
§1 *At the Boundary (Deut. 1:1–5)*

1:1 / The opening words of the book give it a prophetic flavor from the start—**These are the words Moses spoke** (cf. Isa. 1:1; Amos 1:1; etc.). This is reinforced by the repeated emphasis on the role of Moses in verses 3 and 5. His task was to proclaim **all that the LORD commanded him**, a task in which he was also a model for all future prophets (cf. 18:17f.). The relationship between the words of Moses and the words of God in Deuteronomy is sometimes so close that they merge imperceptibly, making exegetical separation quite difficult. “To claim . . . that the Bible nowhere claims to be the ‘Word of God’ is to fail to hear a central claim of Deuteronomy” (D. Christensen, *Deuteronomy*, p. 9). He was also **to expound** the law (cf. Deut. 27:8 and Hab. 2:2). Deuteronomy is thus “preached law”—that is, law explained with prophetic urgency, divine authority, and a preacher’s clarity. Whatever one’s view of the authorship of the book, it was given this introduction in order to stress its abiding relevance **to all Israel**. This is a frequent phrase in Deuteronomy, occurring in the first verse of the book (referring to Moses’ words), in the last verse of the book (referring to Moses’ acts), and about fourteen times between. It stresses the covenant unity of Israel, both horizontally (all in each generation, cf. 29:10ff.) and vertically (throughout all generations, cf. 5:3; 29:14).

Having established the source and the authority of the words to follow, the introduction goes on to fix them in their specific geographical and historical context (another feature of the prophetic books). The word of God is not a message without context. It intersects with the reality of a particular time and place, and is thereby all the sharper in its ongoing relevance. These verses form a bridge with Numbers 36:13, just as the closing chapter links the book with Joshua. The continuity and wholeness of the canon of scriptural books is clearly visible in these short strips of editorial velcro.

The geographical context was **in the desert**, or wilderness, **east of the Jordan . . . in the territory of Moab** (vv. 1, 5). The precise location is uncertain from the list of the place names given. But the point is clear: Israel was still in the wilderness. This last book of the Torah begins and ends with them awaiting possession of the promise that had shaped both their destiny and the literary structure of the Pentateuch itself—namely, the land that God had promised to Abraham. Wilderness, certainly, was the place of God’s grace, protection, and provision, but it was not the place where they were meant to remain. Indeed, the reason they were still there was that it was also a place of God’s judgment and discipline. Both points will be underscored in the rest of this chapter and in the lessons applied in chapter 8.

1:2–3 / The historical context is fixed in two ways. First of all it is dated very precisely to **the fortieth year** after the exodus from Egypt. The generation that had experienced God’s liberation in the exodus had failed to enter into God’s promise of the land because of their fear and rebellion, and had perished in the wilderness. The present generation is here addressed as if they had shared in that collective failure (1:26ff.). It is this implication of verse 3a that may explain the otherwise enigmatic note in verse 2, about the length of time it normally takes to travel from Mt. Sinai to Kadesh Barnea (the oasis just to the south of the land, from which they could have launched their invasion a whole generation earlier). A journey that should have taken them **eleven days** had already lasted forty years. The implication, which is hammered home repeatedly in the following chapters, is that they should not squander the opportunity this time.

1:4 / Secondly, however, and more cheerfully, Moses’ exposition of the law is dated **after he had defeated Sihon . . . and . . . Og**. These events (recorded in Num. 21:21–35 and recollected in Deut. 2:24–3:11) were powerful reminders of God’s past victories, and therefore equally powerful encouragement to move forward to face the even greater challenge ahead. The introduction thus alludes to both negative and positive motivation that Moses fully exploits in the following chapters.

The opening verses thus set the scene for the rest of the book. Geographically, historically, and theologically, Deuteronomy is a book “on the boundary,” speaking powerfully through the ages to every generation of God’s people called to move across

the ever shifting boundary from past experience of God into future unknown circumstances (cf. Miller, *Deuteronomy*, pp. 20f.).

Additional Notes §1

1:1–2 / For a full discussion of the journeyings of Israel in the wilderness, and the problems involved in identifying many of the sites, including Mt. Sinai itself in particular, see G. I. Davies, *The Way of the Wilderness*, and “Location of Mount Horeb.”

1:4 / **Amorites:** See additional note on 7:1.

§2 Structures for Growth (Deut. 1:6–18)

The recollection of this particular event out of all the memories of the wilderness period is a key to one of the book's main purposes, which was to provide Israel with a social, political, moral, and spiritual charter (cf. McBride, "Polity"). Here, and in greater detail in 16:18–18:22, the people are provided with different levels and structures of leadership. Those leaders are then given their primary responsibilities. Deuteronomy thus outlines a theology and an ethos of leadership in the people of God that has both spiritual dimensions and social applications.

1:6 / You have stayed long enough at this mountain was God's way of saying that the purpose for which Israel had been brought to Mt. Sinai was then complete. It was time to move on. The phrase is repeated in 2:3 as a signal that the time of wilderness wandering was also over. For God's pilgrim people, moments come when God says "long enough." There is a boundary to cross, a new phase to enter. Deuteronomy is a book for such times of movement and change.

1:8–11 / This moving forward was grounded in God's promise. The covenant with **Abraham** had three main elements (cf. Gen. 12:1–3) and all of them are woven into vv. 8–11.

