

On the Plains of Moab

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Passage: “Beyond the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to explain this law...” (Deuteronomy 1:5, ESV).

Introduction: What kind of God is depicted in the Old Testament?¹ Not a very appealing one if you ask Richard Dawkins, a British evolutionary biologist and prominent atheist who is well-known for criticizing the God of the Christian Bible. In his book, *The God Delusion*, Dawkins writes, “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”²

Christopher Hitchens, a British-American author and atheist claims that the Canaanites were “pitilessly driven out of their homes to make room for the ungrateful and mutinous children of Israel.” He also said that the Old Testament (referring to Deuteronomy) contains “a warrant for trafficking humans, for ethnic cleansing, for slavery, for brideprice, and for indiscriminate massacre, but we are not bound by any of it because it was put together by crude, uncultured human animals.”³

Sam Harris, American philosopher, neuroscientist, author, and atheist, concluded that if the Bible is true, we should be stoning people to death for heresy, adultery, homosexuality, worshipping graven images, and “other imaginary crimes.” Referring to Deuteronomy 13:6–11, Harris claims that the consistent Christian should stone his son or daughter if she comes home from a yoga class a devotee of Krishna.⁴

Is Dawkins’ charge that the God of the Hebrew Bible (*Yahweh*) is a moral monster fair? Does Deuteronomy provide “a warrant for trafficking humans, for ethnic cleansing, for slavery, for brideprice, and for indiscriminate massacre,” as Hitchens claims? Is Harris reading Deuteronomy correctly when he claims that Deuteronomy requires us to stone our children if they leave the faith? Is it possible that these men have given a distorted representation of Deuteronomy’s message?

¹ This presentation assumes that the God of the Old Testament is the same being Jesus referred to as “my Father” (Matt 7:21; 11:27; Jn 15:1; 20:17, etc.). Jesus came to make him known more fully (Jn 14:9; Heb 1:3).

² Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 241-248.

³ Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2007), 101,102.

⁴ Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 18, 19, 23, 24.

Body:

- I. Deuteronomy is the fifth book in a collection of five in the Hebrew Bible known as the Torah⁵ or Pentateuch.⁶
 - a. These five books—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy—tell **a story** about a people called by God to be a “kingdom of priests” among the nations (Ex 19:5-6); a people through whom “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:1-3).
 - b. Within this story, there is legislation.⁷ This portion is found in the latter part of Exodus, most of Leviticus, portions of Numbers and much of Deuteronomy.
 - c. However, most of the “Law of Moses” consists of a narrative.
- II. In Deuteronomy, the narrative continues as Moses addresses “all Israel beyond the Jordan in the wilderness” (Deut 1:1).
 - a. **Israel** is a shorthand for Abraham’s descendants, who whom God called to display his character before the nations (Isa 42:6; 60:3).⁸
 - i. The first eleven chapters of Genesis tell the story of creation, the fall and exile of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, the degeneration of the human race, the flood, the repopulation of the earth and the scattering of the people at the tower of Babel.
 - ii. Beginning in Genesis 12, the narrative focuses on Abraham and his descendants— Isaac, Jacob, his twelve sons and their descendants.⁹

⁵ Jesus referred to the first five books of the Old Testament as “the Law of Moses” (Lk 24:44). The Old Testament “laws” (legislation) are set in a narrative framework. The Hebrew word תּוֹרָה (*tôrâ*) encompasses much more than the English word “law.” Some scholars believe the English word “law” is not the best translation of the Hebrew word *tôrâ*. Some prefer the word “instruction” or “teaching.” The phrase “*tôrâ* of Moses” is found throughout the Old Testament (Josh 23:6; 1 Kgs 2:3; Ez 3:2; Dan 9:13). It is not clear whether this phrase was used to refer to the five historical books written by Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) or to legislation found in them. One thing is certain, the “laws” within the five books written by Moses are given in the context of a story, and by Jesus’ day the phrase “Law of Moses” was used in the broader sense to refer to the five books.

⁶ The word *Pentateuch* is another common form of referring to the first five books of the Bible. It is a two-part Greek word, *penta* (“five”) and *teuchos* (scroll). It goes back at least to the second century A.D. when the church father Tertullian spoke of the *Pentateuchos biblos*, the “the five-scrolled book.”

⁷ The book of Numbers contains lists (1, 26), poetry (6:24-26; 10:35; 21:14-18, 27-30: 24:17, 20-25), historical narratives and legal material. All of these are interwoven throughout the book.

⁸ According to Deuteronomy 4:5-8, the divine wisdom undergirding Israel’s laws was also designed to attract the nations.

⁹ In Acts 14:16, Paul said, “In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness...” In this specific context, the “witness” Paul refers to is God’s provision of “rains from heaven and fruitful seasons.” But God also provided the witness of a people—Abraham’s descendants—to the nations.

