two verses of chapter 33 set up the second poem this way, “Now this is the blessing with which Moses the man of God blessed the sons of Israel before his death. And he said, ...”

The last section in Archer’s six-part outline is not a discourse, but the narrative at the end of Deuteronomy that tells us about the death of Moses.

While we are here at the end of the book, I’ll point out a couple of ways the end ties together, not just Deuteronomy, but the whole of the Pentateuch. The ending of this fifth book is similar to the ending of our first book. Genesis ended with blessing the tribes of Israel by Jacob and then a brief narration of the death of Joseph. Deuteronomy ends in this second poem with a blessing of the tribes of Israel and then a brief narration of the death of Moses. There is also a key word link between the beginning of Genesis and the end of Deuteronomy. The word *hover* appears only twice in the Pentateuch. The first time is in Genesis 1:2 where the text says that the “Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” The second use is here at the end of the Pentateuch in 32:11 where Moses likens God to an eagle “that hovers over his young.” These little artistic details speak to the unity and common authorship of the whole work by the author Moses.

Taking this quick view of Deuteronomy as a series of speeches by Moses, we pick up on the tone of the book as a call of obedience from old, faithful Moses. His time has come. He is about to die. His whole generation has passed. So, he takes the opportunity to speak to this next generation. We will hear repeated by Moses the phrase, “Hear O Israel.” He is not calling them merely to let sound waves bounce off their eardrums. He is calling them to listen with the intent of doing. Hear and understand and do. We also see in the discourse a heartfelt plea from Moses to obey as an act of love for God. Moses does not envision an imposed religion, weighing down the Israelites as an unwanted duty. Moses calls for obedience as a response of love from the heart. The Bible project sums up Deuteronomy as a repeated call from Moses to his people to listen, that is to listen, hear and obey, and to love. That’s the charge he leaves with them with.

Recognizing Deuteronomy as this series of speeches helps us get the voice and tone of the book. This is personal. It is first person from the heart of Moses to the people. Seeing the discourse shows us something that is going on in the text. It is the literary approach or style of the book. It does not, however, help us establish the literary structure of the text. More is going on in Deuteronomy than the speeches. So, let’s move on to consider the suzerain-vassal treaty form which is also a literary aspect of Deuteronomy.

## 2. 2<sup>nd</sup> Millennial Suzerain-Vassal Treaty (Literary Form of Deuteronomy)

Peter Craigie addresses the treaty form in *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* volume on Deuteronomy which came out in 1976. This was one of the first scholarly, evangelical commentaries to evaluate Deuteronomy in light of the mound of archaeological examples of ancient near-eastern covenants uncovered through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Critical scholars view the mix of literature in Deuteronomy as evidence that the book was stitched together from various sources by various authors. They argue that the mix of history and legal stipulations, blessings and curses, theological reflection and poetry in Deuteronomy cannot be explained if there was only one original author. They argue that no known form of literature can account for all these disparate genres found in this one book. That observation was true, that we did not have another similar example of

literature as the mix in Deuteronomy, at least, it was a true observation until the archaeology finds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century revealed numerous examples of suzerain-vassal treaties that contained exactly this mix of genres. Not only does the treaty form affirm what believers of biblical authority already accept, that Deuteronomy is a unified literary work from Moses, but more importantly the form helps us to better interpret the text we have in Deuteronomy by helping us understand the function of the different parts and how those different parts relate to one another.

As a reminder from our earlier lessons, the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennial suzerain vassal treaty form contains these standard elements.

- 1 Title
- 2 Historical Prologue
- 3 Stipulations
  - a. basic
  - b. detailed
- 4 Deposition and regular reading
- 5 Witnesses
- 6 Blessings
- 7 Curses

Deuteronomy includes all seven of these elements. I am not claiming that Deuteronomy is a suzerain-vassal treaty. Deuteronomy is a much higher literary accomplishment than what you would find in an ancient treaty document. An ancient near eastern listener would have recognized these covenant elements while also recognizing that they were receiving something much more than just a legal document. Moses builds in explanation and exhortation in a wonderful literary design on top of the covenant form.