People (v. 10). God had promised to make Abraham into a great nation, as numerous as sand and stars. This theme of posterity dominates the Pentateuch (cf. Clines, *Theme*). In the book of Genesis it generates suspense, but in Exodus 1:1–7 it is seen as secured. By the time of the exodus, the multiplication was such that new structures were needed to cope with its extra demands (vv. 12–17).

Blessing (v. 11). God had promised a relationship of special blessing with the descendants of Abraham, a relationship later described in covenantal terms (Gen. 15, 17). Blessing within covenant relationship is the focus of God's dealings with Israel at Mt. Sinai, as recorded in Exodus and Leviticus. The second term of the Abra-

ham covenant thus forms the second major element in the structure of the Pentateuch. Moses prays for that blessing to continue as promised, even as he struggles to cope with its consequences!

Land (v. 8). This becomes the dominant theme of the Pentateuch from the point in Numbers when God told Israel to leave Sinai and head toward the land (Num. 10:11). From then on the focus of the narrative and the perspective of the laws is the promised land, even though the Pentateuch ends just a day's march short of it (Deut. 34). The geographical extent of the land (v. 7) includes the whole of Palestine from the edges of the Sinai desert (the **Negev**), from Mediterranean coast to Jordan valley (the **Arabah**), and as far as Syria in the North (to the **Euphrates**)—a larger area, in fact, than Israel ever historically controlled, even under Solomon. Verse 8, however, expresses Israel's theology of land in a nutshell. It was **the land that the LORD swore he would give . . . and did**. Possession of the land would thus be in itself a monumental, tangible proof of the faithfulness of Yahweh to his promise. The land-gift tradition was a central factor in Israel's sense of dependence on Yahweh. They could never consider themselves an autochthonous people ("sons of the soil"), for they would have been no people and would have had no land apart from the divine gift. The land was thus also a proof of God's grace. But it was land that they had to **go in and take**. Crossing the boundary would mean war and work for this people. The sovereign act of God and human responsive action go together. God's gift of grace needed to be appropriated by faith, obedience, and action. Centuries later, prophets would threaten that the gift could be lost again through unbelief, disobedience, and complacency.

God's promise to Abraham had more in mind than Israel alone. Although it is not explicit in the text at this point, the universal dimension of the Abraham covenant is never far from the surface whenever it is mentioned. The "bottom line" of that covenant was that all nations would be blessed in or through Abraham and his descendants. In the ultimate purpose of God, therefore, a lot more was at stake in Israel's crossing the Jordan into the promised land than merely getting them out of the wilderness. Their next step of obedience was also the next step in the redemption of the world. They needed to be motivated to take that step not just for their own sake, but to move forward in God's historical strategy for bringing blessing to the nations. There was a missionary dimension to Deuteronomy's call for

committed obedience. There always is. The church as a whole and individual Christians need to see every step of obedience that is called for in response to God's grace as being invested with the significance of being woven into God's great plan of blessing the nations.

1:9–12 / **You are too heavy a burden for me to carry alone.** (Cf. Exod. 18:13–26 and Num. 11:10–17.) The problem did not lie in the population growth in itself. That was due to God's blessing, and Moses forestalls any suggestion that he was complaining about it by his prayer that God would multiply them a **thousand times** more (v. 11)! The growing people, however, had turned this blessing into a heavy one with **problems and . . . burdens and . . . disputes** (v. 12). The words are graphic and remind us of the many occasions in the wilderness narrative when the people murmured, complained, disputed, and argued—taxing even Moses' outstanding leadership ability.

1:13–15 / The qualifications for those who were to be appointed to subordinate leadership include both ability (**wise and understanding**), and social standing (**respected**, lit. "known"). They would thus have the gifts and the respect to carry the judicial responsibilities laid on them. The more explicitly moral requirements of spiritual and personal integrity that Jethro had proposed ("men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain," Exod. 18:21) are implied here by the instructions given in verses 16ff.

1:16–17 / The responsibilities given to the tribal judges echo other passages where a heavy emphasis is laid on judicial integrity (cf. Exod. 23:1–9; Deut. 16:18–20; 2 Chron. 19:5–7). God's concern was not merely that God's people should have good laws, but that there should be good administration of law. Three aspects of their duty are highlighted here. (a) They were to **judge fairly** (lit. "judge the right"). The primary duty of judges is to discover where right lies and act accordingly. (b) They were to **not show partiality**, i.e., to not favor the Israelite over the non-Israelite or the rich over the poor. The equal status before the law of the resident alien in Israel is a marked and distinctive feature of Hebrew law (cf. Exod. 12:49; Lev. 24:22; Deut. 29:10ff.; 31:12f.). (c) They were to **not be afraid of any man**, because in exercising justice they were doing the work of God himself. Whether the phrase **judgment belongs to God** means that justice in general is

God's domain or that it was God who gave the judgment (verdict) in particular cases, through human agents, is uncertain, but the second is more probable (cf. 2 Chron. 19:6; Prov. 16:33). Either way, it underlines the elevated status given to judicial activity in Israel. It also enshrines a major feature of constitutional law, namely, that the law has a transcendent value. Promulgated and administered by humans, it possesses an authority above even those who so promulgate and administer it. Behind the law stands the God who loves and requires and gives justice.

