

SESSION NINETEEN

INTRODUCTION TO DEUTERONOMY

Deuteronomy

I. INTRODUCTION

The Book of Deuteronomy does not represent an extended historical period of time in Israel's history, but rather a unique occasion on which Moses spoke to the new generation of Israelites immediately before their entrance into the land of Canaan. This address was delivered by Moses in the plains of Moab on the east side of the Jordan. The setting involves the people who are about to cross the river and conquer the land so that they may live therein and be blessed of God. However, the people need a good "sermon" at this point lest they think that they can relax their faith and obedience once they take the land.

Indeed, the book is very much sermonic. Deut 1:5 says, "*Across the Jordan in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to expound this law.*" This was more than a review of what the Law demanded; primarily this was motivational, revealing the heart of the Law and offering incentives to obey. True obedience must come out of love of YHWH (Deut 6:4-6), and without obedience, God's blessings will not come. In fact, disobedience will bring divine curses and even removal from the land. To enter the land is no guarantee of retaining the land; inheritance can be lost.

In the introduction, we might point out that critical scholarship is virtually unanimous in its denial of Mosaic authorship and attributing the book to an anonymous "deuteronomistic" historian of the 7th century.¹ A rebuttal to this theory will be presented separately [See the session on "The Deuteronomistic Theory"].

II. GENERAL COMMENTS

A. The Title

The present title of the book in our English version (Deuteronomy) has not always been how the book has been known. A common term for it as applied by the Jews was *ʿelleh haddʿbārīm* ("these are the words"), the first two words of this book in the Hebrew Bible. Sometimes the term *mišneh* has also been used for Deuteronomy (derived from 17:18 -- "a copy [מִשְׁנֵה] of this law").

¹Regarding the form of the book and parallels to Hittite suzerainty-vassal treaties of the 2nd millennium BC, see the class notes on Ex 19–24. Merrill (*Kingdom of Priests*, 81) observes,

"In the interest of defending a much later date for Deuteronomy, however, many scholars prefer to connect the form and content of Deuteronomy to Neo-Assyrian treaties of the seventh century. But a careful comparison of these treaties and the biblical texts reveal insurmountable problems for this interpretation. For example, blessing formulae are an integral part of both the Late Bronze treaties and the biblical texts, but are unattested in the Assyrian documents."

Cf. Moshe Weinfeld, "The Loyalty Oath in the Ancient Near East," *Ugarit-Forschungen* 8 (1976): 397.

The Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament produced in the 3rd century BC) mistakenly translated the phrase "a copy of this law" in 17:18 as *to deuteronomion touto*, i.e., 'this second (or repeated) law.' From this, the Latin Vulgate rendered the Greek noun as *deuteronomium* (from whence we get Deuteronomy), and the contents were regarded as a second law (*deuteros* = second; *nomos* = law).

Although the title arose from a mistaken translation of the Hebrew, it is not entirely inappropriate. The historical situation of the book involves the new generation of Israelites who have risen up in place of the Exodus generation that died off in the wilderness. Now Moses is calling this new generation to bind themselves in covenant to the Law.

B. The Tone of Deuteronomy

The book of Deuteronomy is not just a long elaboration of regulations for the covenant nation. Certainly, legislation is involved, but the book is mostly sermonic, i.e., a "persuasion" from the passing leader of the nation for God's people to obey Yahweh. This obedience that is envisioned must come from a heart that loves the LORD. J. A. Thompson has noted,

Deuteronomy is marked throughout by a spirit of urgency. The book comes even to the modern reader in much the same way as a challenging sermon, for it is directed towards moving the minds and wills of the hearers to decision: choose life, that you and your descendants may live (30:19). The work as a whole was evidently intended to give Israel instruction and education in her faith and to press home to her the demands of her faith.²

III. THE ISSUE OF DATE AND AUTHORSHIP

The determination of the date and authorship of a biblical book is what scholars call "higher criticism." In and of itself, this is an appropriate exercise, because we must know the author and date to correctly understand the historical situation in which the book was written and the original audience who received it. Unfortunately, the Book of Deuteronomy has been one of the most contested books of the Old Testament in this regard. Evangelicals generally hold that Moses was the author of the book (with the possible exception of his death notice at the end), whereas critical scholars vehemently deny Mosaic authorship. Harrison notes, "The view that Deuteronomy was substantially Mosaic in origin was, with a few exceptions, held by both Jews and Christians until the nineteenth century."³ Over the past two hundred years, however, the traditional opinion has been under attack.

