

DEUTERONOMY 1

Introduction to the Book of Deuteronomy

This book contains the parting words of Moses to the Israelites just before they entered the promised land of Canaan after their forty-year sojourn in the wilderness. Moses would not be joining them because he would soon be translated to further work of the Lord.¹

The title of the book, Deuteronomy, means “repeated law,” “second law,” or “copy of the law,” alluding to the fact that it is an abridgement of the Mosaic law and Israelite history Moses had compiled in the books of Exodus through Numbers. Deuteronomy offers a prophetic guide to what would best help God’s people retain their testimonies and grow in their conversion as they entered the promised land.

Deuteronomy, like Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, is attributed to Moses, though we know that some sections of Deuteronomy appear to be later scribal additions (such chapters 1 and 34). Nephi, who lived many hundreds of years after Moses, mentioned having access to “the five books of Moses” (1 Nephi 5:11).

Moses’s exhortations in Deuteronomy reflect his wise concern that these people might stray from their beliefs and even break their covenants once they had settled in the fertile ground of the promised land. Moses knew that the temptation to feel self-sufficient would be strong. Accordingly, Deuteronomy features an emphasis on remembering as a key to avoiding spiritual amnesia, which is often the first step toward spiritual atrophy and apostasy. The words *remember*, *forget*, and their variants are found more often in Moses’s final book than in his previous four books combined.

¹ See Matthew 17:3–4; Mark 9:4–9; Luke 9:30; Alma 46:19.

Yosef Yerushalmi, an authority on Jewish memory, wrote, “Only in Israel and nowhere else is the injunction to remember felt as a religious imperative to an entire people. Its reverberations are everywhere, but they reach a crescendo in the Deuteronomic history and in the prophets.”²

Throughout Deuteronomy, Moses gathers multiple memory aids designed to help Israel successfully “let God prevail” in their lives. These memory aids³ will be highlighted throughout these study notes.

As you study this pre-inheritance-of-the-promised-land handbook, it may be helpful to look for similar memory aids in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that can strengthen modern disciples against deceptions of self-sufficiency (not to be conflated or confused with the virtues of self-reliance). It appears to be a universal temptation to believe that we all “fare in this life according to the management of the creature” and that everyone who prospers does so “according to [their] genius” and conquers “according to [their] strength” (Alma 30:17).

Deuteronomy offers a different view—one in which we are in a continuous, dynamic relationship with God, having every aspect of our lives imbued with covenant significance and possibility. This is a reality that is both merciful and beautiful but that we ignore or abandon at our peril.

For a brief outline and overview of the structure of Deuteronomy, see the entry for “Deuteronomy” in the Bible Dictionary, available at churchofjesuschrist.org.

Deuteronomy 1:1–8

Moses gave geographical context so his people (and future readers) would know that what followed represented a new beginning of their covenant history, as they were on the cusp of finally entering the promised land that God granted to their forefathers Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, “and their seed after them” (Deuteronomy 1:8). Scholars have generally agreed that Deuteronomy is a covenant renewal text in which the relationship is formalized, establishing that the Lord is their God and the Hebrews are His people. The covenant includes a list of benefits and punishments for fidelity or disloyalty, respectively. Impressive parallels to ancient Hittite secular “sovereign-vassal” treaty texts like those found at Hattusas (modern Boghazkeui, Turkey) have been common among scholarly analyses. Latter-day Saints are uniquely positioned to understand ancient Israelite covenant-making, furthering Deuteronomy’s relevance, and the insight within it, for modern disciples.

² Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1982), 9.

³ Among these aids are salvation history; repetition; types and symbols; a sacred calendar with daily, weekly, seasonal, and yearly rites and observances; sacred architecture and monuments; religious attire; and even the Song of Moses.

