

INTRODUCTION TO 5th BIBLEBOOK

DEUTERONOMY (about February 1407 B.C.)

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A. THE ORIGIN OF THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY

1. The name of the book.

In the Hebrew Bible, the first five books are called by their beginning words. This book is called ‘These words’ (Hebrew: *ellé ha-debarim*). In the oldest translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, it is called “The second law” (Deuteronomion). Another translation called it very suitably “the record of the repeated commands”.

2. The writer, the date and the place of writing.

Deuteronomy was written by Moses. The book itself states very clearly that Moses is the writer of this book. The book consists mainly of the speeches of Moses. The first three verses say, “These are the words Moses spoke to all Israel in the desert east of the Jordan ... in the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month, Moses proclaimed to the Israelites all that the Lord had commanded him concerning them.” According to Deuteronomy 34:5,8 and Joshua 4:19, Moses died about one month before Israel crossed the Jordan and Israel mourned his death for one more month. Thus, the book of Deuteronomy was written during the eleventh month of the fortieth year after Israel’s departure from Egypt. This was about February 1407 B.C. Moses wrote the book over a period of about one month at the border of the Promised Land.

The book mentions Moses 36 times and in Deuteronomy 1:16 etc., Moses speaks in the first person. In Deuteronomy 31:9 we read that he himself wrote down the law. In the Old Testament, the author of the book of Chronicles¹ and in the New Testament, Jesus² himself and the apostle Paul³ spoke of Moses as the author of the book of Deuteronomy. Words from the book of Deuteronomy are quoted 90 times in 14 books of the New Testament.

Deuteronomy has a few later additions by an editor. It seems that certain historical and archaeological remarks have been added by a later person. For example, in Deuteronomy 2:10-12 we read, “The descendants of Esau drove the Horites out, just as Israel did in the land the Lord gave them as their possession.” Likewise the remarks in Deuteronomy 2:20-23, 3:9,11 and 14. It is also possible that the introduction to the speech of Moses in Deuteronomy 1:1-5 was written by a person already living on the West side of the Jordan, but it is also possible that the East side of the Jordan was called Transjordan. Deuteronomy 31:22 says that Moses recorded his own song in Deuteronomy 32 and taught it to Israel. Although the blessing of Moses in Deuteronomy 33 was spoken by Moses, it was probably recorded by somebody else. The writer, who described the death of Moses in Deuteronomy 34, is not mentioned, but he could have been Joshua.

However, no matter whom the Holy Spirit used to record the words written in Deuteronomy, according to 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:20-21, we Christians believe that the whole Bible was inspired by the Holy Spirit.

3. The character of the book.

The book of Deuteronomy reminds, warns and exhorts.

Deuteronomy is a book written on the border between two worlds: *the past* of Israel in the desert of Sinai and *the future* of Israel in the Promised Land of Canaan. The purpose of the book is to remind Israel of their experiences in the desert and these experiences of the past are the basis for his warnings and exhortations with respect to the future.

The laws in the book of Deuteronomy are directed to the general public.

The laws and commandments in the book of Deuteronomy are a repetition and sometimes even a supplement of the laws given before. But while most of the laws in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers are more technical in character and regulate how the ceremonial (ritual) law must be applied by especially the priests and Levites, judges and leaders, the laws in Deuteronomy are clearly more popular in character and are directed to the general public of Israel. That is why the book of Deuteronomy had *to be read in public to all the Israelites* once every seven years (31:10-11).

The ceremonial (ritual) laws in the book of Deuteronomy emphasise the importance of joy in their celebrations.

Deuteronomy 12:7 commands, “There in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your families shall eat and shall rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the Lord your God has blessed you.” The Israelites must include their whole family, servants and the Levites in their joyous celebrations (12:17-19).

The ceremonial (ritual) laws in the book of Deuteronomy deliberately limit the extent of sacrifices.

While the other nations made sacrifices on every hill, Israel may only bring offerings at the one place God would choose in the Promised Land.

