

Deuteronomy: Introduction: Content, Structure, and Themes

Session 1; Dr. Cynthia Parker

This is Dr. Cynthia Parker and her teaching on the book of Deuteronomy. This is session 1: Introduction: Content, Structure, and Themes.

Introduction

Thank you for joining me. We are doing a lecture series on the book of Deuteronomy. My name is Cindy Parker, I am a professor at Biblical Theological Seminary, and Deuteronomy is one of my all-time favorite books. I know a lot of people have preconceived ideas about Deuteronomy. Lots of times when I'm at a cafe, and I'm writing or working on grading papers, and people ask me what I'm working on, I know for a fact that if I say Deuteronomy, it's a conversation-stopper. People tilt their heads, lift up an eyebrow and look at me like, why would you spend any time studying Deuteronomy? Sometimes people go: I don't even know what Deuteronomy is, and I say, "Well, it's the fifth book in the Pentateuch." Then there's a pause, awkwardly, and I'll say, "Well, you know, one of the books that's considered to be a book of Moses." Then Moses usually is something that people can grab onto. When people think of Deuteronomy, they think of laws and dusty, dirty books, you to blow the dust off the cover. There's no excitement to engage in the book.

But I love this book. Let me tell you why. I think that the book of Deuteronomy is one of the hearts of the Old Testament. It presents themes for us that show up throughout the whole rest of the Old Testament. The book of Deuteronomy is one of the four Old Testament books that is quoted the most in the New Testament. So, even for people during the time of Jesus and after Jesus,

Deuteronomy was essential. They understood it. They were living it. They were breathing it. It says something there is engaging about the book.

I think that we should spend some time trying to hear this book. And I think that we in modern culture have a lot that we can learn from the book of Deuteronomy. We just need to engage the book on its terms, not on our own terms. So, considering as we do with lots of the Hebrew Bible, the book was not written to us as the modern-day audience. The book is written for us. We have a lot that we can engage and a lot that we can use to bring into our modern-day culture. In fact, I think the book of Deuteronomy will show us what the heart of God is like, what God wants the heart of his people to be like, and what a biblical view of investing in, and building a good community is all about. But we need to do this on terms of Deuteronomy. So, we will be doing that over the next few lectures, kind of getting our context and our bearings for the book of Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy's Place in the Pentateuch and Hinge to the Historical Books

So, just as an introduction, let's engage some of the things that Deuteronomy has for us. So, by the time we get to Deuteronomy as we're reading through the Pentateuch, if you're reading straight from Genesis to Deuteronomy, you will find that the narrative of Deuteronomy slows down drastically. So, if you've been reading since Genesis, you've been taking big huge gigantic strides through time, through space even. The narrative has been moving from Mesopotamia down into the land, down into Egypt and back. We've been following generations after generations of people in very short amounts of time in Scripture. So we have big huge strides when it comes to a narrative, and as soon as we get to Deuteronomy, we have to put on the brakes because the entire book is built as if it's happening in one spot, over how long of a time, we don't

know, but it's built as a series of sermons given to the people right on the edge of the Jordan River. So, we have a time frame that slows down. So, we need to read Deuteronomy in a whole different way.

We're going to find that this book of Deuteronomy is also the turning point for us in the Pentateuch. So, we have the Pentateuch books, or we've been following these narratives of the Patriarchs, and now we're going to jump into what happens when this community of people goes into the land that God has promised. So, the book of Deuteronomy acts as a hinge book for us so that it takes us from the Pentateuch into the historical narratives. It takes us from the stories of the Patriarchs into stories of what it is like for the nation of Israel living in a land-building society and having a kingdom. The book of Deuteronomy is going to act as our transition point for us.

Deuteronomy: Past as Giving Perspective on Present and Future

We are also going to find that Deuteronomy is going to make use of a technique that we find throughout the whole Old Testament but it's something we should be aware of. So, Deuteronomy looks to the past as a way to explain present-day events as a way to look forward to the actions in the future. This is a very Middle Eastern way of thinking. Middle Eastern now, in modern-day communities as well as in the biblical time, people face their past. In fact, a friend of mine in Jerusalem always says this to groups of students who go to talk to him. He will look at everyone in the room and say, "There is no thirty-year-old Israeli, and there is no thirty-year-old Palestinian." And there's always a moment of pause and confusion as people look out the window and say, "I'm pretty sure someone is 30 out there." And he will say, "No, no one is 30 years old. Everyone is 3000 years old." So, he is engaging this idea that everyone has a mindset facing the past.