1:1. “this side of Jordan.” This phrase is not as clear in the King James Version, but other translations clarify that the Hebrew indicates the location of Moses’s speech to be east of the Jordan in what is known as the Arabah, or the floor of the Great Rift Valley. (Through the middle of this valley, the Jordan River runs south from the headwaters of the Sea of Galilee, emptying into the Dead Sea.) To the Hebrews’ backs on the east, rising out of the valley, were the hills of Moab (the modern state of Jordan), while the Hebrews faced the Judean hills to the west, which eventually slope down to the Mediterranean coast. See Numbers 36:13 for another account of Moses’s lawgiving/covenant renewal “in the plains of Moab.”

1:2–3. “eleven days’ journey . . . in the fortieth year.” These phrases highlight God’s trustworthiness and the cost of Israel’s former disbelief and disobedience. It is an achingly painful fact that if the older generation had been faithful and trusted the Lord at very beginning of the Exodus, they would have already settled their families in Canaan four decades before. The geographical distance between Mount Sinai—where their initial covenant making had taken place forty years earlier (see Exodus 19–24—and the southern borders of the promised land at Kadesh-barnea (in the Negev region of southern Israel today) is quite literally less than a two-week journey by ancient means of travel. They could have been there forty years ago! They had passed through the Red Sea and were geographically positioned to enter their land of inheritance via a direct southern route. Yet, Moses reminded them, they were simply too spiritually rebellious to receive it. (The reasons will be unmistakably rehearsed in Deuteronomy 1:19–46; see also Numbers 13–14 for the expanded account.)

Now, Israel was poised again on the edge of their inheritance, this time on the eastern front of Canaan. A new body of water formed the border. A new miracle awaited. A new heart was required to truly inherit this promised land.

Similarly, Joseph Smith Jr. found himself geographically led by the Lord to the Hill Cumorah in 1823. He too was poised to receive a significant inheritance. Covenants were in the wings, and yet, he was not yet spiritually ready to possess and use what had been promised and prepared for him. Years would pass as young Joseph matured in his discipleship enough to take up the ancient American record and bring it to light.

In Deuteronomy, we hear a pleading prophet marshalling every means at his disposal to encourage and exhort. Do we hear our prophets today striving in the same way to make clear how crucial is the covenant offered in Christ?

A final note regarding the geographical and chronological context: by referencing the forty-year probation, Moses also confirmed that the Lord keeps His word. This timing was an exact fulfillment of the Lord’s declaration at the time of the Hebrews’ fathers’ provocation at Kadesh-barnea that it would take

the same number of years to enter their inheritance as days that the Israelite spies had scouted in Canaan before making their report to the whole Israelite assembly (Numbers 14:34).

1:8. “go in and possess the land.” Some ancient listeners might have erroneously hoped that this meant, “Everything is taken care of for you; all you have to do is walk right in and have it.” Yet, the great plan of our Heavenly Father and its attendant gospel covenant requires far more from us than simple mental assent for us to become far more than we currently are. We must not fallaciously imagine that “a few brisk push-ups and deep knee bends would do,” as Elder Neal A. Maxwell said.⁴ Indeed, this same apostle perceptively warned that some “Church members know just enough about the doctrines to converse superficially on them, but their scant knowledge about the deep doctrines is inadequate for deep discipleship (see 1 Corinthians 2:10). Thus, uninformed about the deep doctrines, they make no deep change in their lives. They lack the faith to ‘give place’ (Alma 32:27) consistently for real discipleship. Such members move out a few hundred yards from the entrance to the straight and narrow path and repose on the first little rise, thinking, ‘Well, this is all there is to it’; and they end up living far below their possibilities.”⁵

Indeed, truly possessing a land already inhabited by nations who had willfully rejected God’s prophets and descended into gross wickedness (see Leviticus 20:23; 1 Nephi 17:33–35) was much like taking true possession of our unruly hearts that are so prone to wander after the “commandments of men” and perhaps even some “doctrines of devils” (Doctrine and Covenants 46:7). Had those first-generation Israelites wholeheartedly let God prevail, they not only would have surely possessed the land but would also have attained the spiritual stature of their covenant forebears—to “land their souls, yea, their immortal souls, at the right hand of God, in the kingdom of heaven, to sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and with Jacob, and with all [their] holy fathers, to go no more out” (Helaman 3:30).