The early church modeled itself on the Deuteronomic pattern of devolved leadership portrayed here. When rapid growth under God's blessing (echoing 1:10f.) led to disputes and organizational needs, these were met by a response similar in nature to that of Moses in 1:13–15 (cf. Acts 6:1–7). And inasmuch as Israel was intended to be a model, "a light to the nations" with paradigmatic relevance, there are interesting points of relevance to political and judicial forms of power in any human society today. We shall explore these more in our discussion of chapter 17.

Additional Notes §2

1:8 / The theme of **this land** is clearly one of the most central themes in the whole book and indeed is a key factor in Israel's theological understanding in the whole Hb. Bible. It had two major dimensions, of which the first is expressed in this verse: (a) divine gift; (b) divine ownership—the land still belonged to Yahweh as ultimate divine landlord (cf. Lev. 25:23). Modern study of this theme owes much to the seminal study of von Rad, "The Promised Land." See also Brueggemann, *The Land*, and C. J. H. Wright, *God's Land*.

1:15–16 / Three terms are used here for leaders in Israel. **Commanders:** The *šārîm* are primarily military officers here, but the term is also used of civil officers entrusted with supervision of work forces. Later it describes princes and court officials. **Officials:** similarly, *šōt'ârîm* (the term used in 16:18) are civil officials, probably with secretarial skills, who assist judges and other higher ranks of officialdom. **Judges:** the *šōp'tîm* are those responsible for the administration of justice throughout Israel; this is one of the most important roles in the whole society and comes under constant moral scrutiny by the later prophets. On parallels between these officials and the instructions given them and other ancient Near Eastern societies, especially Hittite and Egyptian documents, cf. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy*, pp. 140f.

1:16 / An alien: The *gēr/gērîm* denotes a class of people who were landless but resided in Israel's land under the protection of Israelite families. They may have been remnants of the original population or people who immigrated for various reasons. Being without the natural double protection of land and family, they were vulnerable to exploitation and oppression. Israel's memory of its "resident alien" status in Egypt was a powerful moral spur to humane treatment of aliens in its own midst (cf. Exod. 23:9). The Israelites' status before Yahweh as the supreme landlord is elsewhere expressed by the description of them as *gērîm* with him on his land (Lev. 25:23). On the social and economic situation of this class, cf. C. J. H. Wright, *God's Land*, pp. 58–64, 99–103; van Houten, *The Alien*.

§3 A Reminder of Wasted Opportunity (Deut. 1:19–46)

The journey from Horeb (Mt. Sinai) to the oasis of Kadesh Barnea takes about eleven days (v. 2). But when the newly freed Israelites got there, they lacked the nerve to possess the promised land, and thus had to wait for thirty-eight years in the wilderness. The events (cf. Num. 13–14) are recalled here in order to challenge the new generation to not fail again. One wasted generation was enough. It is an interesting feature of Deuteronomy, however, that the succeeding generations of Israel are treated as if they were the actors in that earlier drama. **All of you came to me . . .** (vv. 22ff.). Conversely, the covenant relationship that had been established at Sinai is explicitly said to have been made also with this next generation (cf. 5:3; 11:2–7; 29:14f.). All people of God have a solidarity and continuity in their actions and relationships, and this is the essence of the covenantal structure and ethos of Deuteronomy.

1:22–23 / Then all of you came to me and said . . . The idea seemed good to me. This is an interestingly different way of describing the initiative in the sending out of the spies from how the matter is presented in Numbers, where it is at God's command (Num. 13:1–3). But there is no need to assume that everything Moses interpreted as a word or command from Yahweh had to come by direct revelation. God could speak to him through the ideas and suggestions of others. In a similar way, vv. 9–14 describe a proposal that originally came from Jethro as if it were Moses' own idea. It seems unnecessary to regard the differences as coming from different documents (cf. Mayes, *Deuteronomy*, p. 126). It is perfectly natural to envisage a suggestion of the people being interpreted by Moses as the will of God, and then the actual command being given by Moses himself.

1:24–46 / With the return of the spies and the good report of some of them (the bad report of the others is suspended

until v. 28), the original command **Go up and take possession of the land** (v. 21) has been reinforced by the encouragement, **it is a good land that the LORD our God is giving us**. This makes the people's next response all the more surprising and shocking: **But you were unwilling to go up** (v. 26). The rest of the section is presented as an ever intensifying resistance to all Moses' encouragements, ending in the debacle of an attempted conquest and humiliating defeat. Structurally, the narrative has a dramatic dialogue form, with alternating responses among the people, Moses, and God. The people's initial refusal (vv. 26–28) is countered by Moses' encouragement (vv. 29–31). This meets the people's continued refusal (vv. 32–33), which in turn arouses God's anger against them (vv. 34–36) and even against Moses (vv. 37–40). The people then change their minds (v. 41) in spite of God's warning (v. 42), and their final rebellion ends in disaster (vv. 43–46).

Three reasons for the people's failure of nerve are highlighted in the text.