Let's go through the covenant elements and point them out as they occur in Deuteronomy. I also notice that I am using the words treaty and covenant interchangeable. That's because the scholarly work done on the ancient texts often uses of the word treaty whereas in the biblical context, we use the word covenant. So, just know that treaty means covenant and covenant means treaty. It is the same thing.

#### *1 Title (1:6; 5:2)*

Ancient covenants started with a title through which the suzerain or great king declared how he was to be addressed, extolling himself with magnificent characteristics and claims of authority. The lack of a title at the beginning of Deuteronomy is a reminder that we are not dealing with a strict legal document. Deuteronomy is unique as a literary work. It does not strictly follow a covenant, legal form. We do get a title. We get it both at the beginning of the historical prologue and at the beginning of the basic stipulations. Moses does not provide a grandiose title though it is grand. He simply states in 1:6, "The LORD our God spoke to us at Horeb..." (Horeb is another word for Sinai) and in 5:2, "The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb." The LORD our God. Yahweh, our Elohim.

These names have become loaded with meaning for us since we began at Genesis 1, beginning with the creation story in the first chapters of Genesis, moving through the fall and the call of Abraham to the call of Moses and the Exodus from Egypt. God keeps building on the revelation of his name. He does this in direct confrontation with Pharaoh in the book of Exodus, Pharaoh who claimed a great title for himself and admitted to having no knowledge of Yahweh and no desire for knowledge of Yahweh. The most important theme of the whole Pentateuch is the answer to the question, "Who is our God?" He is creator. He is holy. He the self-existent I Am. He is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, full of lovingkindness and truth. He is the God whose anger burns against sin and will not let unrighteousness go unpunished. And he is also the God who makes a way for sinful people to enter into his love. He is the God of Israel and he is the God of all nations. He is Yahweh, our Elohim.

## *2 Historical Prologue (1-3)*

In chapters 1-3, Moses provides a historical prologue. He starts with the setting forth from Sinai, repeating the promise of land from the southern end of Canaan all the way up north to the Euphrates river. Moses reaches back in history to remind his listeners that this is the promise given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Moses reminds Israel that they have received a land grant from the great king. Now they must go take it. The first generation failed to act in faith on this promise from God. That generation has passed away in the wilderness wandering. The second generation is now camped in the plains of Moab on the wrong side of the Jordan river. They must decide whether or not they will be the faithful generation, to take God at his word, believe in the promise, and enter that land.

Interestingly, in this historical prologue Moses does not focus on the Exodus out of Egypt even though that is the decisive historical moment of salvation that Israel will look back to every year, every time they celebrate the Passover, every time they celebrate the Feast of Booths, they are looking back to the Exodus. And we will focus on the Exodus and on Mt. Sinai in chapters 4-11 but not here in the historical prologue. Here Moses gives attention to the victory over the Amorite kings Sihon and Og. It is much less amazing, much less incredible. Why does he do that?

The purpose of historical prologue is to define or reflect on the relationship between the great king and his vassal people. In this historical reflection, Moses does take Israel back to Abraham and to Sinai. They do need to consider the big picture. They also need to consider how their own generation fits into that picture. I think Moses recognizes the need every generation has for their own experience with God. We need to understand that we fit into a past context, but we cannot live in the past. I think about that sometimes in relation to my own denomination that I grew up in. We are quite proud of our missionary history. We have great history. And I love it. I love recalling it, and I love retelling it. But then I have to ask, "What is our present experience?" How has our generation experienced God? And are we still the same people? Are we still committed to the authority of God's Word and the gospel of Jesus Christ? Do we have our own stories of faithfulness, of proclamation, of supernatural victory? Are we seeing communities and peoples come to Christ through the work of God by the labor of our generation? It might not be as fantastic as the Exodus out of Egypt, not much is. But do we have our Sihon and Og? Do we have our more present victories and present experience with God as we faithfully follow him?