Deuteronomy 1:9–18

See notes for Exodus 18.

Deuteronomy 1:21–46

1:21. “fear not, neither be discouraged.” Moses reminded the second generation that their fathers had been assured by the Lord that they could possess the land despite the daunting nature of dispossessing its current inhabitants. Knowing they would be tempted to be afraid, the Lord encouraged them in advance. While we cannot see the end from the beginning, He can. His disciples throughout time must believe Him

4 Neal A. Maxwell, “Willing to Submit,” April 1985 general conference, online at churchofjesuschrist.org.

5 Neal A. Maxwell, *Men and Women of Christ* (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1991), 2.

when He assures us that “these things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

1:22. “We will send men before us, and they shall search . . . by what way we must go up.”

Their plan to scout out the area for routes and cities pleased Moses because it sounded like the people were sincerely planning to trust the Lord in taking possession of their promised land.

1:23. “I took twelve men of you, one of a tribe.” It is interesting to note that Moses chose the representatives of each tribe, and yet ten out of the twelve ended up giving faithless reports, which appeared instrumental in the disastrous results. Perhaps some wondered if Moses was really being led by the Lord in his prophetic selections.

Some stumble in their faith when they see the imperfections of current or past Church leaders and what appear to be problematic decisions they make. The adversary cunningly tempts, “They are not inspired,” or “This cannot be the Lord’s work.” President Lorenzo Snow provided comforting wisdom for such occasions: “I saw the . . . imperfections in [Joseph Smith]. . . . I thanked God that He would put upon a man who had those imperfections the power and authority He placed upon him, . . . for I knew that I myself had weakness, and I thought there was a chance for me.”⁶ President Gordon B. Hinckley took a similar approach: “I have worked with seven Presidents of this Church. I have recognized that all have been human. But I have never been concerned over this. They may have had some weaknesses. But this has never troubled me. I know that the God of heaven has used mortal men throughout history to accomplish His divine purposes.”⁷

Regarding the wisdom or folly in the appointing of any particular person to the Lord’s work, let us be careful not to judge unrighteously. Rather, let us view the unfolding Restoration and the work of the “living church” with both faith and charity (Doctrine and Covenants 1:30). Joseph Smith Jr. taught a great principle when he said, “I told them I was but a man, and they must not expect me to be perfect; if they expected perfection from me, I should expect it from them; but, if they would bear with my infirmities and the infirmities of the brethren, I would likewise bear with their infirmities.”⁸

1:27–28. “ye murmured in your tents . . . our brethren have discouraged our heart.” The account in Numbers 13 is slightly more detailed; however, there is enough here in Moses’s retelling to see the damaging effect of the ten spies’ doubts. President Russell M. Nelson has taught how to build and

6 Quoted in Neal A. Maxwell, “Out of Obscurity,” October 1984 general conference, online at churchofjesuschrist.org.

7 Gordon B. Hinckley, “Believe His Prophets,” April 1992 general conference, online at churchofjesuschrist.org.

8 Joseph Smith Jr., May 7, 1844, in Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1969), 268.

maintain faith in the Lord Jesus Christ: “Study with the desire to believe rather than with the hope that you can find a flaw in the fabric of a prophet’s life or a discrepancy in the scriptures. Stop increasing your doubts by rehearsing them with other doubters. Allow the Lord to lead you on your journey of spiritual discovery.”⁹

1:29–33. “I said unto you, Dread not, neither be afraid of them.” To bolster that confidence, Moses reminded the Israelites of God’s power in delivering them out of and away from Egypt just months earlier. These events were so recent for the first generation that it is curious why Moses’s reminder of these miracles did not bolster their faith in the Lord. But there is a vast difference between merely living through an experience versus imbuing that experience with personal spiritual significance. This is done by our faithful recognition (witnessing) and response (recording).