¹ 2 Chronicles 25:4; compare Deuteronomy 24:16

² Matthew 19:7-9; John 5:45-47

³ Romans 10:19

This must have caused an enormous limitation of the number of sacrifices made by the Israelites, especially by those living very far from the tabernacle. *This limitation concerning the sacrifices prepared Israel for the time when all sacrifices to God would be abolished!* Because the religious-ethical demands were emphasised, we must conclude that the sacrifices were not the highest God expected from Israel.

The laws in the book of Deuteronomy deal especially with the time Israel would be living in the Promised Land, Canaan. In Deuteronomy 12:1 we read, “These are the decrees and laws you must be careful to follow in the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess.” Chapter 12 includes the centralisation of the ceremonial (ritual) worship. In contrast to the heathen nations, who had put up their idols all over the country and who sacrificed on every hill, Israel must have only *one place of worship* of the Lord. Israel must bring all their sacrifices and offerings, tithes and other special gifts to the place where the tabernacle would stand. Chapter 16 includes a law about the appointment of judges and officials in every town in which they would live in Canaan (16:18). Chapter 17 includes even a law for the king for the time when Israel would choose a king! (17:14). The purpose of these laws were to keep Israel from worshipping God in the way of the idolatrous nations around them.

The book of Deuteronomy emphasises not the ceremonial (ritual) laws, but the religious-ethical laws.

While the laws in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers are more *legal-ritual* in character, the laws in Deuteronomy are far more *religious-ethical and practical* in character. *These religious-ethical demands are for example the demands to love God, to fear God and to obey God.* In Deuteronomy 6:5 God commands, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” In Deuteronomy 10:12-13 is written, “And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?”

The civil laws in the book of Deuteronomy are ethical rather than legal in character.

Chapter 16 commands that judges and officials must judge people *fairly*. They may *not pervert justice or show partiality*. They may *not accept bribes*, because bribes blind the eyes of the wise and twist the words of the righteous. They must follow justice alone, so that they may be able to possess the Promised Land and keep on living in it (16:18-20). Chapter 17 commands that the king must read the laws of God in the Bible every day of his life, so that he may learn to fear and respect God, follow all God’s laws carefully and *not become conceited and arrogant* (17:18-20). Chapter 23 commands that the Israelites must *protect refugees* (23:15). It also commands that they may not charge their fellow-Israelites *interest on money* or on anything else that may earn interest (23:19). Chapter 24 commands that a recently married soldier must not be sent to war, but must be given one year leave in order to enjoy his marriage (24:5). The Israelites may not make their labourers *work overtime* or *withhold their wages*, but they must pay the wages of a poor man every day before sunset (24:14-15). The Israelites must *not oppress the poor*, but allow them to pick up a certain amount of their harvest (24:19). Chapter 25 commands that the courts must acquit the innocent and *condemn the guilty*. They must punish the guilty, but the punishment must be in the presence of the judge and the *punishment must not be cruel* (25:1-3). The Israelites may not even be cruel to their animals. They may not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain (25:4). Finally, chapter 27 warns, “Cursed is the man who withholds *justice from the alien, the fatherless or the widow*.” And the curse means that they will not prosper in the Promised Land, but everything, they put their hand to, will fail. The Lord will punish them with diseases, droughts and agricultural pests. The Lord will punish them with war, oppression by enemies and captivity to foreign countries (chapter 28). Later history shows that all Gods promises and threats became a reality!

B. THE DIVISION AND MAIN CONTENTS OF THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY.

The theme of Deuteronomy: *God’s commandments serve to show how to live as God’s saved people.*

The book of Deuteronomy may be divided into five main parts as follows:

1. Deuteronomy 1 to 4. The first speech of Moses to Israel.

Moses gives an overview of Israel’s history from the time Israel left Mount Sinai until they reached the border of Canaan. For example. Chapter 1 records God’s requirements for leaders of God’ people. God’s people may only choose men to be their leaders when they are wise, understanding and respected. These leaders must be chosen from every tribe, thus be representatives from every section of God’s people (1:13). Chapter 4 warns that people may not add anything to God’s commandments and also not subtract anything from God’s commandments. God reveals his will and all people must obey God’s commandments (4:2).

