

Sunday Message Notes – Better Bible Reading in 2026

Deuteronomy: Ancient Survival Language, Not Timeless Political Instruction

The Bible is arguably the most impactful work of theological and philosophical literature in the history of the human story (positively and negatively – beautifully and harmfully). Our commendation to the academic study of the Bible – is **1) PROACTIVE**: to gain adequate tools to “rightly divide the Word of truth;” **2) PREVENTATIVE**: so that, we don’t read unskillfully or maliciously weaponize the Bible against other persons, cultures, religions or countries – and 3) ultimately **SELF-PRESERVATIVE** – affording us awareness of our intrinsic human interconnectedness – thus, weaponizing Scripture against “others” is weaponizing it against ourselves.

Subject: “Deuteronomy: Ancient Survival Language, Not Timeless Political Instruction”

Deuteronomy reads like the voice of a people trying to survive—politically, culturally, and religiously. Its most difficult passages (commands of conquest, cultural erasure, and even genocide) reflect an urgent belief that possession of the land is essential to identity and covenant, especially when that land was already contested or lost. Written and shaped in the shadow of exile or the real threat of it, Deuteronomy looks backward to explain why the land was lost and forward to imagine how absolute loyalty, even when expressed violently, might secure a future that history repeatedly failed to deliver.

The Bible is not fragile. Honest reading is not faithlessness. Wrestling is part of faith practice. God invites us into an ongoing, living conversation. We must be honest, not everything in Deuteronomy reflects God’s heart fully. Much of it reflects *human attempts* to protect faith in dangerous times. Deuteronomy is potentially a dangerous, violent work IF its **ancient survival language is read as timeless political instruction**, instead of historical religious struggle.

I. What Is Deuteronomy Trying to Do?

A. Moses’ final sermon to Israel as they stand on the edge of the Promised Land.

1. However, most scholars agree it was written later, during a time when Israel was under threat—politically, religiously, and culturally.

B. Reading Deuteronomy faithfully does not mean ignoring difficult verses or tensions.

1. Faithful engagement means listening carefully, learning humbly, and letting Scripture question us as much as we question it.
- a. In essence, we bring our questions to the Bible—and the Bible, in turn, questions us.

II. Situating Ourselves as Serious Seekers

A. The 3 Worlds of the Text: a Window (the world BEHIND the text), a Picture (the world OF the text), and a Mirror (the world IN FRONT of the text).

1. The **Window** (or world BEHIND the text) grants us a glimpse into the *past*, the time of the *author(s)*, and to earlier cultures (ANE comparanda) that impact the text.
- a. Assyrian / Mesopotamian Vassal Treaties (of Esarhaddon, 672 BCE): “If you break this covenant, may disaster fall on you” – provides background for **Deut. 28** (650-620 BCE): “If you do not obey...cursed shall you be...”
2. The **Picture** (or world OF the text) frames how the Bible talks to itself, repeats itself and applies its ideas via diverse literary devices.
- a. -(Mosaic scribal) Exodus – “manna” is a heavenly, mysterious food (bread).

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- (Mosaic scribal) Deuteronomy 8:3b – “feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that *one does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.*”
- (Davidic tradition) Psalm 78:24-25a “rained down on them manna to eat, and gave them the grain of heaven. Man ate of the bread of the angels.”
- (Gospel scribes) Matt 4:4 / Luke 4:4 “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”
- b. Deuteronomy 6:4–5 – The Shema / Mark 12:29–30 – Jesus calls this the greatest commandment
- c. Deuteronomy 10:18–19 – Care for the vulnerable / Luke 10:27 (Good Samaritan context) – Jesus weaves Deuteronomy into ethical teaching.
(notice - this also places the ethics of Jesus within His Jewish context, not outside of it).
- 3. The **Mirror** (or world *IN FRONT* of the text) allows the *reader* sees oneself, and the modern church, within the text.
- 4. The Window/BEHIND is Historical-Critical. The Picture/OF is Literary. The Mirror/IN FRONT is Theological. All ‘three worlds,’ overlap and interact with each other. Biblical interpretation is incomplete without all three worlds.

III. Let’s Wrestle

A. The “**Shema**,” **Deuteronomy 6:4**, “Hear, O Israel: YHWH our God, YHWH is one,” functions less as philosophical **monotheism** (or as exclusive loyalty to one god) and more as a form of **henotheism** (worship of one primary god while acknowledging that other gods exist).

1. Israel’s conquest of other nations (and their gods), when read alongside the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9)—where a unified humanity is divided after approaching godlike capacity—could lay blame back at the feet of YHWH and the divinely enforced separation of people:

Deuteronomy 32:8–9 When the Most High apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the gods; ⁹the Lord’s own portion was his people, Jacob his allotted share.

- a. The Most High (or high god in *henotheistic* understanding) of the divine council (ANE – Mesopotamian, Ugaritic, Canaanite) allotted nations to lesser gods after humanity’s division, while Israel was assigned to YHWH specifically. This divine-council worldview reflects political and ethnic divisions resulting from a structured heavenly hierarchy.

B. Does monotheism merit Conquest, Colonization, Chosen-ness?

1. Conquest

Deuteronomy 7:1–2 – When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy and he clears away many nations before you—the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than you— ²and when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy.