Moses reminds this second generation of Israelites of the work that God has just done among them. They do need to remember the Exodus. They also need to experience their own stories of "God with us." The defeat of Sihon and Og, that is not their parents' story. That is their story. But they are not to rest on those two victories. There is still more work to do. They still need to cross the Jordan river. Moses is saying, "Look at what God has promised our fathers. And look at what God has just done for us and through us. Let's not forget our purpose and settle down here. Keep it going. The mission is still ahead of you. It is not your father's calling. It is yours. God is at work among you. Keep going!"

This historical prologue connects this generation of Israel to the bigger historical story going back hundreds of years to the promises of Abraham, while also reminding them of their own recent, personal history with God.

## *3 Stipulations (5:6-21; 12:1-26:19)*

After the historical prologue, Moses goes over the covenant stipulations. Chapters 4-11 reflect on covenant obedience with an emphasis on the ten commandments. These are the basic commands of the mosaic covenant. We then dive into a large section of legal code starting in 12:1 and continuing all the way through the end of chapter 26. These are detailed covenant stipulations of Deuteronomy. Alright, where are we? So far, we have covered the first three elements of the suzerain-vassal treaty form in correct order: the title, the historical prologue, and the stipulations. The remaining elements are also there. They are just not in order.

*7 Curses and 6 Blessings (27:15-26; 28:3-14)*

So, after the list of detailed stipulations, we have a list of covenant curses in 27:15-26, followed by a list of covenant blessings in 28:3-14. We will consider these more closely later. For now, we recognize that the giving of specific blessings and curses follows the covenant form that the Israelites would expect.

*4 Regular reading and Deposition (31:10; 31:26)*

A specific command for regular reading is given in 31:10,

At the end of every seven years, at the time of the year of remission of debts, at the Feast of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place which he will choose, you shall read this law in the front of all Israel in their hearing.

This does not mean to imply that the Israelites are only to read Deuteronomy once every seven years. In 6:6-7 Moses says,

“These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up.”

And a special command is given to the king in 17:18-19.

Now it shall come about when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. It shall be with him and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and these statutes,

In the most fundamental building block of society, the family, parents are to read the Torah, to know the Torah, and to teach it to their children. Also, at the highest level of society, the king is to write out for himself a copy of the law. This is not the work of a scribe. He doesn't get to farm it out. He is supposed to do it himself. He is to have his own personally written out scroll. And it is to be written with the oversight or witness of the Levitical priests to ensure the integrity of the written word. The king is to know this law, to read it, so that he can observe it all the days of his life.

So, the commanded reading of once every seven years is not the way the people learn the words of Torah. That begins in the home and is a commitment of every level of leader from parent to king. The communal reading of the law is a ceremonial affirmation by the whole community of the centrality of this law to all belief and order in Jewish society.

Moses also commands the deposition of this law in 31:26, saying, “Take this book of the law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God that it may remain there as a witness against you.” Apparently, the original scrolls of Torah were not kept inside the ark of the covenant but beside the ark of the covenant. The stone tablets containing the ten commandments were kept in the ark as representative of the whole covenant.

The scrolls kept by the ark of the covenant in the holy of holies would not have been the only copies. For instance, we have already read, the King was to make his own copy to have in his possession so that he could read and study and obey.

*5 Witnesses (30:19 and 32:1)*

Now, we have not seen a call to witnesses in our major covenants so far from Adam to Noah to Abraham to Moses at Sinai. We do not expect to see a call to witnesses in the Bible, like we see in other ancient covenants, because those witnesses were always a myriad of gods and goddesses called to witness to covenant between king and vassal. The one true God is his own witness. There are no gods and goddesses to call. So, it is interesting here in Deuteronomy that God goes ahead and fills out anyway all the expected elements of covenant form by calling witnesses. We just read that the words of the law are themselves a witness. But heaven and earth are also symbolically called as witnesses. We see this in 30:19,

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants by loving the LORD your God, by obeying his voice, and by holding fast to Him.

The call of witnesses is repeated at the beginning of the poem in 32:1, "Give ear, O heavens, and let me speak; and let the earth hear the words of my mouth."

