



Grace in the End

By Dr. Gordon McConville

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The book of Deuteronomy is one of the great theological documents of the Bible. The main lines of its thought can be traced not only in the book itself, but throughout the Old Testament, especially in the historical books from Joshua to 2 Kings--hence the term "Deuteronomic theology." In this book, the first in a series on Studies in the Old Testament Biblical Theology, McConville surveys and evaluates both older and more recent scholarly approaches to Deuteronomic theology. He shows how Israel persistently failed to keep God's covenant by rejecting him and relying on themselves instead. For that reason, God consistently brought his judgment on them, but that was not his final word to them. They survived as a nation only because of God's overpowering grace; there is grace in history in the end.

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Editorial Review

From the Back Cover

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About the Author

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Chapter 2 The Deuteronomic Idea in Biblical Scholarship The aim of the present chapter is to explore the character of Deuteronomic theology as it is understood in modern scholarship. This exercise will be largely descriptive, though we shall try to show what kinds of assumptions are made when Deuteronomic theology is characterized. A critique of the approaches will be the subject of the following chapter. The attempt to describe Deuteronomic theology is governed by three factors: First, the link that may reasonably be made between the setting or origin of Deuteronomy and its meaning; second, the difficulty of establishing its setting (if a Mosaic authorship is not presupposed) in any particular period in Israel's history on internal grounds alone; and third, its theological elusiveness. The last of these derives from the fact that the book holds together ideas that can appear contradictory, such as law and grace. The reticence or ambiguity of the book about its own setting and meaning constitutes the greatest difficulty in its interpretation. We shall see how interpreters have evaluated it differently as a result. Modern critical study of Deuteronomy is generally traced to W. M. L. de Wette, who proposed in 1805 a close association of the book with King Josiah's reform of the national religion of Judah in 621 B.C., Deuteronomy being identified with the 'Book of the Law' in 2 Kings 22:81 J. Wellhausen went on to argue that it was an early form of the book (Urdt) that gave the reform its impetus.² For Wellhausen, Urdt was a law-code, consisting of Deuteronomy 12--26; this view has remained influential, even if opinions have varied as to its exact extent and whether or not it was originally furnished with an introduction.³ He explained the purpose of this original Deuteronomy in connection with Josiah's reform, maintaining that the reform was an important turning-point in Israel's religious history and that Urdt, correspondingly, marked a mid-point in her theological and literary development. The 'centralization' of Judah's worship in Jerusalem, put in place by Josiah, was a decisive step away from the permissiveness that had reigned hitherto in religious practice. Wellhausen regarded this earlier freedom in religion as a good thing, since it was spontaneous and relatively unburdened by cultic ordinance and priestly control. For him, Josiah's centralization tended to constrict and formalize religion through many regulations.⁴ In this reconstruction, Deuteronomy's law regarding worship was its most telling and characteristic feature. Wellhausen held that it was Josiah's understanding of the command of Deuteronomy 12:5 ('you are to seek the place the LORD your God will choose from among all your tribes to put his Name there for his dwelling') that convinced him of the need to centralize public worship in Jerusalem and to regard all other sacred places as idolatrous (12:3). Many of Deuteronomy's laws, in fact, could be understood as revisions of existing legislation, designed precisely to enforce this centralization. Wellhausen's primary

evidence for this view lay in the frequent repetition of the formula concerning 'the place the LORD your God will choose,' and the related expression 'before the LORD.'⁵ Wellhausen increased the potency of his argument by contending that certain of the regulations about worship were modified greatly in order to bring Israelite practices into line with the policy of centralization. The laws of the tithe (14:22--29) and the feasts (16:1--17) illustrate the point. Only in Deuteronomy does the law of the tithe require attendance at the central sanctuary, and the location of the Passover meal there (16:2) is particularly striking in view of its character elsewhere as a family feast.⁶ Only at one point did Josiah fail to implement the laws of Deuteronomy, namely, his refusal to allow the 'priests of the high places' to stand alongside the Jerusalem priests in the new order (2Ki 23:9). Even this feature of Josiah's measures, however, seemed to be the exception that proves the rule, because of the supposition that the passage in 2 Kings referred expressly to the law of Deuteronomy 18:6--8.⁷ Wellhausen's synthesis proved attractive to many and spawned a number of detailed attempts to define more precisely the Deuteronomistic adaptation of older laws in terms of the centralization of Israel's worship.⁸

1 W. M. L. de Wette, *Dissertatio critico-exegetica qua Deuteronomium a prioribus pentateuchi libris diversum, alius cuiusdam recentioris auctoris opus esse monstratur* (Jena, 1805). 2 J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (Edinburgh: A. and C. Black, 1885), 279--80. 3 J. Wellhausen, *Die Composition des Hexateuchs und der historischen Bücher des alten Testaments*, 2d ed. (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1889), 189--195. In subsequent discussion, it became common to suppose that the legal section did indeed have an introduction, namely 4:44--11:32; see S. R. Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1895), lxxv; G. W. Anderson, *A Critical Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: Duckworth, 1959), 44; G. Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: SPCK, 1970), 171. Driver also included ch. 28 (p. lxxvii). M. Noth defined UrDt as 'essentially' 4:44--30:20; see his *The Deuteronomistic History* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1981), 16. 4 Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 17--38 (51). 5 The 'place-formula' occurs at 12:5, 11, 14, 18; 14:23, 25; 15:20; 16:2, 6--7, 15--16; 17:8; 18:6; 26:2. In addition, the phrase 'before the LORD' occurs 17 times, effectively meaning, with few exceptions (24:4, 13), 'at the place which the LORD will choose.'⁶ Contrast Deuteronomy law of the tithe with Nu 18:20--25. Other legislation on the feasts occurs at Ex 23:14--17; Lev 23; Nu 28--29. For the Passover see also Ex 12--13. See also Driver, *Deuteronomy*, 166--73 (on the tithe), and p. 192 on the Passover: 'The Passover loses consequently, in some degree, its old character ... of a domestic rite'; cf. also M. Weinfeld, 'The Emergence of the Deuteronomistic Movement: The Historical Antecedents,' in *Das Deuteronomium: Entstehung, Gestalt und Botschaft*, ed. N. Lohfink (Leuven: Leuven Univ. Press, 1965), 95. 7 Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 124. I have shown elsewhere the error of associating these two passages in this way, as have others; see my *Law and Theology in Deuteronomy* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1984), 132--35; cf. M. Haran, *Temples and Temple Service in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), 99--100. 8 For example, see F. Horst, *Das Privileg Jahves* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1930); R. P. Merendino, *Das deuteronomische Gesetz* (Bonn: P. Hanstein, 1969). See also the commentaries of S. R. Driver (*Deuteronomy*) and C. Steuernagel (*Deuteronomium und Josua*, HKAT [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1900]).

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