

# Reading the Words of Moses in Deuteronomy

By Jim Myers

The Hebrew names of the first five books (**Torah**) of the Bible come from the opening verse of each book. Below are the Hebrew names of each book along with their English translations, as well as the book's opening words.

- *Bereishit* -- "in the beginning" – "**In the beginning** God created." (Genesis 1:1)
- *Shemot* -- "names" – "And these are **the names** of the children of Israel." (Exodus 1:1)
- *Vayikra* -- "and He called" – "**And Yahweh called** to Moses." (Leviticus 1:1)
- *BaMidbar* -- "in the wilderness" – "And Yahweh spoke to Moses **in the wilderness.**" (Numbers 1:1)
- *Devarim* -- "words" – "These are the **words** which Moses spoke." (Deuteronomy 1:1)

*Devarim* (Deuteronomy) holds a unique position, and speaks with a unique voice, in the literature of the **Torah**. No book of the **Torah** is truer to the idea of "**instruction**" than *Devarim*.

*"Now these are the words (speeches) that Moshe spoke to the Children of Israel in (the country) across the Jordan."*

From the book's opening words the basic premise of the book is that *the aged Moshe, personally and indeed in the first person, speaks for the last time to the assembled Israelites, before their triumphant entry into the land of Canaan.*

- Yahweh **our** God spoke to **us** in Horeb . . . (1:6)
- **I** spoke to **you** at that time . . . (1:9)
- How can **I** alone bear **your** problems and **your** burdens and **your** complaints? (1:12)
- Then **I** commanded **your** judges at that time . . . (1:16)
- And **I** commanded **you** at that time all the things which **you** should do. (1:18)
- And **I** said to **you** . . . (1:20)

The image of Moshe addressing the assembled people gathered on the **Plains of Moab** waiting to finally end their long journey is the central setting of the book. That image must be kept in mind as you read the words of Deuteronomy.

- *No longer is the narrator in the background, as it is the first four books.*

- *Moses is now directly addressing a living audience.*
- *However, the audience to whom Moses is speaking also includes members of future generations that hear his words.*

Moshe, the man who was “*not a man of words*” in Exodus 4:10, now finds his voice – *a voice that functions fairly indistinguishably from God’s own voice.* Unlike the words of the first four books, *Devarim* makes it clear that we are dealing with **a text of directly authoritative character** -- *a series of speeches that in their own self-understanding already bore the status of “Torah.”* The following is from Deuteronomy 4:1-2.

*“Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I teach you to observe, that you may live, and go in and possess the land which the Lord God of your fathers is giving you.*

*You **shall not add to** the word which I command you, nor **take from it**, that you may keep the commandments of Yahweh your God which I command you.”*

That introduces **the concept of canon** into the Bible for the first time. The **Torah** is now a bounded, accepted body of authoritative literature. This role is clearly seen at the end of the book in Deuteronomy 31.9-12, 26:

*Moses gave the **Instruction (TORAH)** to the priests, the sons of Levi . . . and to all the elders of Israel . . . saying: “At the end of every seven years, at the appointed time in the year of release, at the Feast of Tabernacles . . . you shall proclaim this **Instruction (TORAH)** before all Israel in their hearing.*

*Gather the people together, **men** and **women** and **little ones**, and **the stranger who is within your gates**, that they may hear and that they may **learn** . . . and carefully **observe** all the words of this **Instruction (TORAH)**, and that **their children**, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear Yahweh your God as long as you live in the land which you cross the Jordan to possess . . .*

*Take this **Writing of the Instruction (TORAH)**, and **put it beside the Ark of the Covenant** of the Yahweh your God, that **it may be there as a witness against you.**”*

The **Instruction (TORAH)** will be a reminder to all future leaders of Israel that every Israelite man, woman and child, as well as every stranger in the land of Israel hears Yahweh’s words and His **Instruction (TORAH)**. Today, the story of the Exodus is read in Jewish homes every Passover.

**SOURCE:**

*The Five Books of Moses: A New Translation with Commentary by Everett Fox; pp. 839, 842.*