

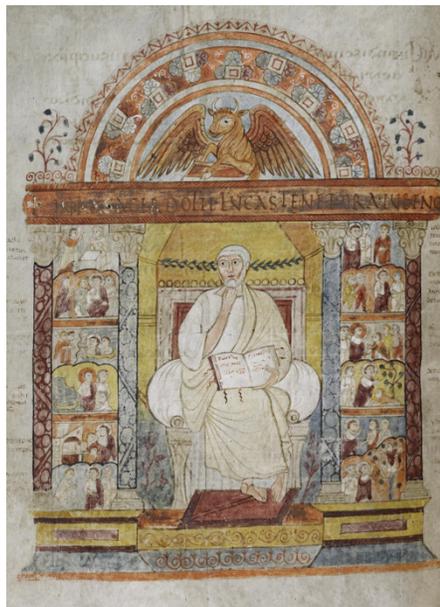
# Deuteronomy

by Mark Glanville

*Deuteronomy displays the radically restorative ethic of the reign of God.*

Deuteronomy shapes Israel to be a ‘display people’ living in the sight of the nations with faithfulness to God, in obedience to his law, committed to the flourishing of everyone in the community. As Israel lives in obedience to the Lord the nations will exclaim: “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people” (Deut 4:7). Deuteronomy records the words of God delivered to Israel through his prophet Moses on the brink of entering the land. Here, before crossing the Jordan, Israel is faced with a decision: to be faithful or not to be faithful—to worship the one true God or to worship other Gods, abandoning the life of justice and generosity that Yahweh has set out in His law.

Deuteronomy is a deeply complex book, which holds a vision for a covenanted community living under Yahweh’s rule. It doesn’t so much address the individual, as hold out a vision for society—Deuteronomy shows that God, in Christ, stakes claim to



every part of culture. It doesn’t merely challenge social injustice (though it does that), but brings the whole of human life within the scope of the covenant life. As God’s people learn to love Yahweh her God, embracing his life-giving rule in Torah, they will live together as kindred—family—a shared life characterised by thanksgiving, joy, justice and generosity.

Some highlights of the book:

## **1. Deuteronomy 1:1-33 *The roots of the church***

God calls a people, shaping this community through his law, and places them in a blessed land. In the arc of the biblical narrative, this is a kind of return to Eden.

## **2. Deuteronomy 4:1-14 *A people of God in the sight of the nations***

‘... mission is not primarily about *going*. Nor is mission primarily about *doing* anything. Mission is about *being*. It is about being a distinctive kind of people, a countercultural . . . community among the nations.’ (Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra)

### 3. Deuteronomy 5:6-21 *The Ten Commandments: God's economics*

The commandments shaped Israelite society to be a place where every person could thrive, in contrast to the oppression and exploitation that the nation had experienced in Egypt—in this way Israel was to be a display people before all the world. To read more on the Ten Commandments, see:

[http://klice.co.uk/uploads/Ethics%20in%20Brief/EiB\\_Glanville\\_22\\_2\\_WEB.pdf](http://klice.co.uk/uploads/Ethics%20in%20Brief/EiB_Glanville_22_2_WEB.pdf)

### 4. Deuteronomy Chapter 8: *The danger of satiation*

Consumerism is a culture of endless accumulation and endless desire. In a consumer culture it is difficult to stop and to be grateful. Gordon McConville writes, "Deut. 8 is perhaps the greatest statement of human dependence on God for everything."

### 5. Deuteronomy 16:1-17 *The festivals: Celebration is the beginning of mission*

God's people are called to be a community of celebration with inclusion and diversity.

### 6. Deuteronomy 24:1-22 *"The Law is rest": A contrast community shaped by the law*

The laws of the Pentateuch shaped Israel to live rightly with one another and with creation. They shaped Israel to be the kind of people who, in N. T. Wright's words, 'show the rest of humanity what being truly human is all about.'

### 7. Deuteronomy 29: *The covenant curses: 'Many will say to me, "Lord, Lord..."*

Deuteronomy 28 and 29 hold out both covenant blessings and covenant curses. Deuteronomy Chapter 29 is a sombre

warning to the covenanted community and to the world that God will not brook rebellion and injustice.

