

# I

## Preamble (Deuteronomy 1:1–8)

**K**line states that ‘Ancient suzerainty treaties began with a preamble in which the speaker, the one who was declaring his lordship and demanding the vassal’s allegiance, identified himself.’<sup>1</sup> The preamble of Deuteronomy identifies Moses as the speaker of the words of the covenant (1:1). He is the covenant mediator, and the words he speaks are the words of the sovereign Suzerain (1:3); as prophet of Yahweh (18:15), he is understood to be the one who pronounces the very words of God.

*1:1–2. These are the words which Moses spoke to all Israel across the Jordan in the wilderness, in the Arabah opposite Suph between Paran and Tophel and Laban and Hazeroth and Di-Zahab. It is eleven days from Horeb by the way of Mount Seir to Kadesh-barnea.*

In the Masoretic Text the initial clause, ‘These are the words’, serves as the superscription or title of the book. And it also points to the nature of the document: the book of Deuteronomy records the words of Moses — he is the narrator of this document. The recipient of the narration is ‘all Israel’, and this is a common expression in Deuteronomy to describe the people in covenant (5:1; 31:30; 32:45).

These two verses not only define speaker and audience, but they provide the setting of the giving of Deuteronomy in its historical and geographical contexts. Time and place are thus specified. First, this second giving of the law occurs in Transjordan in the land of Moab.<sup>2</sup> The specific locations of the sites listed are uncertain. The Jewish *Targum Onkelos* attempted to reconstruct history by translating and interpreting the site names in the following way: ‘opposite Yam Suf in Paran where they slandered the manna, and in Hazeroth where they angered [God] concerning the meat and because they served the golden calf’. The place name Tophel is interpreted to mean ‘slander’, Laban as ‘white’ (a reference to the manna) and Di-Zahab as ‘sufficiency of gold’ (i.e. the golden calf). This understanding appears to be fanciful. The Septuagint is no more lucid than the Masoretic Text regarding specific locales.

Verse 2 is a time designation. The people have left Horeb (= Sinai) and the episode of unfaithfulness has already occurred at Kadesh-barnea (Num. 13). Thus the Israelites are at the end of the wilderness wanderings and they are poised to cross the Jordan River and to capture the promised land.

The eleven-day march from Horeb to Kadesh-barnea does not seem to fit with the itinerary of Numbers 33:16–36, which lists at least twenty camp-sites between the two places. One possibility is that the Hebrews doubled back after having initially arrived at Kadesh-barnea in eleven days. ‘Such a suggestion need cause no

surprise, since the Bible tells us of at least two distinct occasions (Num. 13:26 and 20:1) that the Israelites arrived at Kadesh-barnea during their 40 years of wandering and yet this name appears only once in Numbers 33.<sup>3</sup>

1:3–4. *And it came to pass in the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month, that Moses spoke to the sons of Israel according to all that Yahweh had commanded him [to say] to them, after he had punished Sihon, the King of the Amorites who was dwelling in Heshbon, and Og, the King of Bashan who was dwelling in Ashtoroth at Edrei.*

The opening verse here provides the precise date of Moses' address to the people of Israel recorded in the book of Deuteronomy. It is the only exact date given in the book. His speech occurs near the close of the fortieth year — that is, at the very end of the wilderness wanderings. It is taking place just prior to Israel's conquest of the promised land.

The second verse provides a time designation in relation to recent events. The term 'after' is a temporal particle that gives a *terminus post quem*, or earliest possible date, for Moses' address; in other words, his speeches recorded in Deuteronomy do not precede the events specified. The defeat of Sihon and Og is described in Numbers 21:21–35. All four geographical locations mentioned lay in Transjordan (i.e., east of the Jordan River). The Hebrews have generally secured this area and now they stand ready to invade and conquer Canaan. Perhaps these conquests of Sihon and Og are purposefully cited as precursors; in other words, they anticipate what is coming.

1:5–8. *Across the Jordan in the land of Moab, Moses resolved to expound this law, saying, 'Yahweh our God spoke to us at Horeb, saying, "You have dwelt*

*too long at this mountain. Turn and set out and enter the hill country of the Amorites and into all [the land of] their neighbours in the Arabah, in the hill country, and in the Shephelah, and in the Negev, and in the coast of the sea, the land of the Canaanites, and the Lebanon as far as the great river, the Euphrates River. See, I have set the land before you. Enter and possess the land that Yahweh swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob, to give [it] to them and their seed after them.”*

Here begins the first speech of Moses (1:5–4:40). Moses’ purpose is to begin ‘to expound’ upon the law. That Hebrew verb means to make something distinct, plain and clear.<sup>4</sup> It is used in Habakkuk 2:2 of writing on tablets that may easily be read by a person who is running past them. The verb is later employed in Deuteronomy of God’s command for Israel to write the law on standing stones ‘very distinctly’ (27:8). Moses is, therefore, not merely rehashing the laws of Sinai, but he is giving an exposition of them. That method plays out through the whole book as a law is stated and then an explanation of it is given, often accompanied by an example.

Moses begins his speech with the expression, ‘Yahweh our God’. This title is common in the book of Deuteronomy, but rare in the rest of the Pentateuch. God’s covenant name is used here with a plural personal pronoun in order to underscore the close, personal relationship between God and his people. It is Yahweh’s law that Moses is expounding (1:3).

The covenant mediator then explains that Israel’s movement from Sinai to the brink of conquest has all been by the commands of God. Now they are to go into the land and take possession of it. The description of the land is comprehensive in scope — it includes all major regions in Syria and Palestine. But before they conquer it they are told to ‘see’ it — that verb in Hebrew is a singular imperative, which is used to reflect the covenantal oneness

of the people of God (cf. 1:21). In the ancient Near East, the legal transference of land was often concluded by means of presenting it in the sight of the new owner.<sup>5</sup> One ancient text relates a Hittite king saying to a vassal: 'See, I gave you the Zippashla mountain land; occupy it.'<sup>6</sup>

### **Application**

In the present passage, Moses reminds Israel of their having been forged into a covenanted people at Mount Sinai. They are to understand that that event was due to the elective will of God. And they are further to recall that God has been leading them and guiding them to the promised land. These events are all unfolding according to the plan and decree of God. It is important that Israel remember these things because they define who Israel is as a people. The very nature and being of Israel are rooted in their call and election by Yahweh.

The same is true for the church. Believers are summoned to remember the work that God has done that defines who we are and where we are going. Paul reminds the church of these things in many passages, such as in Ephesians 1:3–6, where he says, 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to himself, according to the kind intention of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.' Let us not forget the work of God through Christ that has brought believers from death to life.