2. Deuteronomy 5 to 11. The first half of the second speech of Moses to Israel. Moral laws.

It includes reminders of the history of Israel and laws and exhortations of a general nature. The Ten Commandments and the command to love the Lord with all your heart and soul are in this section.

Chapter 5 teaches to walk in the way of the Ten Commandments (5:6-21,33).

- The first commandment. People must only know and worship the God of the Bible. All the other gods of other religions are not God at all⁴.

⁴ Isaiah 43:10-11

- The second commandment. People must not make any idols, also not of their career, money, power or position⁵.
- The third commandment. People must not use the name of the God of the Bible to make vows, pronounce curses or to swear⁶.
- The fourth commandment. People must set aside one out of every seven days apart to rest from their daily work, to meet together with other people of God and to do good works⁷.
- The fifth commandment. People must honour their parents.
- The sixth commandment. People must not kill other people⁸.
- The seventh commandment. People must not get involved in sexual immorality⁹.
- The eighth commandment. People must not steal anything.
- The ninth commandment is. People must not tell lies or give false testimonies.
- The tenth commandment. People must not covet (desire) anything that belongs to another person.

Chapter 6 warns people not to test the God of the Bible (6:16). Chapter 8 teaches that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God (8:3). In chapter 10 God asks people to fear him, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve him with all their heart and soul and to observe all his commands (10:12-13). And he teaches them what God is like: The God of the Bible is mighty and awesome. He shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless, the widows and the foreigners (10:17-18). In chapter 11 he warns the people of Israel that they must fix the words of God in their minds and talk about them to their children or else soon perish from the land (11:16-20).

3. Deuteronomy 12 to 26. The second part of the second speech of Moses to Israel. Civil laws.

It includes a series of specific laws. For example, it regulates the civil laws concerning finding possessions that belong to somebody else, the wearing of proper clothing, the responsibility of building safe buildings and the punishment of a series of sexual violations. It regulates the civil laws concerning refugee slaves, prostitutes, kidnappers and lepers. It regulates civil laws concerning the newlyweds, divorce and re-marriage. It regulates the civil laws concerning charging interest on loans, taking pledges on loans, taking securities on debts, paying wages to the poor, allowing the poor to harvest the leftovers on harvest fields and using only accurate weights and measures in commerce. And it regulates the civil laws concerning punishing only the guilty member of a family, acquitting the innocent and not depriving the aliens or orphans of justice.

For example, in chapter 15 he teaches that there should not be any poor people among God's people. God's people must cancel debts, freely lend the poor what they need and set their slaves free. Chapter 18 warns that God's people should not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations that worship a god which they have devised themselves or that practice occultism (18:9-13). Chapter 23 teaches that God turns the curses of enemies into blessings for his people (23:5). Chapter 25 commands that all merchants should have accurate and honest weights and measures (25:15).

4. Deuteronomy 27 to 30. The third speech of Moses to Israel. Curses and blessings.

It consists of a command to Israel to write all the commands of the Lord on white plastered stones on Mount Ebal and of curses that must be read aloud to all Israel. It moreover includes *the blessings for obedience and the curses for disobedience*. Finally, it describes the renewal of the covenant on the plains of Moab, just before Israel crossed into the Promised Land and God's offer of life and death to Israel. God demands that Israel must choose. For example, God blesses everyone who carefully obeys his commandments (28:1-2). *God makes it very clear that he has not revealed everything about himself to people, but that he has revealed everything that is necessary for people to know God, have a personal relationship with God and follow God and his ways* (29:29). God also makes it very clear that what he commands is not too difficult for any person to do (30:11).

5. Deuteronomy 31 to 34. The last words of Moses to Israel.

It regulates the successor of Moses, the reading of the law every seven years, and *the prediction that Israel would rebel in the future*. It moreover includes the song of Moses which he recited to the whole assembly of Israel and the blessing of Moses which he pronounced on all the Israelites before his death. In this song Moses said that the God of the Bible is the unmoveable Rock for those who trust in him. The works of the God of the Bible are perfect and all his ways are just. The God of the Bible is a faithful God who does no wrong. The God of the Bible is upright and completely just (32:4). Finally, it describes the death of Moses and his succession by Joshua.