Grumbling rebellion (vv. 26–27). The theme of Israel's murmurings and discontents chimes dolefully all through the narrative of their movements ever since the immediate aftermath of the exodus itself. "Stiff-necked" had become Moses' favorite term for them, echoing God's own opinion (Exod. 32:9; 33:3; 34:9; Deut. 9:6). But this time there is something of a climax. Of all their rebellions this was surely the most serious and the most costly. The bitterness of their disobedience is expressed in their words, in which they accuse God of quite absurd motives in what he had done for them. **The LORD hates us . . .** (v. 27). The very events that had been the greatest proof of God's love for them and of God's faithfulness to the promise to their ancestors are inverted into proof of God's malevolence (cf. 7:6–8)! Such a reaction, though certainly shocking in its context here, is not surprising as a symptom of depression and despair. It is sadly typical that even the people of God turn on God in accusation and blame when things go wrong, when obstacles seem insuperable, or when prolonged frustration leads to exhaustion.

Fear (v. 28). The bad report of the majority of spies (Num. 13:26–33) weakened the Israelites' resolve; they felt inferior and panicked. There were giants ahead! The irony is that they were in the kind of state of mind that God had promised to inflict on their enemies (cf. 2:25)—and later did (Josh. 2:11; 5:1; cf. Exod. 14:10).

Unbelief, in spite of evidence (vv. 29–32). One antidote to such fear is a good memory. Moses urges them to be unafraid in view of what they had already seen in their own recent past—God’s victory over the Egyptians (v. 30) and God’s parental care for them in the wilderness (vv. 31, 33). They had experienced Yahweh both as fighter and as father, as savior and as provider—a powerful combination of metaphors that echoes through the whole Bible. But **in spite of this, you did not trust in the LORD your God**. In spite of such evidence, they would not move forward in faith. Faith was no leap in the dark, but a perfectly reasonable step forward with eyes opened wide to what God had already done in the past and had promised to repeat in the future. God would be **ahead of** them as he had been behind them (v. 33). Israel’s refusal in this circumstance was not prudence or realism but sheer unbelief that exhausted God’s patience and led to judgment.

The seriousness of God’s reaction to such a litany of rebellion is seen in the fact that the same expression is used for God’s declared intent in judgment (vv. 34–36) as for the original promise of blessing: **the LORD . . . solemnly swore**. This particular generation had finally excluded itself from the enjoyment of the covenanted blessing of the promise to Abraham. The covenant as such was not revoked, but this generation would not **see** its fulfillment. Their eyes were sealed in unbelief. With such eyes they would never see the promised land.

Rebellion turns to presumption. Mortified by God’s response, the people decide to “have a go” and in the process turn their delayed obedience to God’s earlier command into direct disobedience to the latest instruction (vv. 40–46). The most serious flaw in the whole enterprise was that God had said, **“I will not be with you.”** The last time Israel had heard such dreadful words was after the terrible golden calf apostasy at Mt. Sinai (Exod. 33:1–3). On that occasion Moses had realized only too clearly the implications of such an absence of God in their midst and told God that he would prefer to stay put in the wilderness rather than move forward without the presence of God (Exod. 33:15f.). Here, however, the people show no such awareness of the reality of their situation. The result demonstrated beyond all doubt that the only criterion of their success or failure lay in whether or not Yahweh was with them. Presumably this expedition did not differ in physical strength, military resources, or the number of fighting men from the expedition

God had originally commanded. The only difference was the lack of God's presence; but then, that was the only difference that mattered.

It is possible for the same action in the same circumstances to be an act of obedience or an act of disobedience, depending on the word of God in relation to it. It is possible for it to succeed or fail, depending on the presence or absence of God in the enterprise. Israel later learned through equally humiliating events (the loss of the ark to the Philistines) that the presence of God could not be physically or magically dragooned into the service of a disobedient people either (1 Sam. 4). Later still they expressed this principle in a psalm that sees all basic human action—building, working, raising a family—as fruitless without God (Ps. 127).

The whole section, 1:26–46, is a litany of disaster, punctuated by the sad refrain of the people's attitudes and actions. The sequence of verbs is poignant, climactic, and sobering. It stands as a warning to every generation of God's people to avoid such a chain reaction: **you were unwilling . . . you rebelled . . . you grumbled . . . you were afraid . . . you saw but . . . you did not trust . . . you thought it easy . . . you would not listen . . . you rebelled . . . you came back . . . you wept . . . you stayed.**

Additional Notes §3

1:28 / The **Anakites** was a term used for the previous inhabitants of Canaan, some of whom were apparently of unusual stature. The LXX translates it as "giants" (cf. 2:10f., 21; 9:2).

1:31 / The metaphor of God as a **father** who, in this case, **carries** Israel as **his son**, is found again, with a disciplinary flavor, in 8:5. The fatherhood-sonship theme is also reflected in the call for distinctive living (14:1) and is appealed to negatively in the powerful "prophetic" accusation of Israel in 32:5f., 18–20. It also underlies the description of the land as Israel's "inheritance" from Yahweh. It was, in fact, another way of expressing the covenant relationship and added a more personal and relationally durable dimension to it. See C. J. H. Wright, *God's Land*, pp. 15–22.

1:37 / On the exclusion of Moses also from the land, see commentary below at 3:26ff., and cf. 4:21f. and 34:1–4.

1:38 / The appointment of Joshua as successor did not actually take place at Kadesh Barnea in the context of the events being recalled here, but Moses adds it as an aside since obviously if Moses himself was not going to lead the people into the land, it was natural to ask who would. The mention of Joshua as his successor here at the beginning of the book, linking up with the full description of it at the end, adds to the effect of the whole book standing as “the last will and testament” of Moses. It is also a significant factor binding together both parts of the “outer frame” of the whole book (cf. 31:1–8, 14, 23; 34:9).

