

Intro to Deuteronomy

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Note: references to “Van Rongen’s Book” are to The Words of the Divine Great King: Outlines on Deuteronomy. In our Bible Study we decided to skip the first 5 outlines, since we would otherwise not have time to complete the book in our study season. This introduction therefore has an overview of Deuteronomy, and summarizes the first 11 chapters of that Bible book. There are 3 questions at the end.

I’d like you to think back to what you remember about Medieval times, when kings ruled, knights fought for honour and glory, and peasants tilled the land. Alright, now that you’re thinking about knights in shining armor, who’s the guy who taps him on the shoulder and says “I dub thee sir knight”?

That’s right. The king.

And this happens right after the knight (or soon-to-be-knight) swears fealty to the king.

Does everyone know what “swearing fealty” means?

Pledging allegiance.

So the knight pledged to serve the king with his sword and steed, and the king promised to grant him a title, and usually with it, money and land.

So let’s say this knight becomes a success. He is granted a castle with a village of peasants to be lord over. One of the first things that he does once he’s claimed his castle is... have a swearing-in ceremony, where all the peasants (or vassals) pledge their allegiance to him. He promises to protect the people and give them land to work, and they promise to pay taxes and provide him with what he needs.

So this knight lives a long life, and eventually gets too old to continue as leader. So he appoints someone to be the next leader. Do the vassals need to swear fealty to their new liege lord?

Yup. They repeat the ceremony, and the promises are renewed.

And does the son need to go to the king and swear fealty to him?

Yup. Here again, the ceremony is repeated, and the promises are renewed.

These swearing-in ceremonies, or suzerainty treaties, were around for centuries before our king and knight used them in the medieval ages. In fact, they were quite common in the Ancient Near East. In fact, Deuteronomy is an ancient version of this type of situation.

Moses (the “knight” in our story) is too old, and is handing leadership over to Joshua.

In addition, God had made his original covenant at Mt Sinai with the parents of these people. These people themselves have never “sworn fealty” to their Divine Great King.

So in Deuteronomy we see the covenant renewed, with all the parts of a traditional treaty renewal.

The parts of a suzerainty treaty were:

read bottom of p.11 in VanRongen’s book.

read top of p.12 in VanRongen’s book.

So in chapters 1-11 we hear Moses:

1. introduce himself as God’s spokesman, speaking “all that the LORD had commanded him concerning them.” (like our knight, speaking to his vassals) – the preamble

2. review all that the Lord has done for them. Notice that this part starts with the making of the covenant at Mount Sinai. He then reviews everything that has gone on since the making of that initial covenant. He shows how Israel has been unfaithful, yet God has remained faithful and has blessed the Israelites. They have every reason to swear fealty to the Divine Great King! Note that Chapter 4 is a mini treaty renewal, focussing on the transition from Moses as leader to Joshua as leader. If you look, you will find all of the elements of a “swearing in” ceremony in that chapter. This chapter does belong in the historical prologue, though, because the focus of the Deuteronomy treaty is the renewal of God’s covenant with His vassals Israel.
3. Review the “constitution” of the covenant -- the 10 Commandment, in Deut 5.
4. Start outlining in more detail what the constitution means in practical terms. These covenant stipulations – things the people must do – continue through to ch 26.

After that we find the list of witnesses in chapter 30 (element 4 of a suzerainty treaty)
The curses and blessings for (not) keeping the covenant – ch 28 – 5th element
and finally, the provisions for the periodic public reading of the covenant text in 31:9-13 – 6th element

So why are we starting with Deuteronomy 12 next time?

Remember the constitution was in chapter 5, and then the following chapters worked out in more detail what the people must do? Well, chapters 6-11 focus on the First and Greatest Commandment, the Shema – “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.”

You can understand why any king, medieval, ancient Near Eastern, or otherwise, would make something like “You shall have no other before me” as the primary law. If a vassal would not swear to serve his king before any other king, what use was his oath of allegiance?

And so, God demands our whole hearts. Chapters 6-11 focus on what that means in a practical way. Time and again through these chapters we read “Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today...” You’ll see the words found in 6:1 “decrees, laws and commands” a lot throughout the book. That’s because a treaty is all about those “decrees, laws and commands”.

In Chapter 6 the First and Greatest Commandment is explained from the past, and applied to the future. Chapter 6 exhorts the people to remember what God has done for them. When they enter the Promised Land, they must not say “look what we have accomplished”. And when their children say “Why the 10 Commandments”? They must say “we were slaves in Egypt, and the Great and Divine King saved up. He commanded that if we follow these laws, we will continue to prosper.”

In Chapter 7 the First and Greatest Commandment is applied to the conquest of Canaan. Again, if the people follow the laws, the Lord guarantees that they will receive all the land they need, and God will drive their enemies out at the appointed time. But they must keep separate from the Canaanites, and ensure that the Lord remains first in their hearts.

Chapter 8 points out the danger of the blessings God will bestow. It will be easy for the people to forget that they did not free themselves from Egypt, nor conquer Canaan by their own strength. They must continue to remember this suzerainty treaty, and realize who provided everything for them.

Should the people remember it was God who provided for them, Chapter 9 reminds them that God did not provide for them because they are so righteous. The example of the golden calf is given of how lacking in righteousness the people really were.

Chapter 10 and 11 summarize what's been said, and restate the point "Love the Lord your God!" Then He will bless you with every good thing. If you refuse, you will feel His anger through curses. These laws are spoken by Moses, shortly before his death. We read in chapter 11 they the laws will be re-read (ratified again) when Moses' successor has taken command. This will occur when the Israelites have entered the land, and will stand on Mounts Ebal and Gerizim. There the blessings and curses will be re-read, to ratify the covenant once again.

And that takes us full circle to our king, knight and vassals. In Deuteronomy 1-11 we hear the knight explain to the vassals all of the commands of the King. The vassals must love that King with all their heart, serve Him in all things. Then they will be blessed with every good thing. When the knight, Moses, dies, his successor Joshua will renew the covenant again, so the people can see it is an everlasting covenant, tied to the King, not the knight who presents it.

Questions:

1. Can you find the elements of a suzerainty treaty back in the 10 commandments?
2. Is there a difference between a decree, law and command? If not, why are the words repeated in sentences, e.g, Deut 4:40 "Keep His decrees and commands..."
3. What does the Greatest Commandment (Shema) mean for us today?