

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.