§4 Reminder of Past Victories (Deut. 2:1–3:29)

The first three chapters of Deuteronomy not only warn the people from past failures but also encourage them from past victories. The words to Joshua near the end of the section (3:21f.) give the point of the whole: God can do again what they had seen God do before, even for other nations. Their God did not lack experience! The structure of the section can be presented as follows:

2:1–8	Encounter with Edom
2:9–18	Encounter with Moab
2:19–23	Encounter with Ammon
2:24–37	Encounter with Sihon
3:1–11	Encounter with Og
3:12–20	Settlement of the Transjordan tribes
3:21–22	Encouragement of Joshua
3:23–29	Exclusion of Moses

The narrative summarizes and systematizes the events of Numbers 20–21 around two concerns. First, it underscores the sovereignty of Yahweh in all the events described. His initiation and direction of Israel's movements are repeatedly mentioned, and even the parenthetical footnotes of the chapter (2:10–12, 20–23) attribute previous national migrations and conquests to Yahweh's sovereignty.

Secondly, it seems designed to explain why some nations along Israel's route remained unmolested while others were conquered and dispossessed. The claims of brotherhood (an important ethical motivation later in the book) protected Edom (2:4, 8; cf. 23:7a). Moab and Ammon have a similar claim, being distantly related to Israel in the Genesis family archives (Gen. 19:30–38), but in their case the reason they are protected is explicitly told: Yahweh had already given them their lands by driving out earlier inhabitants, and the present arrangements were not to be dis-

turbed (2:9–12, 19–21). However, when Sihon and Og resisted and attacked Israel, in spite of peace overtures in the former case, they met their doom.

2:1 / By echoing 1:40, the last explicit command of God, the narrative signals Israel's return to a more obedient behavior and thus prepares the way for the positive flavor of the following two chapters, in contrast to the gloom of 1:19–46.

2:2–8 / There are some differences between the account of Israel's dealings with Edom contained in Deuteronomy and that in Numbers 20:14–21. Deuteronomy uses **descendants of Esau** rather than Edom, in order to highlight the claim of kinship (cf. Gen. 36). Deuteronomy omits the request of Moses to pass through Edomite territory and its outright rejection by the king of Edom, thus passing over the hostility implied in the Numbers narrative. These differences doubtlessly stem from Deuteronomy's overall theological aim to compare the fates of the five nations. Conversely, the idea of Yahweh having given the land of Edom to Esau is not found in Numbers, but is Deuteronomy's way of adding to the theological interpretation of history.

The accounts do not necessarily conflict. Numbers tells us that the king of Edom displayed his military strength to deter Israel from marching through his land (Num. 20:20); he did not actually attack Israel and so would not have merited the fate of Sihon or Og. It is also possible (cf. Driver, *Deuteronomy*, p. 34) that the Numbers account describes Israel's earlier request to Edom, whereas Deuteronomy refers to their march around Edom just before their actual entry into the land. The geographical details of the stages of Israel's route are obscure, so that we do not know exactly how Israel **went on past** Edom, though it seems likely that they skirted it on its eastern border.

2:9–12 / Moab was not to be conquered either, not because of a particularly benevolent attitude toward Moab (cf. 23:3–6), but simply because Yahweh had **given Ar to the descendants of Lot as a possession**. When Deuteronomy's prominent land theology in relation to Israel's possession of Canaan is taken into account, this direct statement that Yahweh had given other lands to other peoples, supported by the parenthetical notes that follow, is quite remarkable. Three times this passage says that Yahweh had given land to other peoples—to Edom (v. 5), to Moab (v. 9), and to Ammon (v. 9)—using the same vocabulary as is

characteristically used of his land-gift to Israel. On top of this, the antiquarian footnotes (vv. 10–12 and vv. 20–23) inform us that the processes of migration and conquest that lay behind the then current territorial map had also been under the control of Yahweh. Not only is the same language used as for Israel's settlement, but the comparison is explicitly drawn: other nations had conquered and settled **just as Israel did in the land the LORD gave them as their possession** (v. 12).

More theology is tucked into these obscure notes than the NIV's understandable use of parentheses might suggest—some of it explicit, some latent. First, these notes unambiguously assert Yahweh's multinational sovereignty. The same God who had declared to Pharaoh that the whole earth belonged to God (Exod. 9:14, 16, 29) had been moving other nations around on the chessboard of history long before Israel's historic exodus and settlement. This universal sovereignty over the nations mattered a great deal to Israel in subsequent centuries as they themselves joined the ranks of the attacked and the dispossessed. Later prophetic understanding of Yahweh's "use" of the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians as agents of Yahweh's purposes in history is in fact consistent with this deeper theme of God's ultimate, universal direction of the destiny of nations (cf. Deut. 32:8; Jer. 18:1–10; 27:1–7).