So, we see that God through Moses intentionally included all the elements of an ancient near eastern suzerain-vassal treaty form in the book of Deuteronomy. Recognition of the form helps us to understand various literary elements that make up Deuteronomy. The structure of the book, however, does not follow a treaty form. So, we haven't yet figured out our structure. It is not based on the discourses. It is not based on the treaty form. So, let's move on to one more literary feature of the book, chiasm.

### 3. Chiasm (*Literary Structure of Deuteronomy*)

Duane Christensen addresses in depth the chiastic structure of Deuteronomy in the *Word Biblical Commentary* of Deuteronomy published in 2002.<sup>2</sup> Recognizing a five-part chiastic structure has enabled me personally to really get my hands around this complex book. And we have talked about chiasm a lot throughout this series, but I'll repeat the definition for anyone who may be jumping into these lessons right here at the beginning of Deuteronomy. Chiasm is one of the parallel structures loved by the writers of both Old and New Testament. Western education heavily focuses on linear outlines. We do everything in order. Westerners are taught to structure everything as I, II, III, IV with linear subheadings. So, we might have IA. IB. IC. IIA. IIB. III. IVA. IVB. IVC. and so on. Everything moves in a straight line. This is not true for a lot of non-Western peoples. And it certainly wasn't true of the writers of Bible.

In a chiastic structure, the first element parallels the last element, the second element parallels the second to last element, the third element parallels the third to last element, and so on, sometimes with a central element that is not paired, but not always. John F. Kennedy left us with a famous chiasm. It is very simple.

A "Ask not what your country can do  
B for you –  
B ask what you  
A' can do for your country,"

So, the pattern is your country, you, you, your country. So, your country is paralleled on the outside frames, the beginning and the end, and you is the parallel on the inside frames.

How does this pattern work as an overall structure of Deuteronomy? As we have already stated, one of the things you notice when reading through Deuteronomy is a movement from one type of literature to another. When you start reading Deuteronomy, you are reading historical narrative. But then in chapter 4, the reading gets more difficult. It is not narrative anymore. You have just moved into theological exhortation. It is like the difference when listening to a preacher when he moves from giving theological explanation to telling a supporting story or illustration. The story is a lot easier to listen to and to follow. We love stories. We follow narrative naturally. It seems like our brains are wired for it. But theological explanation is harder to get our minds around. It is harder to

<sup>2</sup> Along with the five-part chiasm recommended here, Christensen points out a possible seven-part "menorah pattern" observed by C. J. Labuschagne by dividing B and B' one more time.

- A Opening narrative: Moses looks backward Deut 1–3
- B Opening prophetic sermon Deut 4
- C The Horeb covenant Deut 5–11
- X The lawcode: statutes and stipulations Deut 12–26
- C' The Moab covenant Deut 27–29
- B' Concluding prophetic sermon Deut 30
- A' Concluding narrative: Moses looks forward Deut 31–34<sup>2</sup>

follow. We notice another big change after the theological exhortation in chapter 12. All of the sudden, we find ourselves in the middle of legal code. And that runs for 15 chapters. But then we find ourselves back in theological exhortation, and we finally end back in narrative.

#### **Simplified five-part chiasm**

A Historical Prologue	1-3
B Theological Exhortation	4-11
X Covenant stipulations	12-26
B' Theological Exhortation	27-30
A' Historic transition	31-34

These different genres in Deuteronomy form a simple chiastic pattern. We start and end with historical narrative. That is the A and A' of our outline. It is the outer frame. A is chapters 1-3 at the beginning. This is our historical prologue, explaining how we have gotten this generation to the plains of Moab on the wrong side of the Jordan river. At the end of Deuteronomy, we have A'. That is chapters 31-34, which are also historical narrative but not giving us more prologue. A' is describing the historical transition from first generation to second generation, from Moses to Joshua.