### 8. Deuteronomy Chapter 31: *God's word as an instrument of God's mission*

"The Scriptures do not only record God's mission through his people to bring salvation to the world; they are also a tool to effectively bring it about..." (Michael Goheen).

### The Law Code, Deuteronomy 12-26

In the center of the book of Deuteronomy is the law code (chapters 12-26). Far from the rule-book approach with which the Old Testament law is commonly accused, the Deuteronomic law *frees* the people of God for participation in a new community. Unlike Egypt, Israel is not to be a society where economic production comes

at terrible human cost. Every person is to be accorded dignity—especially the vulnerable. And idolatry with all its dehumanizing implications is to be shunned. What Gerhard Lohfink says of Jesus' miracles is true of the Deuteronomic law: it "liberate[s] from the isolating and destroying demons of a sick society." Israel was uniquely privileged to receive the law, as through the law something entirely new was happening. The law was an

outbreak of a new order for life, the beginning of a new epoch, wherein the future overran the present.

What are we to make of the supposed law-gospel dichotomy in light of these claims? To put the question differently: can the Deuteronomic law be fulfilled? To be sure, as Martin Luther wrote, the law brings us "to a knowledge of our impotence" (e.g. 31:29). First and foremost, however, the

Israel is not to be a society where economic production comes at terrible human cost.

Deuteronomic law is the Great King's blueprint for the communal life of his people Israel. Israel is to put the law into practice. It is "for our good always" (6:24). The law is "rest," that deep Sabbath that humanity and all of creation is longing for. The law shapes a contrast community that lives in the sight of the nations.

Deuteronomy's law code, given in Chapters 12-26, forms the center of the book. The law was to infuse the life of the covenant community. The written law was to be treated with the greatest reverence (31:24-29). Many in the community would have memorized the law (Psalm 1:2). The law was to be taught to the next generation (6:7), and it was to be read every seven years (31:10).

Deuteronomy's law is unique among the law codes of the Pentateuch and of the ANE in its focus on care for vulnerable people. Norbert Lohfink argues convincingly that Deuteronomy's social laws operate as a system with the goal of doing away with poverty altogether. Deuteronomy's law code provides for this by decreasing the likelihood of the vulnerable falling into debt (e.g. 14:28-29; 24:6, 10-15; 26:12-15) and by providing means of recovery when debt occurs (e.g. 15:1-3; 12-18). "It will never be possible to eliminate the existence of strangers, orphans, and widows. But it is possible, according to Deuteronomy, to create a world in which one can be a stranger, an orphan, or a widow without being poor." "There shall be no poor among you," Yahweh himself demands (15:4). The societies of Israel's neighbors in Mesopotamia were characterized by the increasing alienation of a people from their land, by the erosion of ties within kinship groups, and by increasing indebtedness leading to forms of slavery. None of these

were to be true of Israel: she was to be the great contrast society of the ANE.

One figure that features prominently in Deuteronomy's social laws is the "stranger" (e.g. 1:16; 16:11, 14; 26:11). The stranger was a person separated from their inherited land and from the traditional kinship ties that would grant them identity, belonging, and security. Therefore, they were especially vulnerable to exploitation. In other cultures, such as that reflected in the Nuzi *habiru* service contracts for example, impoverished immigrants entered a life-long contract "of their own free will" but from which they were unlikely to ever achieve release. Their status was little better than slavery. In contrast, Deuteronomy insists upon relationships of care where displaced people are protected from exploitation by being included within a landed household and as full participants within a village.

Deuteronomy's social laws display the radically restorative ethic of the reign of God. The book is an ancient example of the kind of community that God desires, as a paradigm for communities at any time and any place. We can inquire: how can worshiping communities embody the kind of mutuality displayed here, living as a foretaste of the Kingdom of God and as an instrument of this Kingdom? ✨

*Bring your questions on the many difficult texts in Deuteronomy to our monthly gathering. On the texts concerning Canaanite destruction, look out for the next book summary on the book of Joshua.*

*To receive a more detailed explanation of Deuteronomy, please email: [markrglanville@gmail.com](mailto:markrglanville@gmail.com)*