Secondly, these notes relativize Deuteronomy's land-gift tradition itself, though not in the sense of questioning or undermining it. The affirmation of Yahweh's gift of land to Israel in fulfillment of his promise to Abraham is one of the fundamental pillars of Deuteronomy's whole worldview. However, it was, in principle and at a purely historical level, no different from what God had done in other nations. In the immediate context, Israel's defeat and territorial takeover of the lands of Sihon and Og was no different from other nations' earlier migrations and forceful settlements; all are attributed to the sovereign disposition of Yahweh.

Because God had also given lands to other nations, Israel's uniqueness lay, not in having merely received land from Yahweh, but in its covenant relationship with Yahweh. And that covenant was based on God's faithfulness to the promise to Abraham and God's historical act of redemption from Egypt. If that covenant were to be threatened by Israel's neglect, then the mere historical facts of exodus and settlement would count for nothing more in the face of God's judgment than the migrations of other nations.

Elsewhere Deuteronomy warns Israel against reading any kind of privileged superiority or pride into their remarkable history, whether numerical (7:7–8), economic (8:17–18), or moral (9:4–6). Amos shocked the people by putting Israel’s exodus on the same level as other migrations orchestrated by Yahweh (Amos 9:7), and Jeremiah risked a public lynching by suggesting that Yahweh could destroy his temple and revoke the gift of land by expelling the people (Jer. 7:1–7, 26). Such prophetic threats sounded radical and shocking to the complacent people they addressed, but did no more than amplify the principles already laid down in the Torah. The driving out of nations and the gift of land to Israel were a tremendous historical encouragement and also a tremendous historical warning. God could and would do the same to Israel if they gave cause by following the ways of the nations (cf. Lev. 18:24–28; 20:22–24).

2:13–15 / Almost as a hidden echo of the implicit warning just referred to, these verses remind the present generation that the very generation that had experienced the incredible blessing of the exodus itself had forfeited their enjoyment of its purpose and had perished outside the land. It is a flashback to the negative account of 1:26–46. It gains its rhetorical power by an inversion of the “holy war” motif. That is, it takes phrases normally used against the enemies of Israel (**perished . . . the LORD’s hand . . . against them . . . completely eliminated**) and directs them at Israel itself. Paul used the same event as a continued warning to God’s people, on the explicit hermeneutical principle that “these things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us” (1 Cor. 10:1–13).

2:16–23 / Israel’s nonharassment of the Ammonites (on this occasion!) is noted in the same way and is for the same reason as in the case of the Moabites. This time, however, the explanatory geographical note adds a reference to a region not involved at all in the current narrative, namely, the “Gaza strip,” which had been populated by the Avvites and was taken over by the Caphorites, usually thought to be the Philistines migrating from Crete and the Aegean region (v. 23). The very incidental nature of this piece of information, which has no other apparent reason for inclusion, seems to underline the affirmation of Yahweh’s sovereignty in international history and geography.

2:24–30 / **The Arnon Gorge**, running into the Dead Sea, marked the northern boundary of Moab and the southern boundary of Ammon. The Ammonite territory, however, lay to the east, stretching as far north as the Jabbok, which flowed into the Jordan. The territory to the west of the Ammonites actually bordered the eastern bank of the Jordan and belonged to **Sihon the Amorite, king of Heshbon**. The Israelites needed to pass through this territory in order to cross the Jordan into the promised land. Sihon's refusal to let them do so led to his land being not merely traversed, but conquered and annexed to Israel's tribal allotments.

The narrative that follows is a small-scale example of the Old Testament's view of historical responsibility, of which the story of Pharaoh and the plagues of Egypt is the classic case study. Why did Israel capture the land of Sihon? At one level, it was because Sihon chose to reject a request for peaceful transit (vv. 26–30)—a decision for which he was fully responsible. But at another level it was because Yahweh had already **given** Sihon's land into the hand of the Israelites and for that purpose **had made his spirit stubborn and his heart obstinate** (v. 30). Neither pole of the explanation should be collapsed into the other. That is, we should not view the theological explanation as merely a post factum spiritualization of historical events, nor should we think of Sihon (or Pharaoh) as a mere puppet stripped of personal accountability by a manipulating God. It is characteristic of Deuteronomy and the Hebrew scriptures generally to affirm with equal strength the divine will and purpose and the human responsible choice. History is the mysterious combination of both, neither operating independently of the other. Other examples of the same dual responsibility for a course of events include the stories of Joseph (Gen. 50:20), the division of the kingdoms after Solomon (1 Kgs. 11:29–12:24), and the death of Ahab (1 Kgs. 22:1–38).

Just as 2:1 signaled Israel's return to obedience, so 2:25 signals Yahweh's return to the active fulfillment of his promise (Exod. 15:14, 16). The fact that Sihon defied the divinely induced panic of the nations (expressed with characteristic rhetorical hyperbole—**all the nations under heaven**) underlines his own culpability for the destruction that followed.

2:31–37 / Since Sihon was a king of an Amorite people, this battle really represents Israel's first victory over the peoples

of the land God had promised. It is thus described in language characteristic of the later accounts of the conquest. There is the same unselfconscious linking together of divine will and human action: **I have begun to deliver . . . [you] begin to conquer** (v. 31); **the LORD our God delivered him over to us and we struck him down** (v. 33); **we took all his towns** (v. 34) . . . **The LORD our God gave us all of them** (v. 36). There is also the application of the rules of war fought in the name of Yahweh (often called “holy wars,” a nonbiblical term that is generally worth avoiding because of its later connotations; see discussion in additional notes §23). This involved the “devotion” to Yahweh of the enemy through total destruction. Sometimes, but not always, this included the destruction of all booty as well—on this occasion Israel kept what they captured (v. 35). The laws of war and the problems associated with the ban on confiscating goods (*hērem*) will be discussed further in the commentary on chapters 7 and 20.