President Henry B. Eyring shared in the October 2007 general conference how he felt inspired to adopt a process whereby he could more clearly see God’s hand in the daily events of life:

I wrote down a few lines every day for years. I never missed a day no matter how tired I was or how early I would have to start the next day. Before I would write, I would ponder this question: “Have I seen the hand of God reaching out to touch us or our children or our family today?” As I kept at it, something began to happen. As I would cast my mind over the day, I would see evidence of what God had done for one of us that I had not recognized in the busy moments of the day. As that happened, and it happened often, I realized that trying to remember had allowed God to show me what He had done.

More than gratitude began to grow in my heart. Testimony grew. I became ever more certain that our Heavenly Father hears and answers prayers. I felt more gratitude for the softening and refining that come because of the Atonement of the Savior Jesus Christ. And I grew more confident that the Holy Ghost can bring all things to our remembrance—even things we did not notice or pay attention to when they happened.¹⁰

Jewish scholar Yosef Yerushalmi noted that “the real danger is not so much that what happened in the past will be forgotten, as the more crucial aspect of how it happened.”¹¹ Christian scholar Peter Craigie confirms, “Memory of God’s past course of action and anticipation of his future course of action provide the framework for the present commitment to God in the renewal of the covenant.”¹²

9 Russell M. Nelson, “Christ Is Risen; Faith in Him Will Move Mountains,” April 2021 general conference, online at churchofjesuschrist.org.

10 Henry B. Eyring, “O Remember, Remember,” October 2007 general conference, available at churchofjesuschrist.org.

11 Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1982), 11.

12 Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 40.

So, even when Moses tried to rally them by reminding them of God’s mighty acts, many of the Israelites were untouched because they had only passively experienced the miraculous instead of choosing to use those events to become more fully converted unto the Lord. If we do so, the “Gee whiz, that was amazing” moments will become “Oh Lord, my God!” scenes that will create the powerful portrait of our preservation by the Lord. And, as President Eyring noted, even the seemingly unremarkable days can begin to reveal His hand tenderly and constantly moving in our behalf.

Creating a personal “salvation history” is an active aspect of true discipleship. What efforts have we made to chronicle the Lord’s delivering power in our lives? How can we make them more vivid and more transforming?

1:41–43. “Go not up . . . I am not among you; . . . ye would not hear, but rebelled.” The flip-flopping by the faithless Israelites reveals a significant but often razor’s-edge fault line in our covenant relationship with God. Who is the real “god” in our lives? In this case, it appears the Israelites were their own gods. They did whatever they wanted to do (or didn’t do whatever they didn’t want to do), and only on their own timetable. This is not discipleship despite the gospel language that passes their lips as they declare, “We have sinned against the Lord, we will go up and fight, according to all that the Lord our God commanded us” (Deuteronomy 1:41)—a textbook example of “they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me,” “for with their mouth they shew much love, but their heart goeth after their covetousness” (Joseph Smith—History 1:19; Ezekiel 33:31). And the resultant slaughter (see Deuteronomy 1:44) witnesses the very real dangers of being one’s own god.

A good question to ask ourselves is, “Am I living ‘by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God’ (Matthew 4:4), or is my life in fact only intersecting occasionally with His word?”

Elder D. Todd Christofferson shared a humorous quote attributed to J. Golden Kimball to help illustrate the difference: “I may not have [always] walked the straight and narrow, but I [try] to cross it as often as I [can].”¹³ Elder Christofferson then added his apostolic insight clarifying what is lost if we take a self-defined and self-directed approach to the covenant path versus being all in on the Lord’s terms: “Actually, the difference is uniquely and eternally significant. It includes the nature of our obedience, the character of God’s commitment to us, the divine help we receive, the blessings tied to gathering as a covenant people, and most importantly, our eternal inheritance.”¹⁴

13 D. Todd Christofferson, “Why the Covenant Path,” April 2021 general conference, available at churchofjesuschrist.org.

14 Christofferson, “Why the Covenant Path.”

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