A. The Challenge of Critical Scholarship

1. DeWette, Wilhelm M. L. (1805)

DeWette challenged the traditional position by asserting that Deuteronomy was composed in the time of Josiah (late 7th century BC), being the book that Hilkiah the priest found in the Temple following the many years of apostasy under the evil kings Manasseh and Amon. "*When they were bringing out the money which had been brought into the house of the LORD,*

² J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary*, 12.

³ R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1969), 640.

Hilkiah the priest found the book of the law of the LORD given by Moses" (2 Chr 34:14; cf. 2 Kgs 22:8ff.).

2. Wellhausen, Julius

Following the conclusion of DeWette, Wellhausen popularized and gave the classic statement to the "documentary hypothesis." This theory is the result of the literary analysis approach to scripture which sought to analyze the literary strata behind the present form of the OT. This approach focused on the evolution of Israel's religion, eventually coming to a monotheistic form around 750 BC. Wellhausen's conclusion was that the present form of the OT was compiled from four primary sources: J, E, D and P. The "D" source was supposedly the Deuteronomic material which came after the "J" and "E" sources. Likewise, Wellhausen dated the "D" source to the time of Josiah (about 622 BC), so that the Pentateuch as a whole would have been compiled some time after 622 BC. Harrison describes the work of Wellhausen:

In consequence he regarded the Pentateuch as essentially of composite origin, consisting of a Jehovistic source (J), dated in the ninth century B.C.; an independent Elohist document (E), coming from the eighth century B.C.; the basic content of the book of Deuteronomy (D), which was assigned to the time of King Josiah (640/39 - 609 B.C.); and a Priestly source (P), from about the fifth century B.C. According to the process outlined in his book entitled *Die Komposition des Hexateuchs*, published in 1877, the Jehovistic author compiled a narrative document from the sources J and E, and this was supplemented by the addition of Deuteronomy in the time of Josiah.⁴

The position of Wellhausen regarding the JEDP theory may seem quite fanciful, but this theory has had a profound influence on Old Testament scholarship. The bottom line of the theory is a denial of Mosaic authorship for Deuteronomy (indeed, the whole Pentateuch) and a late dating of the book (7th century BC). The scholars Brown, Driver and Briggs who produced the famous Hebrew lexicon (1906) were proponents of this theory.

3. Other Attempts

Earlier critical scholars quite readily accepted the results of the JEDP theory and thus dated Deuteronomy to the 7th century BC (H. H. Rowley, for instance, suggested that Deuteronomy was written about 680 BC by a follower of Isaiah).⁵ Other suggestions have been made. W. F. Albright assigned the Song of Moses (Deut 32) to the time of Samuel.⁶ In the latter part of the 20th century, however, the tendency has been to see Deuteronomy as part of a much more extended literary endeavor known as the "Deuteronomistic History." This would comprise the material in Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, I & II Samuel, and I & II Kings. The idea is that all this material is written from the same viewpoint, a work that was edited and redacted over a long period of time. According to this theory, the book we now know as Deuteronomy is simply the end product of multiple redactions, with a final redaction of this material supposedly emerging in the period of the Babylonian exile (ca. 550 BC). Even more extreme are the results

⁴ Ibid., 21.

⁵ H. H. Rowley, *The Growth of the Old Testament*, 31.

⁶ W. F. Albright, *Vetus Testamentum*, IX, 1959.

of Pedersen and the Uppsala school who have concluded that the work reached its final form about 400 BC.⁷

B. Why A Challenge of Mosaic Authorship

Obviously, these scholars have gone to great extent in following these theories. However, there is a reasonable explanation for this. Wellhausen, and others like him, arose in the "scientific period" when the idea of the supernatural was being discarded in favor of scientific explanations. Thus, prophetic and supernatural suggestions were cast aside, and attempts were made to explain the evolutionary process of Israel's religion.

For the critics, Deuteronomy must be dated late because of many of the remarks that the book makes. For instance, the going into captivity of the nation, first by the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC, and then by the Southern Kingdom in 605-586 BC, is anticipated in Deut 29:28. The critics cannot accept that a book written in the 13th-15th century BC could accurately foretell events of the 8th-7th centuries. In other words, they have an anti-supernatural bias. Whoever wrote Deuteronomy had to do so when he had knowledge of these events of the 8th-7th centuries.

