

An Introduction to Deuteronomy

Who?

Within Judaism, the Hebrew Scriptures as a whole are referred to as the 'Tanakh'. This is an acronym based on the division of the text into three parts: 'Torah' (or law), 'Nevi'im' (prophets) and 'Ketuvim' (writings). Deuteronomy has traditionally been placed in the first one of these categories, making up the final chapter of the Torah, the book of the law.

However, the current consensus on Deuteronomy is that, rather than being the final chapter of the law books, it is actually the first chapter, compiled and edited by a single school or group, of the books we would probably call the historical books. These include Joshua, Judges, 1&2 Samuel and 1&2 Kings. What unites these books is a common theology, of which we see a particularly strong example in Deuteronomy chapters 27 and 28, which is a list of blessings and curses connected to obedience to, or deviation from, the laws.

The Deuteronomist, or Deuteronomistic historian, as the authors of the book are often called, have a clear theological agenda, linked to the blessings or punishments meted out to the people of Israel through history. Despite this connection between upholding the law and receiving the blessings of God, though, Deuteronomy is not concerned with the minutiae of priestly ritual. It is likely, therefore, that it does not stem from a priestly source, as does Leviticus and bits of the book of Numbers. The Deuteronomist collects material from a variety of sources, as and where they support his theological argument and makes them into a document which serves as a bridge between the Torah and the Nevi'im.

When?

Deuteronomy, like most of the books we have looked at so far, was almost certainly not written all at once. It is possible that there is some very old material contained within it, and the repeating of, and expanding on, the laws that we have seen in Exodus, suggests that, at the very least, it was commenting on earlier documents. There are a number of pointers, however, which suggest that the final date of composition, cannot have been earlier than the 6th Century BC.

To start with, chapter 17 of Deuteronomy provides us with regulations regarding the installation of a king over the people. This dates the book later than the period of the judges and during the monarchy, which began in the 10th or 11th Century.

When we looked at Exodus, we saw that sacrifices were permitted wherever the Israelites constructed an altar. In Deuteronomy, though, this rule is changed; in chapter 12:13-14, the people are told that they must only make their offerings at a place that God has set aside for this purpose. This centralising of the sacrificial system either took place in the reign of Hezekiah, in the late 8th Century BC, or Josiah, in the 6th Century. The story, in 2 Kings, of Josiah's rediscovery of a book of the law, makes this the likelier of the dates.

Finally, in chapter 29:21-29, there is a passage which seems to foretell the exile of the people in Babylon. If Deuteronomy was, as scholars believe, written as the first part of the history which runs to the end of 2 Kings, this foretelling would in fact serve as a theological reason for the plight of the people, linking a failure to adhere to the law with their military defeat.

Why?

If Genesis tries to pull together the exiled community in Babylon and give them a common history, Deuteronomy begins to answer the question, 'Why did this happen to us in the first place?' 'What could we have done to deserve this?' By putting everything in the mouth of Moses, the hero of the Torah, in the form of a sermon, the Deuteronomistic historian gives authority to his interpretation of history, upon which he will expand in the following six books.