- iii. Exodus continues the story with the people of Israel in Egypt being oppressed and enslaved and then delivered miraculously by God.
 - b. God called **Moses** to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt to the land promised to Abraham's descendants.
 - i. His first forty years were spent in Egypt (Ex 2:1-10; cf Acts 7:23); his second forty years were spent in exile in the land of Midian (Ex 2:11-22; cf Acts 7:30).
 - ii. For the next forty years, Moses led the children from Egypt to the promised land (Ex 16:35; Deut 8:2; Josh 5:6; cf. Acts 7:36; 13:18).
 - c. The Israelites addressed in Deuteronomy are the second generation of those who came out of Egypt.
 - i. The generation of Israelites that left Egypt spent one year at Mount Sinai and then wandered in the wilderness for about thirty-nine years.
 - ii. Towards the end of the forty years, Israel arrived in the land of Moab opposite Jericho. They were in full view of the land of promise, poised for conquest (Num 22:1).
 - iii. The second generation of Israelites who left Egypt were now adults and camping in the land of Moab, just across the Jordan River from Canaan, preparing to invade from the east (Num 22:1; Deut 1:5; 3:29; 4:46).
- III. The story recorded in Deuteronomy portrays Moses' final words to Israel before he died and before they crossed the Jordan into Canaan.¹⁰
- a. The speeches were given in the eleventh month of the fortieth year of wandering (1:3). Moses is like an orator addressing his congregation with words designed to move them to obedience and commitment to the Lord of the covenant.
 - b. Three main discourses are preceded by a brief introduction (1:1-5) and followed by an epilogue that narrates the death of Moses (34:1-12).
 - c. In **Deuteronomy 1-4**, Moses recalls key events during the forty years of wandering in the desert after the Israelites left Egypt.¹¹

¹⁰ In terms of the major content of Deuteronomy, the author is Moses. However, Moses is not the author of the story framework of the book (1:1-5; 5:1; 27:1, 9, 11; 34:1-12). As a covenant renewal message, the content of Moses' discourse was written down shortly after it was given. The scribe who wrote or recorded the final form of the book is not known. The historians of the Old Testament performed the task of collecting, selecting, editing and commenting on stories of Israel's past with theological and ethical criteria and assessment. The book of Deuteronomy as we have it is not necessarily the product of the period it describes.

¹¹ The historical prologue repeats material from Exodus and Numbers in a shorter and sometimes different form.

- i. Moses reviews the life of Israel in the wilderness from Mount Sinai to the land of Moab.
 - ii. The recital of history gave *encouragement* and *warning*.
 - iii. The recital of history was made for an instructional purpose.
 - iv. It prepared Israel for the call to commitment and obedience that Moses would lay upon them in his discourse.
 - v. Moses begins by explaining the reason why their fathers were not able to enter forty years ago (1:19-46).
 - d. In **Deuteronomy 5-11**, Moses exhorts Israel to be faithful to God.
 - e. In **Deuteronomy 12-26**, we have a large block of specific legislation that flesh out the “Ten Commandments.”
 - i. Some of these laws are repeated.
 - ii. Some are introduced for the first time.
 - iii. Others are adapted to Israel’s new situation.
 - iv. God’s Law is not static, but dynamic.
 - f. In **Deuteronomy 27-30**, we have a section that can be summarized as “Blessings and Curses.”
 - g. In **Deuteronomy 31-34**, we have the deposition of the law and appointment of Joshua, the song of Moses, a blessing pronounced by Moses and finally Moses’ death.
 - i. The time of Moses’ death was drawing near and Joshua was to take up leadership responsibilities.
 - ii. At a certain point in the ceremony, Moses summoned Joshua and appointed him to his new role (31:7-8)
- IV. Jesus read the “Law of Moses” as a narrative.
- a. Jesus was in Judea healing people and attracting large crowds (Matt 19:1-2) when a group of Pharisees approached him with hostile intentions, asking, “Should a man be allowed to divorce his wife for just any reason?” (Matt 19:3, NLT).
 - i. Divorce was a debated issue among students of the Torah.

- ii. Followers of Shammai argued that **Deuteronomy 24:1-4** allowed divorce if one's spouse had committed a serious violation.
- iii. Followers of Hillel argued that a man could divorce his wife for trivial reasons.
- iv. Both sides of this debate disagreed on what it meant for a husband to find "something indecent" about his wife (Deut 24:1, NIV).
- b. Jesus answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female..." (Matt 19:4-5).
 - i. Rather than quote Deuteronomy 24, Jesus quotes Genesis 1:27; 2:24; 5:2.
 - ii. Jesus points them to God's ideal, rather than God's accommodation in the context of a sinful world.
- c. The Pharisees responded by referencing Moses, "Why then did Moses *command* one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" (Matt 19:7).
 - i. Jesus seems to take issue with their interpretation.
 - ii. In their interpretation of Deuteronomy 24, Moses gave a "command" to divorce.
 - iii. Jesus does not see a "command" in Deuteronomy.
- d. Jesus answers, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses *allowed* you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so" (Matt 19:8).
 - i. Again, Jesus points them back to "the beginning," where God's ideal for humanity is portrayed.
 - ii. Because of human sin ("hardness of heart"), God has made accommodations to minimize the damage.

Conclusion: Deuteronomy is a record of Moses' farewell speeches to the second generation of Israelites that came out of Egypt (Deut 29:1). Their parents had left Egypt as adults and died in the wilderness (Deut 2:14-15; Num 13-14). As they were on the plains of Moab about to enter the promised land, Moses renewed the covenant with the generation that was to possess the land promised to their ancestors. He recounts their history, reminds them of their covenant with God (Yahweh), and urges them to follow his laws.

Read in context, Deuteronomy should be seen primarily as a narrative, a story rather than a rulebook, albeit one heavily loaded with legal and theological pronouncements. Chapters 12-26 of the book contain a detailed legal code, known as the Deuteronomic Code, covering religious practices, civil and criminal law, and social regulations. This section primarily functions as a legal text, laying out the rules and expectations for Israelite society. A failure to read Deuteronomy in its larger literary context as a story may lead to a false conclusion regarding God's ideal for human relationships and a distorted picture of his character.