Gerhard von Rad, the famous German scholar, is a classic example of this very thing. He wrote:

The sermons in Deuteronomy are addressed to Israel in the form of words of Moses, now near to his death, when they arrived in the land of Moab after their wanderings. This fiction is maintained consistently throughout the whole of Deuteronomy. **But it really is a fiction.** In fact, these sermons are addressed to the Israel of the later period of the monarchy.⁸

He goes on to cite specific topics in Deuteronomy that involve later developments in Israel's history and which for him demand a later date for the book:

We need only consider what is said about the possibility of whole towns falling into apostasy (13:13ff.), the appearance of false prophets, the introduction of the economy, which compelled the old rules concerning the year of release to be reinterpreted (15:1ff.), the sad experiences underlying the law concerning the king and much else.⁹

Gerhard von Rad claims that the book is marked by a pronounced warlike spirit that he attributes to a band of Levites (p. 24). He concludes that a band of Levites, representative of this militant piety, wrote the main body of Deuteronomy in the reign of Josiah (prior to 622 BC) to awaken the spirit of the old religion of Yahweh which had succumbed to Canaanite religion. He even goes so far as to suggest one of the sanctuaries of Northern Israel (possibly Shechem or Bethel) as the book's place of origin (p. 26).

C. Arguments of Critical Scholarship

1. Centralization of worship

⁷ Pedersen, *Israel*, III-IV, 96.

⁸ Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy*, trans. Dorothea Barton (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966) [emphasis mine].

⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

Based on Deut 12:5, 11, 14, 18, 21, 26, Wellhausen argued that the author of Deuteronomy was aiming to institute a centralization of worship at Jerusalem. From this, he claims that such a view point would be most appropriate for a reform movement in Josiah's era.

Response: There is nothing in Deuteronomy to the effect that the central and solitary legitimate sanctuary was to be located in Jerusalem. Furthermore, the call for an altar on Mt. Ebal in Deut 27:1-8 totally undermines such reasoning. More recent critical scholars do not accept Wellhausen's view regarding Jerusalem.

2. Canaanite Prohibitions

Some have reasoned that the prohibitions of Deuteronomy (16:21ff. and 12:29ff.) regarding the Canaanite religious practices would be logically reasonable by an author in Josiah's day seeking to rid the nation of such influences.

Response: This really proves nothing, for such prohibitions are quite appropriate for the nation about to move into the land in Moses' day where Canaanites occupied. Moses was truly concerned that there be no admixture with Canaanite religious practices.

3. The Book Found by Hilkiah was Deuteronomy

The basic argument of the critics is that "the book of the law" found by Hilkiah the priest in Josiah's day (622 BC) was Deuteronomy (2 Kgs 22:8; 2 Chr 34:14). They assume that it must have been written shortly prior to this discovery.

Response: It is impossible to determine from the text either the length or the contents of the "book of the Torah." Furthermore, Deuteronomy could have been "found" in Josiah's reign but still written centuries earlier. Perhaps, this work was lost or neglected during all those years of Manasseh and Amon when idolatry reigned supreme.

4. The Predictive Elements

Since critical scholars deny the predictive elements of the book as part of their rejection of divine inspiration, they would naturally be inclined to date the book very late when such elements could be naturally explained (see comment above under "Challenge of Mosaic Authorship").

D. Defense of Mosaic Authorship

1. The Book's Claim

Deut 31:9 states, "*So Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests . . .*" (cf. 31:24; 1:5).

2. New Testament Citations

Acts 3:22 quotes Deut 18:15 and credits the statement to Moses (cf. 1 Cor 9:9).

3. Jesus Affirmed Mosaic Authorship

In Matt 19:8 in the discussion of divorce, Jesus credited Moses as the author of the divorce ordinance in Deut 24.

4. The 2nd Millennium Treaty Form

Meredith Kline has well argued that the book of Deuteronomy is in the form of a Near Eastern Suzerainty treaty. Furthermore, Kline has argued that there are distinctive differences between second and first-millennium BC treaty forms, which is significant seeing that Deuteronomy is of the earlier second-millennium type.¹⁰

E. The Record of Moses' Death

The final chapter detailing the death of Moses and the succession of Joshua was obviously not written by Moses. Jewish tradition asserts that Joshua added this section as a final tribute to a great man.

F. Conclusion

In keeping with the book's own testimony, Moses authored the book of Deuteronomy at the end of his life just before the Israelites crossed over the Jordan. This was after the Exodus generation had died off, since Deut 1:3 states that Moses' exposition was in the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month. The date that is assigned for the fortieth year depends on the date accepted for the exodus from Egypt. If 1446 BC is accepted as the date of the exodus (cf. 1 Kgs 6:1), then Deuteronomy would have been authored by Moses in the plains of Moab in the early months of 1406 BC.