One of the interesting features of chiasm is that you can read the two parallel sections back to back, and the text makes complete sense. So, if you want to take an easy beginning approach to Deuteronomy, just read the beginning and end. Read chapters 1-3 and then skip to the end and read 31-34 as though these chapters are all one story. And you will not feel like you missed anything in the narrative. It just continues on smoothly. And you get a good overview of the story of Deuteronomy. You will also notice some repetition of ideas that tie the two sections together. For example, A and A' both refer to the fact that Moses has been told he cannot enter the promise land. At the beginning, in chapter 3, Moses mentions that the people share some blame for this, but in chapter 32, God lays the blame squarely on Moses.

The second two parallel sections are theological exhortation and explanation. B is chapters 4-11 and B' is 27-30. Both sections have as a main theme the call to listen and love. B develops that theme of listen and love with a focus on the ten commandments and what should be learned from the period of wandering in the desert. B' develops the theme of listen and love while addressing the tension between blessing and curse, life and death, obedience and disobedience.

You can follow the same suggestion as with A and A' by studying section B, chapters 4-11, and then skipping the middle part of Deuteronomy to pick up at B' in chapter 27. The text flows quite naturally from the end of 11 which has a command to declare blessing and curse on Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal to the beginning of 27 which starts with the same command about blessing and curse on Gerizim and Ebal. It is as though you have not missed anything. The narrative picks right back up, though there is added information. We get the actual curses and blessings that are to be proclaimed. These parallel sections both issue a call to obedience as central to life for Israel and both include reference to the great commandment. In section B we have the Shema, the central prayer of Judaism, in Deuteronomy 6:4-5,

Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

But then in B', in Deuteronomy 30:6, Moses repeats the command, telling about a new work God will do some time in the future,

Moreover the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.

If you really want to get into the thought of Deuteronomy, I suggest taking one of these two sections to study. Section B, chapters 4-11, is 8 chapters long. That is a significant amount of theological exhortation to chew on. When we try to study all of a book, it can be too much at once. If you really



want to get Deuteronomy, you will need to divide and conquer. Start with a smaller section to study, then give yourself a break. So, chapters 4-11 is a great place to start. We will focus on this section in our next lesson.

Now to section x, the central section. I like labeling central sections of chiasm that have no corresponding parallel section with an x. In Deuteronomy, chapters 12-26 are our x, the center of the structure. And with the constant call to listen and love, we need to know exactly what it is we are supposed to listen to. What are the specific commands? How are we to obey? A and A' provide the historical context and situation. B and B' exhort us and provide explanation on how we are to think about law and obedience and relationship with God. X, the central section, gives us specific practical commands to follow.

### **Conclusion**

We have addressed three different literary features of Deuteronomy. And we have gone through the book quickly three times. And here is my recommendation, putting all this together, on how to view the book. The literary device of chiasm creates a structure for the book that helps us to see how the different parts fit together. The beginning and end are historical narrative, the two parts of the inner frame provide us with theological exhortation to examine. And the central section adds to the law code of Israel, furthering our understanding of God's civil, ceremonial, and moral expectations for his people. Now, as we study through Deuteronomy, we are going to see that inside of these sections we have more chiasm. Chiasm is a significant structural device for Deuteronomy.