⁵ Matthew 6:24

⁶ Matthew 5:33-37

⁷ Exodus 23:12; Leviticus 23:3; Mark 3:4

⁸ Matthew 5:21-26

⁹ Matthew 5:27-32

C. THE MESSIAH, JESUS CHRIST, IN THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY.

1. Jesus Christ is the Prophet to whom everybody must listen.

In Deuteronomy 18:14-22, the Lord speaks about the coming Messiah, who would be the Prophet. He says, “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers.

I will put my words in his mouth and he will tell them everything I command him ... You must listen to him ... If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account”. Deuteronomy not only *prophesies the coming of Jesus Christ, but also warns that he must be obeyed.*

2. Jesus Christ memorised and used Bible verses from the book of Deuteronomy.

In Ephesians 6:17, the apostle Paul teaches the Christians about spiritual warfare. He says, “Take ... the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” The words in the Bible are powerful and whenever Christians use them, then the Holy Spirit works. In Isaiah 55:10-11, the prophet Isaiah says something similar, “As the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”

Jesus Christ memorised and used several verses from Deuteronomy:

- He used it in Matthew 4 *to repel* the devil and his temptations.
- He used it in Matthew 5 *to correct* the misinterpretation of the Ten Commandments.
- He used it in Matthew 15 *to expose* the false pretensions of human traditions.
- He used it in Matthew 18 *to teach* his disciples to confront a brother who sins with two witnesses.
- He used it in Matthew 22 *to teach* that loving God is the most important commandment in the Bible.

D. THE MAIN MESSAGES OF THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY.

1. The book of Deuteronomy teaches that Israel is the people of God in the Old Testament.

Throughout Deuteronomy as well as the whole Old Testament it is taught that there exists a special relationship between the Lord and Israel. The Lord is “the God of Israel” and Israel is “the people of the Lord”. In Deuteronomy 7:6 Moses says, “You are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the people on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.” The word *holy* means that Israel is *separated from the other nations and their way of life* in order to live a holy life for God. In this sense they are *the Lord’s possession*. This special relationship with the Lord is the reason why Israel must keep away from the idolatrous and immoral life-style of the nations of Canaan.

2. The book of Deuteronomy teaches that Israel is seen as a national-political entity, a real nation.

This fact is evident from the following:

- **Assembly.** In Deuteronomy 23:1, Israel is depicted as *‘the assembly of the Lord’¹⁰*, to which *aliens from other nations may join*. Nevertheless, certain nations like the Ammonites and the Moabites were excluded from this assembly, because of their past opposition to Israel (23:3). That is no more the case during the New Testament.
- **Laws.** Certain laws have special reference to Israel as a national-political entity and to its civil life. For example, there are civil laws concerning their kings and their wars with other nations, and there are social laws concerning lawsuits and marriages.
- **Promised Land.** The laws show that the emphasis is on the temporary life on earth in the Promised Land of Canaan. For example, Deuteronomy speaks of blessings and curses, of rewards and punishments, of life and death, and always in the context of Israel as a national-political entity.

3. The book of Deuteronomy teaches that the relationship between the Lord and Israel is a covenant relationship.

In Deuteronomy 32:6 the Lord says that he is Israel’s *Father* and Creator. In Deuteronomy 14:1 he says that the Israelites are his *children*, chosen and separated to be his treasured possession. Their relationship is *a family relationship*. Deuteronomy 33:5 and 26:17-19 say that the Lord is Israel’s *King* and the formal relationship between the Lord and Israel is described in terms of *a covenant*. In this covenant, the two parties are not equal¹¹, the judicial aspects of the relationship dominate and the durability of the relationship is dependent on Israel fulfilling certain conditions. Thus on the one hand, the relationship between Israel and the Lord is *a friendship relationship* and on the other hand it is *a legal-relationship*.