So, this is a very biblical thing, and Deuteronomy does this. It's a little counterintuitive for us. If you are in North America or Europe, there is something for us. We love to face the future. We glance over our shoulder from time to time to engage the past or maybe look at the past, but we tend to think, I am my own individual. I will make my own life for myself. I am going to run and pursue the future and make that into what I want.

That is not the way that biblical writers or biblical audiences shaped their worldview. They faced the past because when you look at the past, you're looking at something certain. This has already happened. I already know what it is. The actions of people who have come before me help explain who I am right here, right now. It's because of the past that I am where I am. And I'll glance over my shoulder and think about the future, but I'll back into the future. I'll walk backward this way but take my past with me.

So, we need to think about that with Deuteronomy because that is part of the technique of Deuteronomy. There is a repetition of remember the things that have come before you because that explains your present in the here and now, which will then dictate the way you should be reacting to things in the future.

Deuteronomy on the Edge/Border of the Land: Homecoming & Homesteading

So, then we have our last thing, we have people on the border. Now I think this part is really interesting because the way the book of Deuteronomy is written is everyone's been wandering through the wilderness with Moses. They arrive right at the edge of the Jordan River. Moses gets up to give a set of sermons to the people, and the people are looking into the land that Moses keeps saying, "God is giving that land to you as an inheritance." They're looking at the land, but they're not in the land. So, their immediate experience is wandering through the

wilderness, but they're getting ready to transition into something new. So, they're people on the border.

They're also a people on the border because you have stories of that land being the promised land that God promised to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. In a way, you feel like your homecoming; you're coming into this place, and you've heard stories about the stories of your great patriarchs take place in this land. And so, there's a homecoming. There's a sense that we belong here. But there's also a sense of homesteading. Like we've never been here before. I don't know what it looks like beyond the one hill that I can see in front of me. And so, we're going into this place to create something new, and that place will dictate and demand that we build a whole different type of society than what we have seen this whole time we've been wandering through the wilderness.

So this sense of being on the border, it's a sense of being on the cusp of something new. That is a frightening place to be, and it's also a very exciting place to be. I like to explain Deuteronomy is a little bit like a coach bringing together the team into the locker room at halftime. They've already been out wandering. They've been doing this thing called life together as a nation, with a covenant with God. There was one previous failed attempt to go into the land. And they failed, and because of that, they've been wandering through the wilderness. And so, now we have this big pep talk by Moses. Come on, people, pull it together. Here is your second opportunity to go in. Except this time, when you go in, you need to remember.

Remembering in Deuteronomy

And so the book of Deuteronomy echoes over and over and over again the word "remember." Remember who you are as God's chosen people. Remember who your God is. And remember that He's given this land to you. So, basically, it's

Moses taking his team and saying, let's face the past. Let's remember what we have already learned, and let's take that and go with that into this brand-new place that we have.

The Good Land as a Potential Eden

We're also going to find that part of the pep talk is this great kind of proactive imagination of what this land can be. So, when they go into this land, what is the potential that is here? And so, one of the themes I like to bring out in the book of Deuteronomy is there's a very strong connection to the creation narratives in Genesis 1 and 2. So, if we remember the very beginning part of the story, these creation narratives are all about what God's design looks like? When God designs from the beginning, what is the order and the structure that he looks at to say? That is so good.

So Deuteronomy borrows some of that creation language and says, you know what, this land you're going into, it has that kind of potential to be very good. The land has an opportunity to be another Garden of Eden.

Deuteronomy does not say this land is the Garden of Eden. It's not connecting those in that way. It's not saying this land is where Eden happened. It's not that. It's saying this land has kind of potential, so just as God created an amazing place that was filled with animals, with vegetation, it was the right kind of context, and then he takes people and puts them in that context, and says invest in this context in such a way to make me proud and make me happy. And in that context, God dwells with people.

So too, this land. It's already filled. It has vegetation. It has everything that you need. Go in, take care of it, manage it in such a way that I can dwell with you in harmony, and we can both look at that together and say, "That's so good."

So, Deuteronomy has this casting a vision for the people who are stuck at the border on the outside getting ready to go into the land.

Moses' Activities

Now there are a couple of things we're going to find as basic content that is in the book of Deuteronomy. So, we're going to see that there's a whole set of sermons, and we have a couple of pieces of poetry and a couple of really great songs, old Hebrew songs. And within that content, we'd find the final activities of Moses. So, we were introduced to Moses back in Exodus. We've been following the deeds of Moses, his leadership abilities, and the way he interacts with the people all through Exodus and Numbers and portions of Leviticus. And now, we get to Deuteronomy, and we're catching the very last part of Moses' activities in life.

