

Deuteronomy simply means “second law.” There is a reason for this. It expands on what has already been legislated by God plus adds additional precepts for the Israelites to follow. In addition to recounting what they endured in the wilderness, it also prepares them for life on the other side of the Jordan without Moses. Famous among its 34 chapters is 28, which delineates how good they will have it if they obey and what a drag it will be if they don’t. Although scholars have hotly disputed its authorship over the past few centuries, the New Testament clearly affirms Moses as its author.

Paul wrote 2 Corinthians to shore up his efforts in 1 Corinthians and to prevent the erosion of his authority at the hands of a collection of false teachers who have apparently made considerable inroads into the hearts and minds of some of the members. In this epistle, Paul continually asserts the genuineness of his ministry while denouncing all of the pretenders arrayed against him. He sends Titus to survey the situation and set certain things in order. His report to Paul is favorable. The book ends with an affirmation of the Trinity in the form of a blessing upon this problem-riddled assembly.

Ezra is a priest descended from Phineas. The book bearing his name is one of the post-exilic books, meaning after the exile. It describes Israel’s “second exodus” from Persia. There are two sets of returnees: one under Zerubbabel in the 530s and the second under Ezra in the 450s. The book chronicles the hopes, setbacks and triumphs experienced by both Jewish leaders who pioneer Judah’s return to her homeland at different times. Local and national resistance notwithstanding, God enables them to accomplish this part of God’s will on earth, and, although many of them have fallen into sin, in the end they get it right.

Nehemiah is a high-ranking Jewish official in the court of the Persian king Artaxerxes. Upon hearing of trouble in Jerusalem, he sets his sights upon getting there and straightening things out. The book bearing his name chronicles his many challenges and his ultimate success. If Ezra is a type of the New Testament teacher, Nehemiah is a type of the pastor. The problems he must deal with reflect the array of problems besetting any shepherd of a church. A man of consummate integrity, Nehemiah is also not afraid to tackle the problem of sin in the camp head-on. The book of Nehemiah has been an inspiration to pastors throughout the centuries.

Whereas 1 Peter deals with pressure from the world, 2 Peter treats trouble within the church. False teachers, it seems, have managed to insinuate themselves into the church at large and are wreaking havoc. After issuing protracted threats of doom upon them, Peter turns to the flock and admonishes against following these deceivers to the doorstep of destruction. Rather, believers should spend their days anticipating their Lord’s return and live as though they actually believe it. Peter reminds them that the Lord’s delay is simply his way of dealing with an ungodly world. Be steadfast to the end, he admonishes them.

The book of Esther is a curiosity. The name of God is not mentioned once, yet it exudes the presence of God throughout the ups and downs in the life of a young Jewish woman, Esther, who finds herself chosen as queen by the Persian King Ahasuerus (probably Xerxes). Several difficulties permeate the book, some of which are considerably challenging. Nevertheless, the book screams the doom of those plotting against God’s people and also the overarching providence of God in the preservation of Israel.

Revelation describes the consummation of all things. It contains the blueprint for God’s plan in the last days. At last, divine wrath on a God-defying world will no longer be delayed. The time of reckoning has arrived. Although much of the language is cryptic and difficult to understand, the main thrust of the book is crystal clear: the world is to be punished and God’s people are to be ushered into heaven. The book ends with the total defeat of the devil and his allies, the triumph of the Lamb, and the eternal state of both the redeemed and unredeemed. Additionally, Revelation is the only biblical book with a blessing promised to those who read it and heed its message.

DEUTERONOMY

REMEMBER THE COVENANT

Deuteronomy begins where Numbers ends, on the plains of Moab. It stays there until the very end (Num. 36:13; Deut. 34:1). The picture remains frozen, while Moses speaks on... and on... and on...

God's people are assembled on the threshold of the Promised Land. Their sin has lengthened a straightforward 11-day journey into 40 years of meandering throughout the wilderness. The older generation has passed away; only Moses, Joshua and Caleb remain. After the fall of communism, playwright Vaclav Havel undertook the task of leading Czechoslovakia in finding its footing as an independent nation. He said it felt like "a parent trying to teach an unruly bunch of children how to behave as adults" (Philip Yancey, *The Bible Jesus Read*, 76). Moses probably felt the same!