¹⁰ Hebrew: qahal JaHWeH. Greek: ekklésian kuriou. The word ‘qahal’/ ‘ekklésia’ in the New Testament means ‘church’. Thus Israel in the Old Testament is continued in the New Testament (on the higher plane of ‘fulfilment’/realities) and enlarged to include the believers from all the nations!

¹¹ It is not an agreement/contract (συνθηκη) but a covenant (διαθηκη).

Exodus 4:22 says that when Israel departed from Egypt they were already the people of God, and yet God only made his formal covenant at Mount Sinai. Thus, *the covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai is a reconfirmation and a closer specification of the covenant that already existed since the time of their forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob*, but now the law was added to the covenant. In Deuteronomy 4:31 Moses knows God's covenant with the forefathers. But in Deuteronomy 5:3 it seems as if Moses regarded the covenant at Sinai (the law) as a different covenant. This is not so, because according to Deuteronomy 7:8 and 12, Moses says that keeping the laws of the covenant at Sinai is God's condition for Israel to keep his covenant with the forefathers!

Deuteronomy 8:18 also says that *the covenant God made with Abraham is reconfirmed and further elaborated in the covenant at Sinai*. We could say the covenant with the forefathers and the covenant at Sinai are two phases of one and the same covenant. Galatians 4:15-19 says that 645 years later the law was added to the promises of the covenant which God made with Abraham.

4. The book of Deuteronomy teaches that God's grace is first and decisive.

God loved and chose Israel by grace.

The God of Israel is not a local national deity, but the Almighty God who created all the nations of the world (26:19; 4:19) and to whom belongs the heavens and the earth and everything on it (10:14)! The relationship between God and Israel is based on *God's sovereign and gracious election*. In the beginning, Israel was unknown and unworthy, yet the Lord loved Israel and chose Israel. In Deuteronomy 10:15 is written that the Lord set his affection on Israel's forefathers and loved and chose their descendants above all the other nations to be his people. By grace God loved the forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. By grace God chose the forefathers and made his covenant with them. By grace God continued to love the descendants of the forefathers, Israel. By grace God continued to be faithful to his covenant with the forefathers and reconfirmed that covenant with their descendants, Israel. According to Deuteronomy 7:7-9 and 9:5-6, God did not choose Israel and redeem Israel because they were more numerous or more righteous than other nations, but only because by grace God loved them!

The elected believers of Israel during the Old Testament period is continued during the New Testament period and extended to include the elected believers of the Gentile nations. The blessing given to Abraham comes to the Gentiles through faith in Christ Jesus¹².

God saved Israel from slavery and sin by grace.

In Genesis 15:13-16 God said to Abraham that he would save Israel from enslavement. In Deuteronomy 7:8-9 is written, "It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord your God is your God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations" God saved his people before he gave them his law.

God blessed Israel with earthly blessings by grace.

In the book of Deuteronomy, God reveals the blessings of salvation. Throughout the book of Deuteronomy Israel is regarded as the people of God in a national-political sense. Therefore *the blessings of salvation are especially earthly and temporary*. When God chose Israel, they were poor and had to receive everything out of the hand of God. According to Deuteronomy 26:5, Israel was previously 'a wandering Aramean' who went down into Egypt with a few people. With respect to the past, it was by grace that God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt and it was by grace that God cared for Israel during their journey through the desert.

With respect to the future, it would be by grace that God would destroy the idolatrous nations living in Canaan and give their land as the Promised Land to Israel (7:1). By grace God would give Israel a long time to live in that Promised Land (4:40). By grace God would bring the Israelites to a land with large, flourishing cities that they did not build, to houses filled with all kinds of good things that they did not provide, to wells that they did not dig, and to vineyards and olive groves that they did not plant (6:10-11). By grace God would give Israel the ability to produce wealth (8:18). In Deuteronomy 8:7-9 Moses says, "The Lord your God is bringing you into a good land - a land with streams and pools of water, with springs flowing in the valleys and hills; a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills." By grace God would increase the numbers of Israel (13:17). By grace God would bless Israel in all the work of their hands (14:29) and with abundance, so that Israel would be able to lend to many nations (28:12). By grace God would raise Israel in praise, fame and honour high above all the other nations (26:19; 28:13).