Transferring Leadership from Moses to Joshua

We're going to find that there's a transfer of leadership because Moses is not going into the land with the people; Joshua is. And so, there's the official transfer of leadership where this anointing of leadership goes from Moses to Joshua. Then Joshua is going to take us into the land and will lead us from the book of Joshua through into the rest of the historical narratives. So, we have that transfer leadership that's going to happen.

Explaining the Law

We have the writing down of discourse, or we could say the writing down of the explanation of the law. So, a portion of Deuteronomy, the purpose is to have Moses stand up and explain to the people. We received this law at Mount Sinai. What is this law going to mean for us as we become sedentary people in a given land that God has given to us? So, what does that mean? It's the explanation of the law. And that portion gets written down, or Deuteronomy tells

us that that portion will get written down. And then, of course, at the very end, our final chapter of Deuteronomy covers the final death of Moses.

God Themes: God as Caring Parent & Covenant Giver

Now, as far as themes, we just covered content; those are the types of things we're going to see in the book of Deuteronomy. For themes that we see, I'm going to divide these up into God themes, people of Israel themes, and land themes. So, of course, God is one of the primary characters in this book. So, what we're going to find out is that God acts like a caring parent. He is often described as the father of Israel. So, the Israelites are considered to be God's son. God is depicted as the caring parent. There are a majority of terms that refer to him as a father, but we will touch on a few that considered God to be a mother, kind of have the mother characteristics as well. So, we get this beautiful both father and mother caring for their child. So, we see this God as a parent. We also see that God is the giver of just laws.

Now, this is also something that I think is beautiful because we think of the law when people hear that word "law," and if you have a rebellious streak in you, which I have a rebellious streak in me, lots of us do; we think the laws are meant to be broken. But that's not law the way that the Hebrew Bible really speaks of law. Torah, law, it really should be translated into something closer to "teachings." What I like to say, although it's a little bit of a mouthful, is the law is God's best instructions for how to create flourishing humanity in the place He's given them to be. That's the Law. It's God's gift to his people. How do you succeed? How do you flourish as a human. These laws are the things to help you understand how to do that. So, God is the giver of just laws. So, one that creates equality among his people and one that looks out for nature, as well as for people.

We also learn that God is with his people and that there is a movement as the people move out of the wilderness into the land. God moves with his people. So, there's a relationship. It's a caring relationship that God has with his people. And we find God is the type of God who is willing to enter into a legal covenant with his people. So, you could call the signing of the covenant at Mount Sinai, some people think of it as a marriage contract; this God and his bride coming together. You can think of it as a family contract. This covenant portrays God as a father, and he creates a family relationship of sonship with his people. But it is remarkable that God enters into that kind of covenant connection with his people.

In fact, the idea that God enters into a covenant with his shows up, even just in the structure of the book of Deuteronomy, where the book itself seems to have a contractual structure to it, and we'll get to that in just a moment. So that's a really beautiful picture of God that we get in the book of Deuteronomy.

People of Israelites Themes

We also learn a few things about the Israelite people. So, we see that the people are expected to respond to this gracious and loving God. There is an expected response to it. So, yes, as Moses speaks to the people and they face their past, and they record and remember all the things God has done. They do that to explain why they are in the position they are right now and to demand a response. So, it's not just let's remember what God has done and just receive that grace. It's a receiving, and then, what is the proper way to love God in return?

So, if we're not acting to earn God's love, we've already received his love. We can see that in the past. But what is the way that we can respond in order to please him and to show our love for God?

So, they receive grace, but none of this is actually due to their own actions. So, this is another theme in Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy has a little tongue-in-

cheek aspect to it where it often speaks of "Don't think that all of these gifts and all these things that you have received, this great land that you're going into that has an Edenic potential, don't think that is due to anything you have done previously to earn it. It has nothing to do with you. In fact, you've been rather rebellious. You don't have the greatest of history, and yet, God is still here. God is still giving you something." But there is this recognition that you receive favor because God is faithful, but you're expected to respond to him in a certain way.

We also have this really nice theme of Israel and the nations. So, this book of Deuteronomy is written for the people. The whole structure of it is Moses giving sermons to the people, the pep talk to get them ready to go into the land. It's for them. It has a lot to do with their own history, their own narrative, and the God that they serve. Yet there is an undercurrent of other nations surrounding Israel. Israel is going to have a relationship with those other nations. And what is it? And so we see, in fact, we'll see in the first few chapters of Deuteronomy, that although God has chosen Israel, and although this book is focusing on the Israelites, God actually has his eyes on all people. And so, there is something about the responsibility that people have to respond to God, to be faithful to their covenant with God, that is actually for the benefit of the other surrounding nations. So, we'll see that as well.

