

Specific Advice for Reading Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy has perhaps had more influence on the rest of the biblical story (both Old and New Testaments) than any other book of the Bible. The continuation of Israel's history (Joshua-Kings) is written mostly from its perspective, so that this history portion has come to be called the Deuteronomistic History. Deuteronomy likewise had considerable influence on Israel's and Judah's prophets, especially Isaiah and Jeremiah, and through them deeply influenced the major figures of the New Testament (especially Jesus and Paul).

As you read, you will discover what drives Deuteronomy from beginning to end—an uncompromising monotheism coupled with an equally deep concern for Israel's uncompromising loyalty to Yahweh ("the LORD") their God. This comes out in any number of ways, but its primary moment is in the Shema (6:4–5), which became the distinguishing mark of Judaism and is identified by Jesus as "the first commandment": "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." The reason they are to love Yahweh in this way is that he first loved them—when they were slaves and counted for little: "The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples... But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he... redeemed you from the land of slavery" (7:7–8; cf. 4:37). Thus, everything is predicated on Yahweh's love and faithfulness and his actions that flow out of that love and faithfulness.

This concern in turn accounts for the other distinctive features in the book, three in particular that are closely allied with this first one. Watch for the following:

1. The constant reminder that Israel is about to possess "the land" (a word that occurs more than one hundred times in Deuteronomy). God in his love is about to fulfill the oath he made with Abraham. But the land is currently under the control of the Canaanites.
2. The relentless demand that, when entering the land, Israel not only avoid idolatry but that they completely destroy the places of Canaanite worship as well as the Canaanite peoples. If they do not, Canaanite idolatry will destroy Israel's reason for being. This motif begins in the historical prologue (2:34; 3:6) and continues as a divine demand throughout (7:1–6, 23–26; 12:1–3; 13:6–18; 16:21–17:7; 20:16–18; cf. 31:3). The only hope for Israel to bless the nations (4:6) is for them to obliterate all forms of idolatry and to walk in the ways of the God who redeemed them to be his people (5:32–33).
3. The requirement that they regularly worship at one central sanctuary, "the place the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name" (12:11). You will recognize this as carrying over the theme of the presence of God in the tabernacle into their new setting in the promised land. Note how often this theme, which begins in 12:5, is repeated thereafter (12:11, 14, 18, 26; 14:23–25; 15:20; 16:2–16; 17:8–10; 26:2). Yahweh, the one and only God, will dwell among his one people in one place; he is not like the many pagan gods who can be worshiped at many high places throughout the land.

Why are these matters so important? Because the whole biblical story depends on them. At issue is not simply a choice between Yahweh and a Baal—although that too is involved—but syncretism, i.e., thinking that Yahweh can be worshiped in the form of, or alongside, Baal and Ashtoreth (Asherah), the Canaanite fertility gods. Since Yahweh is one Lord, not many—as are the pagan gods—he must not be worshiped at the high places where Baal and Ashtoreth were worshiped, and since Yahweh made human beings alone to bear his image (Gen 1:26–27) and does not have “form” as such (the second commandment), they must not think that he can be given form in some way by human beings (see especially Deut 4:15–20). You will notice how this issue recurs throughout the rest of the story, right through 2 Kings, and continues as a predominant feature in the prophets.

Two final items: God’s love for his people in redeeming them and in making them his own, and then in giving them “this good land” (9:6), also lies behind the special nature of the Law Code in Deuteronomy (12:1–26:19). Be watching for how the code follows the pattern of the Ten Commandments, beginning with requirements that have to do with loving God (chs. 12–13) and continuing with various laws that have to do with sacred days and with loving neighbor (chs. 14–26). But note especially how often God’s people are required to include “the poor and needy” (see 15:11; 24:14), which in Deuteronomy specifically takes the form of “the alien, the fatherless and the widow,” and sometimes includes “the Levite” (26:13). Their common denominator is that they do not own land among a people who will become agrarian in culture. As you read, observe how often these laws are tied either to God’s character or to the redemption of Israel.

Finally, don’t lose sight of one other important characteristic of Deuteronomy, namely, its forward-looking thrust throughout. This includes not only the immediate generation, which is poised to take possession of the land, but also future generations (4:9, 40). This motif in particular creates tension throughout the book between God’s goodness in bringing them into “this good land” and God’s awareness that Israel will fail nonetheless. Thus at both the beginning and the end, there are prophecies that the curses will eventually come upon them; their failure to keep covenant will result in loss of the land and in exile (4:25–28; 30:1; see 29:19–28 and 32:15–25), but God’s enduring love will result in their being restored to the land through a “second exodus” (4:29–31; 30:2–10; 32:26–27, 36–43). As you read on from here in both the Old Testament and New, you will see how often this theme recurs.

How to Read the Bible Book by Book (p. 59). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.