However, *the enjoyment of all these earthly and temporary blessings may not be the highest goal of Israel!* According to Deuteronomy chapter 8, whenever the Israelites had eaten and were satisfied, they should praise the Lord for the good land he had given them. They should not forget that it is the Lord who has given them all these blessings by grace. The highest goal for Israel was *to acknowledge and glorify the Lord!*

God gave Israel the special revelation and great promises by grace.

- By grace God has given Israel *earthly and temporary blessings*.

¹² Galatians 3:14

- By grace God has *entrusted to Israel the Old Testament revelation*. The Old Testament is the first part of the specific revelation of his will. In Deuteronomy 4:8 Moses asks, “What other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?”
- By grace God also gave to Israel *great promises concerning the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ*. In Deuteronomy 18:15 Moses says, “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.”

God enabled Israel to obey by grace.

The reception and keeping of all these earthly and temporary blessings are dependent on both God’s grace and Israel’s obedience. On the one hand, by grace Israel had already received God’s salvation: Israel had already been rescued from the slavery of Egypt; it had already experienced God’s care and protection in the desert; and it had received the reconfirmation of God’s covenant with the forefathers. On the other hand, Israel would only inherit the Promised Land if it believed and obeyed God’s words. In Deuteronomy 11:23-25 God says, “If you carefully observe all these commands I am giving you to follow - to love the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways and to hold fast to him - then ... every place where you will set your foot will be yours and no man will be able to stand against you.”

Although the fulfilment of these promises is dependent on Israel’s obedience, the fulfilment is certainly going to happen! And although a whole generation of Israelites did not enter the Promised Land, because of their unbelief and disobedience, it is no uncertain fact that Israel would enter the Promised Land. Israel is promised that it would certainly inherit the Promised Land. It would certainly be blessed. And it would certainly receive the promised Messiah! *It is a fact that God himself would make sure that the chosen in Israel would believe and would obey.*

4. The book of Deuteronomy teaches the responsibility of man to obey.

Israel must obey the Ten Commandments. The relationship to the Lord is characterised on the one hand by grace and salvation and on the other hand by obedience. Israel must obey God’s religious-ethical demands, God’s ritual demands and God’s civic-social demands. In Deuteronomy 4:13 is written, “The Lord declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments, which he commanded you to follow and then wrote them on two stone tablets. The Lord commanded Israel to obey the covenant, and *the nucleus of this covenant is the Ten Commandments.*”

Israel’s obedience of all the Old Testament laws is the condition for blessing.

The obedience of these laws are conditions for entering the Promised Land, for remaining in the Promised Land and for receiving the Lord’s abundant blessings in the land. Especially in Deuteronomy 26:17-19, it seems as if the relationship between the Lord and Israel consists of *a contract*, in which merit and reward correspond to one another. Israel declared that the Lord is Israel’s God and that it would obey the Lord’s commands and the Lord declared that Israel is his people and that he would raise Israel above all the nations.

Israel’s disobedience of all the Old Testament laws would result in a curse.

If Israel follows other gods, God will destroy them from the Promised Land (6:15). If Israel marries unbelieving foreigners, God will quickly destroy them (7:4). In Deuteronomy 11:26-28 we read, “See I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse - the blessing if you obey the commands of the Lord, ... the curse if you disobey the commands of the Lord.” Deuteronomy chapters 27-28 and 30:15-20 gives a whole series of curses and blessings. *It seems that if the covenant is equally a covenant of curse as it is a covenant of blessing.*

The characteristic of God’s grace dominates in the covenant.