The Land Theme

And then I would say the last and final theme that we're going to see in the book of Deuteronomy is the land. This "where," it matters. This is actually a really hard theme for people in modern-day contexts to grasp hold of, and understand the significance of, because if you live in modern society, maybe you drive to the store, maybe you control the air conditioning in your home, or you heat your home in the winter. We go to the grocery store, and we find produce from around the world, in the grocery store. Technology allows us to connect with people all

around the world. And in a way, for as wonderful as all of that is, I don't want to give up any of those privileges, but one of the challenges that brings is that it makes us less aware of the particularities of the exact place where we live.

So, in modern times, sometimes I ask students in my classroom. Do you know if the grocery store is uphill or downhill from your house? And unless you're actually walking to the grocery store, you probably have no idea if it's uphill or downhill. That is not at all the experience of ancient people.

People understood their land. They lived off of their land. Subsistence living meant that they needed to be intimately connected to every inch of soil because the produce that is produced by that soil or the watering holes in the wilderness where they can take their sheep and goats is their life force. They depend on knowing the land in great detail.

So, the land is another character in the Bible, and we often ignore it, and we pretend it's not there. We read over it as a backdrop, like it's just a screen in front of which the important action is happening. But the where is significant.

Now you probably actually know this intuitively because if I were to show you a picture of someone living in mountainous terrain, you would know their clothing is different. They probably eat a certain type of food. The activities they are engaged with during the year, be it hiking in the summer or skiing or snowboarding in the winter, are very different. The ability to get deep into the heart of the mountains is quite difficult. You don't connect very well with the outside world.

Now that would be very different from showing a picture of someone who lives on a coast or in a beach community. Their activities are just different; there's a lot more water, playing sports, sailboats or water skis, or scuba diving. There are beachfront communities that have a whole different vibe to them. The type of

cafes that they have are outside. Their connection to the outside world tends to be a little bit more open and broad. We know this intuitively; we just fail to take that back into the text with us.

And so part of what we need to do, as we study the book of Deuteronomy, is to study the land because the where actually matters a lot. So we'll look at a couple of maps, and I'll show you a couple of pictures to help us can engage with this place that the Israelites were told has the potential to be like an Eden. So these are the themes that we're going to go through.

Structure of Deuteronomy

Now, the structure of the book now we start to hit some complicated issues. I'll say one of the ways that people talk about structures is the way the book was designed, the writing down of the text, or even the authorship of the text, and these are very tricky things when it comes to Deuteronomy. A couple of them I'm going to save for another lecture. A lot of those questions related to authorship and the purpose of the text have a lot to do with the law code that is embedded in the heart of Deuteronomy. So, we'll talk about those issues later.

But when people think of the structure of Deuteronomy, how are we going to look at this big picture? How are we going to break it down and understand how it was knit together?

Well, there's no one right answer. There are a few different ways that you can break this down. So let me give you a few that are maybe some of the most popular that you'll find in most commentaries related to Deuteronomy.

Covenantal Structure of Deuteronomy

So, the first one I've already mentioned, I mentioned it back when we were talking about themes of Deuteronomy. That would be a covenant. So the idea is

that God has entered a covenant with his people. So, we can look at the book of Deuteronomy and say it is structured like a covenant.

Now maybe you ask, how do we know that? Let me show you a slide and give you a moment to read it. And I bet without me actually telling you what kind of ceremony is happening, I bet you could read these words and read about the actions of the people involved in this covenant or agreement that is being made, and I bet you could tell me what is happening. And I purposely chose one that has unusual, maybe not traditional language.

So, what would you say? "I blank take you blank as my friend and love." Already just with those first few words, I bet most of you were thinking, it is a marriage. And then you get down to the bottom, and it's "I give you this ring as a symbol," and we all go. Oh yeah. I know what that is. We exchanged rings. This sounds like a marriage ceremony. You would be right. And you did that just within a couple of seconds because that formula is so intuitive to you. You understand what that means just by looking at it.

Ancient Near Eastern Treaties and Deuteronomy's Treaty Form

Deuteronomy is very similar. We have Hittite and Assyrian treaties that have been found. So, treaties that have been written down, and as we've been able to go through and study, the Hittite treaties are significantly older than the Assyrian treaties, they're not exactly the same, but we're finding similar patterns.