IV. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO DEUTERONOMY

A. Introduction

Any attempt to study the historical background of Deuteronomy is dependent upon an accurate date of the event. According to Deut 1:3, Moses delivered the words to the nation in the 40th year, on the 1st day of the eleventh month. The identity of the 40th year, however, is dependent upon the date one accepts for the Exodus, a matter about which there is great debate. Critical scholars (and even some evangelical scholars) have settled on the "late date" for Exodus, i.e., in the 13th century BC. Even the conservative scholar, Kenneth A. Kitchen, accepts the late date of Exodus.¹¹ Other evangelicals, myself included, have opted for the "early date" for the Exodus, around 1446 BC (which accords with 1 Kgs 6:1). On the basis of the "early date" for the Exodus, the Book of Deuteronomy would have been originally given around Jan - Feb, 1406 BC.

The geographical setting can be determined from Deut 1:5. The message was delivered while the Israelites were "*across the Jordan in the land of Moab*" (cf. 4:44-46).

B. The International Scene

The large area of Syria-Canaan remained an area of crossfire during the 16th to 13th centuries. Three dominant empires contended for control: Egypt, Mitanni, and the Hittite empire. Both the kingdoms of Mitanni and the Hittites were located north of Syria, while Egypt was to the south. Syria-Canaan was under the influence of Mitanni until about the middle of the 16th century. From that point on, it came under Egyptian dominance, although the two empires remained rivals until the early part of the 14th century. The struggle shifted to a tension between Egypt and the Hittites. Accepting a date of

¹⁰ Meredith Kline, *Treaty of the Great King*, 42ff.

¹¹ Merrill C. Tenney, ed. *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, s.v. "Exodus, The," by K. A. Kitchen, 2:432.

1406 BC for Deuteronomy (and the start of the conquest), Canaan and Syria would have been under Egyptian dominance.

Both the Exodus and the conquest of Canaan would have occurred during the period of the 18th Dynasty pharaohs of Egypt. Identification of the pharaohs, however, for each of these events is dependent upon which Egyptian chronology one chooses to follow (scholars debate between a “low chronology” and “high chronology” for the pharaohs of the 18th Dynasty). The pharaohs and dates according to the low chronology are approximately as follows:

Ahmose I	1549-1524 BC
Amenhotep I	1524-1503 BC
Thutmose I	1503-1493 BC
Thutmose II	1493-1479 BC
Thutmose III	1479-1424 BC (with a co-regency with Hatshepsut, 1479-1458)
Amenhotep II	1424-1398 BC (a co-regency with Thutmose III started about 1427)
Thutmose IV	1398-1388 BC
Amenhotep III	1388-1351/50 BC

Assuming these dates prove to be correct, the “new king who did not know Joseph” (Exod 1:8) would have been Ahmose I. Moses (born 1526 BC) would have grown up in the courts of Amenhotep I, Thutmose I, and partly in the reign of Thutmose II. The latter, Thutmose II, would have been the pharaoh from whom Moses fled in 1486 BC. Then, the pharaoh of the Exodus (1446 BC) would have been Thutmose III, and the pharaoh at the time of the conquest of Canaan (1406 BC) would have been Amenhotep II.

The area of Canaan was organized into a number of city-states that owed their allegiance to Egypt. Each was governed by a king who had a certain amount of freedom as long as he recognized that he was responsible to Egyptian authority:

The Egyptians did not interfere with the internal structure of the other Canaanite city-kingsdoms, as long as they accepted Egyptian authority, paid tribute, secured the roads passing through their territories and supplied chariots, auxiliary troops, food, and other provisions for the Egyptian army.¹²

The reign of Thutmose III was marked by a number of military excursions northward. This brought him into conflict with the Mitanni empire north of Syria, both of which vied for control of Syria. These campaigns involved transitions through the coastal regions of Palestine. Thutmose’s son, Amenhotep II, however, made very few military campaigns, and his reign witnessed a cessation of hostilities between Egypt and Mitanni. Interestingly, Amenhotep II was not the first-born son of Thutmose III. Amenhotep II (a son by the non-royal Merytre-Hatshepsut) had an older brother named Amenemhat who was the first-born son of Thutmose III by queen Satiah. However, prince

¹² *The MacMillan Bible Atlas*, 34.

Amenemhat died before becoming Pharaoh. He could very well have been the first-born son of the Pharaoh who died at the time of the Exodus (Exod 12:29-32).

