

Deuteronomy 1:1-5

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Moses sets the historical and geographical context of the covenant message he is about to deliver to the Israelites. He intends to tell them all that God has commanded him.

Deuteronomy 1:1-5 provides the historical and geographical context of the covenant message Moses was about to deliver to the Israelites. This section identifies God as the initiator of the covenant (v. 3), Israel as the recipient of the covenant (v. 1; v. 3), Moses as the covenant mediator between God and Israel (v. 1; v. 3, and v. 5), and the covenant text itself which is referred to as “words” (v. 1) or “this law” (v. 5).

The text tells us that Moses delivered this speech *to all Israel across the Jordan in the wilderness*. Precisely, it is *in the Arabah opposite Suph*. The *Arabah*, a term used as a virtual synonym for “desert” is the continuation of the Jordan rift between the Dead Sea and the Gulf of Elath, approximately 110 miles long. Today, the region *across the Jordan in the wilderness* (in Transjordan, east of the Jordan river) is called “the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.”

Besides *the Arabah opposite Suph*, we are told that Israel’s place of gathering was *between Paran and Tophel and Laban and Hazeroth and Dizahab*. These names, except for the unknown *Tophel*, likely refer to places in the Sinai Peninsula. They might be included here to show Israel’s itinerary from Mount Sinai to Moab.

It was *eleven days’ journey from Horeb*, another name for Mount Sinai, to *Kadesh-barnea* by the *Mount Seir* route. The place called “*Mount Seir*” here likely refers to the entire land of Seir, that is, Edom. Furthermore, the text mentions the exact date of the delivery of the speech. It is *in the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month*. This date is given in reference to the exodus departure from Egypt which occurred about 1446 BC. Thus, this fortieth year corresponds to 1406 BC, a time around which Aaron the priest died, according to [Numbers 33:38](#).

Now, Moses did not preach whatever came to his mind. Rather, he preached according to what *the LORD had commanded him*. As the narrator connects

the dots for us, he says that the speech took place after Moses and the Israelites had defeated two enemy kings: *Sihon of the Amorites who lived in Heshbon* and *Og of Bashan, who lived in Ashtaroth and Edrei*. The Amorites were the inhabitants of a kingdom centered east of the Jordan river in central Transjordan ([Numbers 21:33-35](#)). *Bashan* was a rich and fertile land in what is now the Golan Heights, east of the Sea of Galilee. *Ashtaroth* was the capital of *Bashan* and *Edrei* was a city of the kingdom of *Og* in *Bashan*.

The purpose of Moses was to *expound this law*. The term translated as *law* is the Hebrew word “*Torah*,” a noun that refers primarily to instructions or teaching (whether legal or intellectual). It is sometimes used by New Testament writers to refer to the first five books of the Old Testament, as in [Matthew 5:17-20](#); [Luke 16:16](#). In our context, however, this *law* refers to the covenant text, that is, the precepts and stipulations Moses was about to teach the Israelites (see also [Deuteronomy 4:8, 44](#)). As such, the *law* refers to the whole book of Deuteronomy, not just individual laws therein.

It is noteworthy to say that *this law* (teaching) was presented in the form of a suzerain-vassal treaty where the suzerain such as a king or a ruler sets his own expectations of the covenant to the vassal who is the subject. Thus, throughout the book of Deuteronomy, we will see that the Suzerain/Ruler God chose Israel to be His own vassal and provided them with instructions concerning how to behave in order to please Him. This is another way of saying that these instructions were intended to shape the behavior and attitudes of Israel as vassals in a way that reflected their Suzerain/Ruler God.

Thus, other than introductory and conclusive comments by a narrator, Deuteronomy will consist of this speech of Moses to Israel, preparing them to enter the Promised Land. God had made unconditional promises to Israel, through Abraham, making the people of Israel His people, and granting them title to the land. Deuteronomy will remind the people of God’s faithfulness, but also of their responsibility. God’s gift of accepting Israel as His people is irrevocable ([Romans 11:29](#)). But God’s blessing and reward will depend upon the people’s obedience.

Biblical Text:

¹ 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 Dizahab. ² It is eleven days’ journey from Horeb by the way of Mount Seir to Kadesh-barnea. ³ In the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month,

Moses spoke to the children of Israel, according to all that the Lord had commanded him *to give* to them, ⁴ after he had defeated Sihon the king of the Amorites, who lived in Heshbon, and Og the king of Bashan, who lived in Ashtaroth and Edrei. ⁵ Across the Jordan in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to expound this law, saying,