It might be slightly fanciful to detect a note of “I told you so!” in the bald statement, **not one town was too strong** (lit. “too high”) **for us** (v. 36). But it does seem to be a rebuking answer to the fear of the people (1:28). The previous generation had squandered their opportunity to take the land because they were intimidated by tall people and tall cities. Now their offspring discovered that height was no hindrance to the hand of God and a people moving in obedience (v. 37).

3:1–11 / The account of the defeat of Og and the capture of his territory in Bashan follows the earlier narrative in Numbers 21:32–35 closely and is very similar to the encounter with Sihon. Bashan is the territory to the northeast of the Jordan river, famed for its fertility and rich pastureland (cf. Amos 4:1). Clearly it was also well-populated and urbanized (3:4–5). As with the cities of Sihon, the fortifications and defenses were no obstacle to Israel. As a result, therefore, of Sihon’s (and presumably Og’s) resistance to Israel’s initially peaceful request, Israel gained possession of large tracts of land on the eastern side of the Jordan, **from the Arnon Gorge as far as Mount Hermon** (v. 8).

3:12–17 / This summary of the settlement of the trans-jordan tribes (Reuben, Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh) simply gives the result of a heated discussion between their leaders and Moses about their right to settle there. The full record is in Numbers 32. It is again characteristic that the Deuteronomic summary narrative somewhat changes the “flavor” without introducing

serious conflict. What matters here is the outcome, not the emotions, of the decision.

3:18–20 / These verses emphasize the unity and solidarity of God's people. It would have been easy for the Transjordan tribes to settle down in their land and let the other tribes get on with their conquests. So Moses reminds them first that **the LORD your God has given you this land to take possession of it** (v. 18); they have no "natural right" of conquest, and secondly that God is giving much land to their brothers **across the Jordan** (v. 20). So it was not a matter of who conquered what. All the tribes would owe their land to God's gift, and so all the tribes must fight together to possess what God had given to all. Only when God had given **rest** to all would any be free of obligation to help the others.

The principle expressed here remained an ideal in Israel. In fact, in the turbulent centuries that followed, about the only thing that united the scattered tribes of Israel was this sense of mutual obligation, arising from a common awareness of being "Israel" and a common sense of commitment to Yahweh as the God of Israel. This unity was an ideal that was usually recognized only when it was broken. Thus, at the time of the great conflict with the Canaanites under Deborah and Barak, Deborah celebrated those tribes that had come to help in the battle and roundly condemned those that had not, including, unfortunately, the Transjordanians (Judg. 5).

3:21–22 / To close his opening historical survey, Moses looks forward to the future as entrusted into the hands of his successor, Joshua. The lessons of the past were especially for him, and the most important lesson of all was that God's victories were infinitely repeatable. If God could defeat two kings, God could defeat many more. Yahweh was a God who was not coincidentally lucky, but consistently victorious. These words, placed here, are picked up again in 31:1–8, when Moses actually commissions Joshua. They thus reinforce the nature of Deuteronomy as the "last testament" of Moses and give the whole book a forward look toward life in the land. This is confirmed again when the book of Joshua opens with a repetition of Moses' encouragement to Joshua, placed this time in the mouth of God (Josh. 1:1–9).

3:23–25 / There is a touching pathos in the way Moses turns from his encouraging words to Joshua, who has a bright future ahead of him, to his own sad longing to be allowed to share that future. **I pleaded** is a strong expression meaning to beg for grace and mercy out of desperation (cf. Ps. 30:8–10). Moses' plea is an impassioned one. He addresses himself personally to the God he knows by name: **Sovereign LORD**—a title for God that in Deuteronomy is used only in the prayers of Moses, for himself here and for the people in 9:26. He calls himself **your servant**—the privileged title that Moses shared with only a few people in the OT. He has a long-term understanding of God's will and purpose, such that he can look back over the incredible acts of God in two generations and realize that they were only "the beginning" of God's greatness (rather like the way Luke can describe his gospel as merely what Jesus "began to do and to teach," Acts 1:1)! Surely God will allow him to witness the next stage of that purpose. Moses acknowledges the uniqueness of Yahweh in terms he will later impress on Israel (4:35, 39). And finally, he knows that the whole point of his life's work, ever since the fiery encounter at the burning bush propelled him so reluctantly back to Egypt, has been to get this people into **the good land beyond the Jordan**. How could God keep him from seeing the fruition of all his labors?

3:26–29 / How indeed? Yet God said "no." The depth of the pain and disappointment that the divine refusal caused Moses can be seen in the number of times he refers to it. (1:37; 3:26; 4:21; cf. 31:2; 32:48–52; 34:4). So even if he stopped talking to God about it (v. 26 suggests he had been making a persistent request), he didn't stop reminding the Israelites of it: **because of you the LORD was angry with me!** The exclusion of Moses from entering the promised land figures so largely here, and was probably as much a surprise to the original readers as it is to us, that it invites some theological reflection.