It is not true that Israel must first obey and then God would show his grace to them. It is rather the opposite: *Grace dominates in the covenant*; God’s grace is first and on the ground of God’s grace Israel is called to obey God! Deuteronomy 5:6 says that God first led Israel out of their slavery in Egypt by grace and then he commanded them to obey the Ten Commandments. Deuteronomy 7:7-11 says that God first set his affection on Israel and chose them, loved them and redeemed them by grace and then he demanded that Israel take care to follow the commands, decrees and laws. In the light of this truth, all the laws in the Old Testament acquire a completely different character. All the laws in the Old Testament serve to show Israel how they should be thankful for all God’s grace. Israel should show their gratefulness to God by living the kind of life God called them to live.

5. The book of Deuteronomy teaches that the underlying principles of the Old Testament Law are grace, faith, and obedience.

Although the Old Testament contains many laws, they definitely point to a deeper unity. The many specific laws in the Old Testament form an inner unity. How?

The Ten Commandments are the constitution or the foundation of all the laws in the Old Testament.

The Ten Commandments were given in a very special way to Israel. In Deuteronomy 5:22 Moses says, “These are the commandments the Lord proclaimed in a loud voice to your whole assembly there on the mountain from out of the fire, the cloud and the deep darkness; and he added nothing more. Then the Lord himself wrote them on two stone tablets and gave them to me.” The only laws God wrote with his own finger, were the Ten Commandments. This is to show that *obedience of the Ten Commandments is the foundation of obedience of all the Old Testament laws.*

The religious-ethical demands are summarised in principles like love, faithfulness, self-sacrifice, justice, humility and thankfulness.

Deuteronomy 6:5 says, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” Leviticus 19:18 says, “Love your neighbour as yourself.” All the religious-ethical demands are summarised in the command love the Lord and love your neighbour.

The faith principle is the way of salvation and the law principle the way of grateful obedience.

Deuteronomy 4:25-31 and 30:1-6 warned that in the future Israel would be scattered among the nations because of their idolatry and unrighteousness. However, the Lord promised that if the Israelites repented of their sin and sought the Lord with all their heart and soul, the Lord would allow them to find him and return to him. Then the Lord would bring them back to the Promised Land. Then the Lord would circumcise their hearts so that they would be able to love him and as a consequence live. In Deuteronomy, the grace of God seems to be dependent on Israel’s repentance and turning back to God. However, already in the book of Deuteronomy it has been revealed that God is merciful and that the mercy of God is stronger than the curse of the Old Testament laws! The book of Deuteronomy also teaches that God’s grace is first and decisive.

The conclusion is thus that there are two series of statements in the book of Deuteronomy: the statements concerning *God’s demands in the law* and the statements concerning *God’s grace in the covenant*. In the statements concerning God’s Old Testament laws, the *temporary* form dominates, while in the statements concerning God’s covenant, the *unchangeable* nature of God’s covenant is revealed. If we would look at these two series of statements all by themselves, they would form a contradiction. It would seem as if *the legal principle* and *the faith principle* are opposed to one another. The legal principle says, “Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them”¹³. The legal principle says that righteousness is gained by doing the works of the law. And the faith principle says, “Abraham believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness”¹⁴. The faith principle says that righteousness is acquired by faith.

However, the Old Testament teaches us clearly that *the law was given, not as the condition for salvation, but rather as the outworking of salvation. The law was given, not before salvation, but rather after salvation*. Deuteronomy 5:6 begins with the Lord who redeemed Israel from the slavery of sin and then teaches the Ten Commandments as the way in which the saved people of God should live! In this light, obedience to all the laws and decrees in the Old Testament are expressions of living by faith, that faith that took hold of God’s grace in the covenant.

Thus, taking the statements concerning the demands of the law and the statements concerning the grace of the covenant together in the book of Deuteronomy, we find in principle exactly the same teaching as in the New Testament: God’s salvation begins with his grace and is dependent on his grace. By grace God saves his people. By faith God’s people accept God’s salvation. By obedience God’s people show they love God for what he has done for them. Moreover, the New Testament in Galatians 3 teaches us clearly that God never intended the legal principle to be the way of salvation in the Old Testament. God always intended the faith principle to be the way of salvation.

¹³ Leviticus 18:5

¹⁴ Genesis 15:6