So, what we tend to find is there's a preamble, an introduction. This is what this treaty is all about. These are the parties who are involved.

We have a historical prologue. Usually, that talks about the person who is the greater partner in this treaty; these are the things that a person has already done. So, let's say a king and a city. So, the suzerain or the king, the powerful, and the city, which would be the vassal or the less powerful. In that prologue, you

would have the king saying everything he has already done to set up this covenant.

Then we will have stipulations. This would be what are the responsibilities of both parties. So, the king or the suzerain, what does he promise to give? So, he promises to send his army if that city's ever in need, to redistribute food if that city is in need of food. There's a certain amount of support of leadership that is promised. Likewise, and usually, the burden here falls on the city or the vassal in the agreement. So, the weaker of the parties is then saying, I agree to give you so much percentage of taxes. We promise to send so many people to war with you. We promise to send a daughter into the harem of the king, or there are all kinds of stipulations.

Then there are blessings and curses. So, these are the things that happen if this covenant is broken. Or if this covenant is fulfilled, these are the blessings that you get. So, these would be the consequences of your actions.

There's usually a set of witnesses, be it judges, or other kings, sometimes the gods are worshipped. You could say, the heavens, the stars of the heavens. There are always witnesses that are involved.

And then there is some sort of ratification ceremony. So, this is, when everyone gets together to remember that we've entered into this covenant, to remember the stipulations, to remember the blessings. Let's refresh our memory here.

So, these are basically the patterns that we find in a lot of covenants that has spanned throughout hundreds of years in the ancient Near East.

When we get to the book of Deuteronomy, we find that it follows this pattern very nicely. So, the structure of Deuteronomy is set up so that it looks like an ancient Near Eastern covenant. It doesn't match exactly the Hittite nor the Assyrian treaties, but it's close enough that you know it's borrowing from the surrounding culture to say this book is just like the covenant that God has with his people.

And so, we get the preamble, the introduction. We get the historical prologue. What has God already done for his people? What are the events that have come before? We get chapters 5 through 26, which are the lists of stipulations that would be the embedded law code. What is expected? When God expects a response from his people, what is it expected?

Then we're going to find that we get the blessings and the curses. When we get to chapter 32, we find that there are witnesses that are called to watch this covenant between God and his people.

And we do have a ratification ceremony. So, this one comes a little bit out of order, but it is still there in the book of Deuteronomy. So, if we were looking at how we can understand the big picture of this book, we can understand it as a covenant.

Deuteronomy as a Set of Sermons

We can also understand it as a set of sermons. And this is something I mentioned too, this goes back to the idea that Moses is standing at the edge of the land, at the Jordan River, with the people, and he gets up and he speaks. There are some words and phrases that are repeated throughout--sermons are repetitive. They are influential; it's a rhetorical type of speech that builds interest in the people and repeats very significant ideas. We can break down the book of Deuteronomy into 5 different sermons. So, we could look at Deuteronomy and

say, let's go through this according to each sermon that Moses has. So, we find chapters 1 through 4, 5 through 11, 12 through 26, 27 to 30, and 31 to 34.

This same breakdown actually matches fairly well with the covenant way of breaking down the book as well. So the covenantal structure follows this structure as well. So, it's very similar.

Deuteronomy as Literature

We could also say instead of sermons; we can look at the book of Deuteronomy as literature, in which case it's very similar. In fact, I take the exact same breakdown of chapters; we just call them something different. So, based on the way I have got it outlined here, we see that chapters 1 and 4, and then chapters 31 to 34 are the outer frame. So, they set the entire context for the book. Chapters 5 to 11 and 27 to 30 could be the inner frame. Then the focus of the book, the whole reason of being for the book, is the law code here in chapters 12 through 26. This is the focus of the book. So, we have the book here, for this reason, to explain this law.

Summary Conclusion

So, you can see there are different ways we can break down the book. Similarities between all of them, for sure. The law code sits at the heart of the book, no matter which way we're going to break down and talk about the structure of the book.

But one thing we can say for sure, the organization of Deuteronomy is not haphazard. So there has been a very purposeful looking at the book and organization of material in order to craft something that is beautiful for the people to engage in. So, we don't want to lose sight of that because Deuteronomy is a very crafted, beautifully written book. The law chapters are at its core. As we go through our lectures, we're basically following this outline here. I might break

down chapters 1 and 3 and break those off a little bit from chapter 4, but we're going to engage the book in such a way that we end up focusing most of our time here in the law code in chapters 12 to 26.

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