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**44 UNDATED DEVOTIONS THROUGH
THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY**

INTRODUCTION

The opening verses of Deuteronomy tell us all we need to know about the book we are about to read. Moses and Israel are in the land of Moab, poised to cross the Jordan and take possession of the land the Lord promised as an inheritance. Moses has some final words to say to them, which Deuteronomy faithfully records for our learning.

Deuteronomy comes to us in carefully edited form. Note the editorial introductions: 'These are the words' (1:1); 'This is the law' (4:44); 'These are the terms' (literally, 'words', 29:1); 'This is the blessing' (33:1); also see 31:1 and 31:30. The opening chapters (1:1 – 4:43) are an historical retrospect of the journey from Sinai to the second arrival at the borders of Canaan. The great central section (4:44 – 26:19) is a meditative application of the Decalogue, sometimes taking up one or other of the commandments with great force and clarity, often circling round the area of conduct to which a commandment is relevant, but all the time enforcing the fundamental obligations of Israel within the covenant. The separate introduction in 27:1 marks out chapters 27–31 as underlining, in particular, the blessings and curses of the covenant – a powerful summons to choose life, and a provision for regular public reading of the covenant law. Finally, chapters 32–34 are a retrospective of Moses, with his final words and wishes, then the death of the great leader. Much closer analysis of content is possible (and convincing) but would only be confusing in the brief compass of an introduction like this. Hopefully enough has been offered here to keep you broadly aware of your place in this great book of the Bible.

Much ink has been spilt linking Deuteronomy with 'the book of the Law' found in the house of the Lord in the days of Josiah (2 Kings 22), and many have even urged that Deuteronomy owed its origin to that event, being produced in order to promote Josiah's reformation. All this remains highly suppositional – indeed it would not be hard to show how, for example, Leviticus would be equally appropriate to Josiah. Deuteronomy is best understood by the setting it proposes for itself: the final addresses of Moses to the people he has loved, cherished and lead for the last forty years.

The book and its message

These verses are a preface to the whole book and, in principle, tell us all we need to know. Three times Moses is named as its author (vv. 1, 3, 5). It was Moses who ‘spoke to all Israel’ (v. 1); what Moses said the Lord had already said to him (v. 3): the voice was human, the words divine. Moses was a prophet (cf. 34:10), and, like all the prophets, he could say, ‘Thus says the Lord’, meaning, ‘If the Lord had chosen to come in person to speak to you instead of sending me, this is, word for word, what he would have said.’ This is the miracle of Bible inspiration: human speech and divine word. Moses’ task was also to ‘make plain’ God’s law (v. 5; for the verb see 27:8; Hab. 2:2).

Notice how the preface insists on telling us where Moses spoke (v. 1), when he spoke (vv. 2–3a), as well as how he spoke (with clarification, v. 5). The rest of Deuteronomy will demonstrate the accuracy of that verb ‘make clear’. The man who started out ‘slow of speech and tongue’ (Ex. 4:10) found God to be as good as his word to be ‘with’ Moses’ mouth (Ex. 4:12), and he became the scintillating orator we find in this book. But the ‘where’ and ‘when’ are important too. They were in the wilderness. Deuteronomy is a book for the Lord’s people still in this world, surrounded by named locations with all their peoples, potential opposition, possible temptations and trials.

This, indeed, is the point of the exact dating (Deut. 1:2–3a) of Moses’ words. A journey that could have been accomplished in eleven days (v. 2) took nigh on forty years (v. 3a)! Moses will himself tell us more about this at the end of chapter 1: they had come, forty years earlier, to the border of Canaan and refused to obey the voice of the Lord. Disobedience costs! That is part of the message of Deuteronomy – to us as to our ancestors of old.

But there is a date attached also to ‘how’ Moses spoke (v. 4) – it was after the defeat of Sihon and Og. They were the awesome kings ruling in Transjordan (Num. 21:21–35) who fell before an Israel that believed the Lord’s promise ‘I have delivered him into your hand’. In other words, disobedience costs but obedience rewards. Deuteronomy develops these truths in many ways, but, at heart, the position is that the Lord’s people possess the Lord’s commands (Deut. 1:3), their hallmark is to obey them, and this is the way of blessing.

REFLECTION

*Remember what
benefits the Lord’s word
bestows (Ps. 19:7–11).*

The word of God for the whole of life

Moses is looking back over the last forty years (v. 3) and recalling (vv. 6–8) the exciting, key moment when they left Sinai for the desert journey to Canaan. How memories must have flooded back! But one event stands out in his mind: how he picked out leaders of thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens (v. 15). What a let-down! What a dull thing to remember out of all that thrilling time! (See Ex. 18 for how it happened.) But historians only pick out what they think is important. That's their job – to focus on the really significant among the loads of facts and figures available to them. So we must ask what was special about this series of appointments.

Look first at the way this whole section is planned. It begins and ends (vv. 6–8, 21) with the command to 'go ... and take possession'. This is the 'bracket' or 'inclusion' around the verses. Within the brackets we find the record of appointing the leaders. In other words, the leaders and their work is the link between the setting out and actually entering to possess. In Exodus 18:15, Moses said the people came to him 'to seek God's will', and it was this function he passed on to the chosen leaders when he counselled them that 'judgment belongs to God' (Deut. 1:17).

To 'judge' in the Old Testament means to give an authoritative decision settling some issue. It was the judges' task to keep the people on track with the word of God, and this was the point of having leaders available to local or family groups (tens), area groups (fifties and hundreds) and major tribal divisions (thousands). The word of God had to be readily available in every situation, however widespread and however localised. This was the way Moses did it, and he was insistent about it. According to verse 16, their 'judgment' was for all without exception – whether a brother or a stranger. It was to be without fear or favour (v. 17), with no partiality. And it was to be without deviation from 'everything' they'd been told (v. 18). When he appointed the leaders, Moses did relieve himself of intense pressures but that was not the point. The point was doing everything possible to make and keep them as the people of the word of the Lord.

REFLECTION

*Between setting out
and arriving, all we need
is the word of God.*