Having delayed their heart's desire through disobedience, the Israelites now stand poised to seize it—that land flowing with milk and honey—but they stand on dangerous ground. Their gravest danger would be forgetting God's faithfulness, leading to violating the covenant. The overarching theme of Deuteronomy, therefore, is covenant renewal. Moses repeatedly (at least a dozen times) exhorts the people to "remember"! They are to remember, both to avoid past mistakes and improve their walk with God in the future. But "the simple act of remembering would require daily acts of concentration" (Yancey, 87), so remembrance is woven into the fabric of everyday life: the *shema* (6:4–9, 20–25); the feasts (16:16); the ritual of the first-fruits offering (26:5–10); writing the laws (27:1–8); even a protracted song (32:1–43)! The psalmist declared, "Your decrees are the theme of my song wherever I lodge" (Psa. 119:54). If covenant renewal is Moses' theme song, wholehearted obedience is its refrain. Both then and now, it is through obedience that God's people must give expression to their love and loyalty (John 14:15, 21).

Tanya Ferdinandusz

FOR FURTHER READING

J.A. Thompson, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Deuteronomy*, IVP, 1974

J. Gordon McConville, *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, OM Books, 2001

Philip Yancey, *The Bible Jesus Read*, OM Books, 2000, 75–105

2 CORINTHIANS

GOSPEL MINISTRY THAT TRANSFORMS

2 Corinthians is not as well-known as some of Paul's other letters, yet it speaks powerfully to us today. We sometimes idealize the New Testament church, but here is a group of believers who were overrun with difficulties. They had been thrown off-track by false teachers, who seemed all-too-plausible with their smooth and clever-sounding arguments. Paul's authority had been sharply questioned, yet he never gave up on this wayward church, thus reflecting God's great love for his people. This in itself should encourage us. We know that we are wayward in ourselves, and we belong to churches that are far from perfect. God's Word challenges us to change but also gives reassurance that he perseveres with us. Such is God's amazing grace.

Some commentators on 2 Corinthians propose that two letters have been stitched together, with chapters 10–13 written at a different time from the rest. Although I acknowledge that Paul may have taken some breaks as he dictated, the forthcoming notes treat 2 Corinthians as a unity. The overarching theme which emerges from the 13 chapters is “strength in weakness.” It is a vital theme for us today. Our models of leadership and ministry are too often shaped by the standards we see around us. Yet Paul shows us a different way, one that is profoundly countercultural, modeled on Jesus himself. This is the ministry that both the church and the world need: Christians who will take risks for God and reach out in vulnerability and weakness, knowing that God's grace is “sufficient” for them (12:9). The philosopher Ivan Illich was once asked, “How do you change society? Is the way forward violent revolution, or is it better to make step by step progress?” Illich said neither. If we want to change society, he insisted, we must “tell an alternative story” (Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, 254). As we learn from God's Word, may our lives tell a different story, and may God work through us by his transforming power.

Peter Morden

FOR FURTHER READING

Colin G. Kruse, *2 Corinthians: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, IVP, 2004

EZRA 1:1—7:10

RESTORATION AND REFORMATION

The book of Ezra does not declare its author but, according to Jewish tradition, the priest and scribe Ezra wrote both Ezra and Nehemiah. Indeed, the two books were considered one work in the Hebrew Bible. In addition, Ezra was also believed to have written the books we know as 1 and 2 Chronicles, which, like Ezra, view Israel's history from a priestly perspective. The temple (first built then destroyed in Chronicles, then rebuilt in Ezra) features prominently in both, with a strong emphasis on obedience to the Law and the appropriate worship of the Lord—as we would expect from a priest.

Ezra can be divided into two parts. Chapters 1–6 deal with a period of around twenty years (538–515 B.C.) covering the first return of Jews from their Babylonian exile and the rebuilding of the Temple at Jerusalem. Chapters 7–10 continue the story almost 60 years later, with Ezra in 458 B.C. leading a second wave of exiles back to Jerusalem and urging the Jews to live in covenant faithfulness to the Lord. Both these elements (temple-centered worship and covenant loyalty) were essential to the returning Jews' spiritual renewal, to prevent them from rebelling in the same way as had led to their exile in the first place.

Several major themes can be found in the book. One of the author's concerns is to show that God acts providentially, sovereignly and internationally (in this case, through Persian kings) to create political circumstances designed to accomplish his purposes. Another important message in Ezra is how God raises up faithful heralds of his Word (Zechariah, Haggai, Ezra) who stir and motivate his people to do his work and encourage them when the going gets tough. Temple restoration and spiritual reformation are essential components contributing to the re-establishment of God's people in their ancient homeland. The Christian church must be no less eager to evangelize (constructing the temple made of living stones) and maintain spiritual purity (constantly reforming) today.