Adding to the chiastic structure, we recognize that the form of the Deuteronomy is ancient near eastern treaty. Interestingly, the treaty form used is not from the first millennium. From the time of King David on, near eastern treaties uncovered by archaeology contained a significantly reduced set of only four elements: only title, witnesses, stipulations, and curses. The three elements that dropped out were historical prologue, a command for regular reading and deposition and blessing. It does not speak to relationship. It does not care whether you read it. It does not offer any positive incentive. So, this first millennium form is not a very nice covenant form. And it is not the form we see in the Bible. Why is that significant? Well one reason it is significant is that scholars critical of the Bible and of Mosaic authorship claim that Deuteronomy was written much later than the book itself claims. Instead of coming at the beginning of Israel's history and prophesying Israel's failure to be true to God, leading to eventual exile, critical scholars claim that Deuteronomy was written around the time of the curse, the time of exile. That is much later. That is around 600 BC. So, it is not a prophecy but an explanation. If all of this critical scholarship which argues this really late date of Deuteronomy is true, then the authors of Deuteronomy accomplished an amazing feat of historical fiction by writing Deuteronomy according to a form that had not been in use for hundreds of years. The bias of critical scholars against potential prophecy really comes out in this late dating of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy fits the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium. The background of Deuteronomy is a 2<sup>nd</sup> millennial suzerain-vassal treaty. We have no real reason to believe that it wasn't written then. It really seems to be showing a presupposition of critical scholars that you cannot have prophecy. And since Deuteronomy speaks of a future king of Israel before a time of kingship, and since Deuteronomy speaks even further down the line to exile, critical scholarship starts with this assumption, it must have been written later and then they try to argue from there why they believe it was written latter. They are predisposed to their own argument. But if we drop out that presupposition that prophecy can't happen and we look at the form of Deuteronomy, then we have to be honest – it fits the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium. It is using a 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium suzerain-vassal form.

More importantly for us who already accept Moses as the author, the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium suzerain-vassal form helps us to recognize the literary form that Moses was using. And so, we can interpret better what we see in Deuteronomy. For example, we should understand the blessing and curse sections as part of a covenant between a great king and a vassal people. The blessings are not absolute promises for every individual member of the community. The laws of compassion in other parts of the law for

those who are poor or sick presuppose that even when the nation is under a period of blessing, individuals in the community may still suffer hardship. You will still have the poor and sick with you. The blessings are given to the community as a whole and will be the experience of faithful members of the community, but the promise of blessings does not preclude the reality of suffering even among the faithful. This is a serious interpretive mistake made by the prosperity gospel when interpreting wrongly the promises of blessing and curse, because they don't understand them as part of a suzerain-vassal covenant. Looking at a blind man, Jesus' disciples asked, "Who sinned, was it this man or his parents?", Jesus answered, "Neither, but it was that the works of God might be displayed in him." Suffering is not always the result of a lack of faith in the promises of God. We may be involved in a plan that God is working out. That is the whole story of Job. Blessing and curse are not strict formulas applied to faith and obedience, but the promise of God for the whole community in light of ongoing covenant obedience or disobedience. This is just one example of how we need to understand these elements of covenant in their own covenant context in order to rightly interpret theme.

Recognizing that Deuteronomy is describing the making of a covenant also challenges us to consider how this covenant relates to the covenant cut at Mt. Sinai. Way back in lesson 6 on Isaac and Jacob, I quoted from the prologue of a 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium treaty between the Hittite suzerain Mursillis and his vassal Duppi-Tessub of Amurru. Duppi-Tessub's father had died, and so, the great king Mursillis invited the new vassal king Duppi-Tessub to renew covenant. Back in that lesson, I taught that we should view the covenant of Isaac and Jacob as renewal of the covenant with Abraham. Since then, I have read a distinction made by my seminary professor Dr. Niehaus. He would say that Isaac and Jacob did not renew covenant but reconfirmed covenant. And I think he is right. I think this is a helpful distinction. Isaac and Jacob recommitted themselves to the covenant made with Abraham without adding new stipulations to the covenant and without going through a required ceremony of cutting covenant.

Dr. Niehaus points out two covenant renewal ceremonies in Scripture. Noah was instructed to renew the common grace covenant between God and all mankind after the flood. This was a renewal of the adamic covenant which included additional stipulations, listed in Genesis 9, and required a new cutting of covenant ceremony. And there was even a new sign of the rainbow. The second example of covenant renewal in the Bible is here in Deuteronomy. This covenant is not separate from the covenant made to Israel at Sinai, but it is also more than a repetition or a recommitment to that covenant. There are some new stipulations here that were not given to the previous generation. And there is the requirement of a special cutting ceremony. This cutting ceremonial does not happen on the plains of Moab. It is going to happen once they go into the land. But God uses already here the language of cutting covenant in Deuteronomy 29:1 when he says, "These are the words of the covenant which the LORD commanded Moses to make (that is, in Hebrew, "to cut") with the sons of Israel in the land of Moab." So, we have here the language of cutting covenant but we also have a command in 27:6 to hold off the ceremony until they get to Gerizim and Ebal, and they state the blessings and the curses, and then they have a ratification of covenant, a cutting of covenant with sacrifice. And that is going to be in Joshua chapter 8.