2. Colonization

Deuteronomy 7:5-6 ⁵But this is how you must deal with them: break down their altars, smash their pillars, cut down their sacred poles, and burn their idols with fire. ⁶For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

3. Chosen-ness

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Deuteronomy 7:7-9 “It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples. ⁸ It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. ⁹ Know, therefore, that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations

- a. In rabbinic Judaism, “chosen-ness” is typically understood as being chosen *with* the Torah (statutes and commandments)—that is, chosen for a particular covenantal responsibility or obligation—not as being chosen *over* other nations in a hierarchical or ontological sense (substance or beingness).
- b. But, let us be mindful the Torah is impacted by the code of Hammurabi. (**World BEHIND the Text / ANE**) The Code of Hammurabi (c. 1750 BCE) predates the Torah by several centuries and represents an older Mesopotamian tradition of written law dealing with land, property, violence, and social hierarchy. The Torah—especially laws in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy—shows clear influence from this broader legal world, reworking familiar legal forms while reshaping them around Israel’s communal memory, theology, and moral priorities.

4. Contradiction

- a. Is obedience to Torah an exact science yielding military victories and assuring “in the land” status?
- b. Judges 6; 2 Kings 22, 24; and the Joban epic suggest the obedience = success formula is **aspirational theology**, not a tested law of history.

C. In sum: Deuteronomy 7 frames Israel’s identity through conquest and colonization, using divinely sanctioned violence and cultural erasure to secure the land, while presenting Israel as “chosen” not for superiority, but for carrying Torah—a legal tradition shaped by earlier Mesopotamian law codes like Hammurabi, rather than emerging in isolation. Yet, the Bible itself (Judges, Kings, Job) repeatedly undercuts the claim that obedience to Torah reliably produces victory or security in the land, suggesting this obedience-equals-success formula is an aspirational ideology, not a consistent rule of history.

IV. More Difficulty

A. Genocide in the Promised Land

Deuteronomy 20:16–17 But as for the towns of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. ¹⁷ Indeed, you shall annihilate them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—just as the Lord your God has commanded,

1. This includes women, children, elderly—no distinction and stands in direct tension with later biblical calls to love the stranger.

B. Women as Spoils of War

Deuteronomy 21:10–14 When you go out to war against your enemies and the Lord your God hands them over to you and you take them captive, ¹¹ suppose you see among the captives a beautiful woman whom you desire and want to marry, ¹² and so you bring her home to your house: she shall shave her head, pare her nails, ¹³ discard her captive’s garb, and remain in your house a full month mourning for her father and mother; after that you may go in to her and be her husband, and she shall be your wife. ¹⁴ But if you are not satisfied with her, you shall let her go free and certainly not sell her for money. You must not treat her as a slave, since you have dishonored her.

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- a. Consent is never mentioned. Brief emotional mourning is allowed, but male authority remains absolute.

C. Execution (or forced marriage) of a Raped Virgin Woman

Deuteronomy 22:23–24, 28-29

1. If an engaged woman is raped and she doesn't cry out loud enough, she is put to death.
2. A fee must be paid to the father if you rape a virgin who is not engaged. The rapist must marry his victim and divorce is not permitted.

D. Execution of a Rebellious Son

Deuteronomy 21:18–21 “All the people of his town shall stone him to death.”

1. Violence is framed as moral purification.
2. The theological tension here is community order vs. mercy and proportional justice.

V. Reframing/Redeeming Deuteronomy for Seekers and Serious Students, Not Bible Worshipers

A. Asking Better Questions

1. Instead of asking, “How do we defend these texts,” ask “what does this say about God?”
2. A seeker-centered reading asks, “What kind of people wrote this? What pressures were they under? What does this text reveal about how humans use religion to survive, control, resist, and justify?”

B. Don't “Solve” Contradictions, Allow them to Form your Biblical Approach

1. Contradictions Are Evidence, Not Problems.
 - a. The same text can: Protect the poor - Sanction genocide - Limit kings - Empower patriarchal control
 - b. Contradictions tell us we're not reading “God's mind,” but human attempts to manage fear, order, and meaning.
 - c. Deuteronomy is not a book that tells us what to believe — it shows us how belief works.
 - d. Sometimes the Bible gets it right. Sometimes not. In our willingness to see the human hand in the Bible, we enter the sacred spaces of wisdom and discernment.
2. Specific Contradictions / Counter-testimony / Competing Moral Logic
 - a. **Deut. 1:18-19** God cares for the fatherless, widow, loves and provides for the stranger and reminds Israel to love the stranger for “you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”
Deut. 7:1-2 God commands Israel to “cast out” and “destroy” other nations.
 - b. **Deut. 20:16-17** God commands corporate destruction.
Deut. 24:16 situates individuality – the children are not to be punished for the fathers and vice versa.
 - c. Deuteronomy has been used in history to support justice and care for the poor, but also to justify violence, exclusion, and patriarchy.

C. Redeeming Deuteronomy

1. Deuteronomy is a human story of people living under powerful empires and afraid of losing identity while surrounded by many gods and cultures. Their faith is shaped by real fear and real pressure. This explains why Deuteronomy sometimes sounds strict, intense, or even extreme. The writers are saying: “If we don't hold on to this faith with everything we have, we may lose it.”

D. Warning: Deuteronomy can fuel Christian nationalism when its ancient survival language— chosenness, conquest, obedience=equals= blessing, and divine law over human law—is lifted out of its historical context and treated as timeless political instruction. Read that way, it can turn a modern nation into a