Amenhotep II was born and raised in Memphis (near modern-day Cairo) instead of in Thebes (Luxor), the traditional capital. He had a co-regency with his father, Thutmose III, of about two years and four months. This would date his accession to about 1427 BC. Although early in his reign he made a couple of campaigns northward into Canaan and Syria, his last campaign took place in his ninth year, which would have been well before the entrance of the Hebrews to Canaan proper. After this, he apparently made peace (at least informally) with Mitanni, and his focus shifted more to domestic matters. Following the reign of Amenhotep II, Egypt's foreign policy shifted from one of military aggression to one of relatively peaceful relations with the rest of the known world.¹³

Little is known about Amenhotep's son and successor, Thutmose IV. History does record that he also fostered peaceful relations with Mitanni and married a Mitannian princess to seal this new alliance. Upon his death, Amenhotep III (also known as Amenhotep the Great) became the pharaoh of Egypt.

Under Amenhotep III (sometimes referred to as Amenophis III), Egypt's control over the Asiatic provinces seems to have declined, for he is described as "a ruler whose indolent neglect of the Asiatic provinces paved the way for the decline of Egypt's control over Syria."¹⁴ Nevertheless, Egypt's own status was at a high point:

The accession to the throne of King Nebmare, Amenophis III, came at a moment in Egyptian history, when thanks to almost two centuries of unparalleled achievement both at home and abroad, the country was at the pinnacle of its political power, economic prosperity, and cultural development.¹⁵

From a human standpoint, the call in Deuteronomy for Israel to attack Canaan and kill all the inhabitants was a risky venture. This was the domain of Egypt when Egypt was at one of her greatest moments of glory. That Egypt did not launch an all-out counterattack may be due to the development of peaceful relations with Mitanni (thus curtailing Egypt's ventures northward) and her foremost concern for the home-front.

In addition, we have no record of retaliatory measures by Akhenaten, who succeeded Amenhotep III. However, archaeology has uncovered what are known as the "Amarna letters," a number of tablets found in Egypt being "letters" to the Pharaohs (Amenhotep III and Akhenaten) from Syrian-Palestinian kings, appealing to the Pharaoh in regard to rebellion and uprisings in the land. This is known as the "Amarna Period," when Hittite pressure and the revolt of Amorite towns in the north fatally weakened Egyptian power, followed by incursions into Palestine of the warlike bands known as the *khabiru*.¹⁶ Scholars are unsure what relation the latter may have to the biblical Hebrews.

¹³ *Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. 2, part 1 (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1973), 324.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 340.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 338.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 527.

C. On the Plains of Moab

The Book of Deuteronomy represents not a period of history but a particular occasion when Moses addressed the nation of Israel. This was only a couple of months prior to the initiation of the conquest (cf. Josh 4:19). The nation had been wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, and the older generation of men eligible for war had died off. Now a new generation was camped in the plains of Moab (Deut 1:5), just on the east side of the Jordan ready to enter the land that God had sworn to Abraham and his seed. They now faced the same decision that the previous generation had faced earlier at Kadesh-Barnea. Would they be willing to enter the land by faith and destroy the inhabitants? Furthermore, would they obey the Lord once they did enter the land? Deuteronomy is basically a sermon addressing these concerns, but it is more than a sermon. It is also a renewal of the covenant by the nation Israel with her king, YHWH. The tone is very sincere, an urgent pleading by the aged Moses for the nation to be faithful. This is his burden, a desperate one, for he is at the point of death.

The Lord will not allow him to continue with the nation, despite his pleading (Deut 3:23-28). These many years of leading the nation had given him many an opportunity to observe the people. In essence, Deuteronomy is his last climactic opportunity to exhort the nation to their allegiance to YHWH: "obey and you will be blessed!" Moses was calling the people to renew their covenant (their constitution), for the opportunity to have the land was an occasion of great significance. The address of Moses gave opportunity to several important matters¹⁷:

- (1) the people formally declared their allegiance by affirming that the LORD was their God (26:16-17)
- (2) instructions were given for the next renewal of the covenant (ch 27)
- (3) blessings and curses were announced to the people (ch 28)
- (4) Joshua was appointed as Moses' successor
- (5) Instructions were given regarding the deposition of the text of the covenant in the ark (31:9, 26).