When one puts together all the passages that bear on Moses' exclusion, they offer us at least two perspectives. On the one hand, our text here and the two closest to it in Deuteronomy, 1:37 and 4:21, give the impression that it was the people's fault. Moses suffered "because of" them. On the other hand, Deuteronomy 32:48–52 reflects the narrative in Numbers 20, in which Moses himself, under provocation from the people's complaining about lack of water at Meribah, apparently failed

in some unspecified way to uphold God's holiness among them (Num.20:12).

So was it Moses' own fault or was he the victim of the people's rebellion? Probably we should not try to separate the two perspectives so rigidly. Least helpful of all, in my view, is to try to solve the problem on source critical grounds by suggesting that in the original Deuteronomic account Moses was entirely innocent but suffered with and for the people, and that it is only the priestly writer, under the alleged influence of Ezekiel 18, who introduced the idea that Moses himself must have sinned. This might account for Numbers 20:9–12, but it also requires the questionable assumption that Deuteronomy 32:51f. is a Priestly addition to Deuteronomy.

Since Moses' purpose was to exhort the new generation *not* to go on failing as their parents had done, one can understand why his reference to his own exclusion dwells on the people's part in it and omits his own. In a sense, then, the phrase **because of you** is justified. Though not without fault himself, Moses was bearing the punishment of his own generation (that of the exodus) along with them, and bearing the punishment that even the following generation should have had. *Nobody* deserved to go into the land! Moses' death outside the land would witness to the reality of judgment, just as Joshua's victorious entry would witness to the reality of forgiving, covenant grace. This perspective seems close to the surface in 4:21–22. Moses will die, but the people will live. Judgment and grace are interwoven.

So, while it is right not to use the expression "vicarious suffering" for Moses' exclusion (after all, the original rebels also died in the wilderness, so Moses did not die "for them"), nevertheless, in some sense Moses was bearing more of the suffering of his people than was his personal due. He was not himself an innocent victim. But he suffered "because of" the people's sin—a sin that he had not directly shared, yet that had somehow induced his own failure. He entered into the suffering of his people and of the God of his people in a way that, like so much else in his life, foreshadowed that future servant of Yahweh who would indeed offer a blameless life for the sins of us all (Isa. 53:4–6). Would it have eased Moses' pain and disappointment, we might wonder, if he could have known that one day he would stand in the land on another mountaintop and have a conversation with that very servant about the sacrifice (indeed, the "exodus," Luke 9:31) *he* was about to accomplish?

And so this remarkable introduction to the book comes to a close, in a way that anticipates the sequence with which the whole book will end: the commissioning of Joshua, Moses' ascent and death at Mt. Pisgah, and the positioning of the people at Beth Peor—a day's journey from the promised land itself. The boundary has been very clearly drawn—geographically, historically, theologically, and morally. Moses has kindled his people's memories: memories of blessings so great that new organizational structures were required to cope with them (1:9–18); memories of rebellion so horrific that a whole generation had forfeited further blessing and perished in the wilderness (1:19–46); memories of divine guidance that negotiated a path through lands God had given to others (2:1–23); memories of past victories that inspired future courage (2:24–3:11, 21f.); memories of commitments to unity and solidarity in the struggles of God's people (3:12–20). It is time now to move forward and cross that boundary, because **you have stayed long enough** on this side of it (1:6; cf. 2:2).

Additional Notes §4

2:10–12, 20 / The identities of the groups mentioned in these verses are shrouded in uncertainty. On **Emim** and **Zamzummim**, cf. Gen. 14:5. **Rephaim** are a legendary race of giants (Deut. 3:13; Gen. 14:5; Gen. 15:20; Num. 13:32; Josh. 13:12) who later seem to have survived among the Philistines and around Hebron (2 Sam. 21:15–22; Josh. 11:22).

3:11 / Apart from his defeat by Israel, the only thing Og has bequeathed to the annals of history is the size of his bed! Commentators have puzzled over the purpose of this detail. The size was probably honorific—a truly “king-size” bed, though Og, as one of the last of the notoriously large **Rephaites**, was likely a very tall individual. Millard has argued from archaeological evidence, first that Og's “iron bed” was indeed a bed and not (as many commentators and an NIV footnote suggest) a basalt sarcophagus, and secondly, that it was probably a wooden frame plated or decorated with iron, not solid iron (like “ivory palace,” Ps. 45:8). At this point in history, the transition from the Late Bronze to Early Iron Age, iron is still a precious and costly metal and therefore fit for the decor of the royal bedroom. Millard also suggests that since iron became the common metal of following centuries, this small incidental note about a remarkable “iron bed” is consistent with an

early date for Deut. Cf. Millard, "King Og's Bed." Unlike Og, the matter has not been laid to rest: cf. Drews, "Chariots of Iron," and Millard, "Iron Bed."

3:26 / A stark contrast between the Deuteronomic explanation for God's denial of Moses' desire to enter the promised land and the one given in Num. 20 is argued by Mann, "Denial of Moses," linking it questionably with reflection on the death of Josiah.

The severity and apparent injustice of God's refusal to allow Moses to enter the promised land, and the circumstances of his death outside it, has greatly exercised the minds of Jewish commentators from the earliest times. For a fascinating survey of some of the relevant midrashic and haggadic interpretations, see Goldin, "The Death of Moses."