Considering the relationship between this covenant and covenant at Sinai gets us back to our consideration of the title of Deuteronomy. We can see that Deuteronomy is not a second law in the sense that it is something new and apart from the first law given at Mt. Sinai. It is also not merely a repeated law. It is not a repetition of the law of Sinai. There is new information here and a new ceremony required. Each successive generation will need to be challenged to recommit to the mosaic covenant. And that is true even of us today in the new covenant. Every generation needs to recommit to the new covenant. But the successive old covenant generations and our successive new covenant generations, we don't add new material or a new ceremony to the covenant. We recommit. Deuteronomy is something more. It is a formal renewal of covenant with the second generation out of Egypt that includes additional stipulations, a formal covenant declaration, and a

ceremonial requirement. This renewal of covenant becomes part of the legal package, so together with the covenant of Sinai, we have the Mosaic covenant.<sup>3</sup> It is added into and becomes an essential part of Torah, which in the whole is the covenant of Moses.

In addition to chiasm as the literary structure of Deuteronomy and suzerain-vassal treaty as the literary form of Deuteronomy, we recognize the literary style of Deuteronomy as a series of speeches from Moses that set the tone and the voice of the book. This book is a personal communication from the faithful leader of Israel as his life and ministry come to an end. Moses challenges this younger generation of Israelites to hear and obey. Love God with all your heart, soul, and strength. This is your life. The book then ends with a record of Moses' death and with the people on the wrong side of the Jordan river. And though it seems like a strange ending, leaving us here has the effect of challenging every generation of readers with the responsibility to listen and love. It begs a certain set of questions. This call is not for your fathers. This call is for you. You must answer these questions and act on your answers. Who is your God? Who are you? What is your mission? And what are you going to do?

### Reflection Questions

1. In this lesson, we gave focus to the beginning and end of Deuteronomy. As you scan through chapters 1-3, what stands out to you as important or confusing or strange?
2. As you scan through chapters 31-34, what stands out to you as important or confusing or strange?
3. Michael recommends viewing the structure of Deuteronomy chiastically. In chiasm, you can often read from one parallel section to the next without losing the thought. Test this with Deuteronomy. Section A is Deuteronomy chapters 1-3 and A' is chapters 31-34, so read the end of the chapter 3 and then jump over and read the beginning of chapter 31. Does the narrative seem to flow smoothly to you from 1-3 to 31-34?
4. What is the narrative of Deuteronomy? How did Numbers end? How does Joshua begin? And what story does Deuteronomy tell in between these two more narrative books?
5. Test the parallelism of B and B'. Section B is Deuteronomy 4-11 and B' is 27-30. So, read the end of chapter 11 and the beginning of chapter 27. Does the thought seem to you to flow smoothly from 4-11 into 27-30?
6. Consider Moses' poem in Deuteronomy 32. Start with the introduction before the poem in 31:24-30 and then the conclusion after the poem in 32:44-47. What stands out to you? Do you notice any repeated phrases in these two sections? Do you notice anything about the order of the repeated phrases?
7. What stands out to you as important or significant in the poem of chapter 32, particularly in regard to these three essential questions:
  - a. Who is God? (How does Moses refer to God in this poem?)
  - b. Who am I? (What does Moses say about the Israelites?)
  - c. What is our mission? (Does Moses even address the mission of the Israelites in this poem?)

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<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey J. Niehaus. *Biblical Theology, Volume 2, The Special Grace Covenants, Old Testament*. (Wooster, Ohio: Weaver Book Company, 2017) 109-110. Also, Niehaus. *Biblical Theology, Volume 1, The Common Grace Covenants*. (2014) 212.