D. Preparation for Holy War

The occasion of Deuteronomy was significant also as a time of preparation, in that a military conquest lay before them. The preparation, however, was more of a spiritual nature than tactical as Craigie notes:

But now that they knew the character of their God, they renewed their covenant allegiance to him before entering into battle; the outcome of future battles lay not in their military prowess, but in the power of God and the wholeheartedness of their commitment to God.¹⁸

The policy of war was twofold. The inhabitants of the land, particularly the Canaanites, were to be exterminated (7:1-5; 20:16ff.), while others were to be regarded as permanent enemies, e.g., the Ammonites and the Moabites (23:3-6). The term Canaanites sometimes referred to a particular group

¹⁷ Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1976), 31-32.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

of people in the land while at other times as an embracing term for the several groups of inhabitants (see 7:1ff.). Yet, the will of God was for a complete distinction of the Israelites from the Canaanites (Ex 23:32, 33). Indeed, the annihilation of the Canaanites was a judgment upon them from God (Gen 15:16). This was not unreasonable at all, when one considers their culture. They practiced slavery, formed class distinctions, worshipped many gods and offered up sacrifices to them, established their own priesthood, constructed temples for their worship (e.g., Lachish, Jericho, Megiddo, Hazor), held child sacrifices, indulged in many satanic rituals (Deut 18:9-11), and established the fertility cult. The latter involved temple prostitution which included male practitioners as well as female prostitutes (cf. Amos 2:7 and Hos 4:14).¹⁹ The "ban" or "total destruction" which YHWH called for was quite reasonable. Israel had a religion and a revelation that was dependent upon this act, and the welfare of the nations of the world was involved in the decision (Gen 12). The discharge of war is further described in 20:1-20; 21:10-14; 23:10-14; 24:5; and 25:17-19. This responsibility was laid upon Israel and was a part of the call to obedience that Moses was charging the nation with.

V. THE THESIS AND PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

The identification of the basic units of thought within the book and appropriate "clue verses" (4:44; 12:1; 29:1) will help to establish the thesis and purpose of the book of Deuteronomy. Obviously, the book has to do with the Law, particularly as it is expounded for this new generation about to enter the promised land:

"Across the Jordan in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to expound this law . . ." (1:5)

However, other verses clarify that this attempt to expound the Law (i.e., make it plain and clear) were more than a clarification of facts. Israel already had the Law, as recorded in Exodus-Leviticus. The message of Moses in the plains of Moab was an opportunity for the present generation to bind themselves in covenant agreement to YHWH. This covenant agreement was distinct from that made at Sinai (see 29:1, 10-13). Thus the present stipulations (12:1-26:19), although included for the most part in the previous covenant, are being clearly presented to the new generation. The opportunity is being held out for them to be YHWH's people (29:13), but this opportunity must not be treated lightly. To be "His people" is to take on the responsibility to be a light to the nations . . . mediators of God's blessing and the knowledge of YHWH (Gen 12; Ex 19). But this unique role is a privileged position, and comes with specific demands. Thus, the present generation is confronted with these demands and the importance of obedience. They are made to take a close look at the expectations so that they might clearly understand what is being expected of them as YHWH's people. Then they are asked to make a decision whether they are willing to accept this role as the people of YHWH or not. They can respond positively by entering into this covenant with YHWH (29:12). The fact that the decision is underscored by covenant means that Israel is willing to accept the responsibility of their decision. They know the demand of obedience, and they know the consequences if they should fail to obey (the curses). The bottom line of the covenant agreement is accountability.

This call for entering the covenant calls attention to the key thought of the book . . . Israel's response. The LORD (through the agency of Moses) is after a response from the nation, and this response is not only applicable to the present generation but to the future generations as well (29:14-15). Basically, the book of Deuteronomy is presenting a choice to the nation, and this is climactically seen in 30:19-20:

¹⁹ Helmer Ringgren, *Religions of the Ancient Near East*, trans. John Sturdy (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), 167.

"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; for this is your life and the length of your days, that you may live in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them."

These verses essentially capture the message of the book:

- the nation is presented with a choice
- the choice affects the present generation as well as subsequent generations
- the blessing of the nation is the intended outcome
- the blessing is contingent upon obedience from a heart of love for YHWH
- the choice is aimed at fulfilling the Abrahamic covenant

With this in mind, a thesis and purpose statement can be formulated:

Thesis Israel's intended response to YHWH's love and covenant with them is wholehearted obedience to Him and His law.

Purpose That the nation might enjoy continued blessing in the land and yet be held accountable for disobedience.

This thesis and purpose statement is very significant in the Old Testament books which follow, for it explains the basis of God's actions with the nation. As we see Israel disciplined, we understand that this springs from the accountability factor expressed in Deuteronomy.