Andrew Heron

NEHEMIAH

MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

The story of Nehemiah well illustrates Paul's declaration: "Everything written in the Scriptures was written to teach us, in order that we might have hope through the patience and encouragement which the Scriptures give us" (Rom. 15:4, GNB). Nehemiah's calling was to rebuild city walls and revitalize community life among the threatened and despondent population of Jerusalem in the middle of the fifth century B.C. His work overlapped with that of Ezra, who preceded him to reorganize and supervise uniform observance of the Jewish Law.

Nehemiah's role as governor of Jerusalem provides important leadership lessons today for all who work hard to see many tired and dispirited western churches revitalized and energized for their mission: "No other biblical character gives such clear information about how to 'practice the presence of God' while carrying a leadership role" (*The Insight Bible*, Zondervan, 415). Such lessons can emerge because of the measure of continuity between ancient Israel and the post-Pentecost church. The word "church" comes from the Old Testament; its Hebrew equivalent is found five times in Nehemiah, where the NIV renders it "assembly" or "company" (Neh. 5:13; 7:66; 8:2,17; 13:1). Of course, there is also discontinuity between old and new. Jesus said, "I will build my church" (Matt. 16:18), implying an imminent radical new development from the church or assembly of the past.

At a critical point in the revitalization of the Jerusalem community, the people come together to renew their covenant commitment to the Lord. They begin to do so at 8:2 as an "assembly" or—if you like—"church." The spiritual roots of Christians go back to that assembly led by Ezra and Nehemiah, as well as to others preceding it under Hezekiah, Solomon, Moses and others. There is hope, patience and encouragement awaiting us over the next two weeks, as we spend time with the book of Nehemiah. As we study this ancient text, prayerfully allow the Holy Spirit to minister to you. May both Word and Spirit give you confidence and courage to meet the opportunities and challenges you will face over the next fortnight.

Fergus Macdonald

2 PETER

GROWING UP IN CHRIST

A former church member of mine was so convinced of her standing and security in God's saving grace that, rather than motivating her to being changed more into Christ's likeness, her faith seemed to give her the license to do as she pleased, relying on the grace that saved her. In this epistle, Peter addresses such misguided thinking, this false teaching that originates from the Greek understanding of division of body and soul—that if the soul is right with God, it doesn't matter how the body behaves. Peter writes, at times forcefully, to correct this misunderstanding and to halt its influence in the church. Two key truths are held in tension: God does freely forgive sin in Jesus Christ, but he also holds us responsible for our behavior.

Peter writes around A.D. 60—it seems from 1:13 and 14 that Peter is approaching his death, which traditionally is dated around A.D. 64–65 (when Paul also seems to have died, during Nero's persecution of Christians). Peter is writing to the church in what is now north-eastern Turkey, Greece or Macedonia. He is mindful of the mixed heritage of the church. There are many Jewish converts, but the issue of Gentile inclusion in the church forms the backdrop of this letter. Peter is instructing the church in the ways of holiness and sanctification. He is clear that Jesus' return is imminent and is keen to correct erroneous teaching so that his followers maintain purity of life and doctrine and so are found ready at Christ's return.

Peter begins by appealing for the church to grow in spiritual maturity and reminds the people that, in his view, the prospect of Jesus' return is a certain one based on his understanding of the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament as divinely inspired. From this Peter issues a harsh warning to false teachers and appeals to the judgment accompanying the return of Jesus as the inspiration to live a holy life. This letter is a timely call for holiness in today's church.

Gareth Higgs

ESTHER

A SECOND EXODUS

“TRULY YOU ARE A GOD WHO HAS BEEN HIDING HIMSELF, THE GOD AND SAVIOR OF ISRAEL” (Isa. 45:15).

Esther is rather different from all other biblical books. It tells the story of the Persian court and the Jewish community during the reign of Ahasuerus, the fourth king of the Persian Empire (c. 486–465 B.C.). The Jews in question were part of the community who had stayed behind and not returned to Israel when given permission and assistance to do so by Cyrus, between 60 and 70 years prior. It is largely a story of violence and corruption. What is different, and why scholars and commentators have struggled with it in various ways throughout the centuries, is that although the events recorded so dramatically are very clear, how those events are to be viewed is not. Unusually for biblical narratives, there is no editorial comment to guide our thoughts. What is more, there is no reference to God anywhere, no reference to Israel’s covenant or to prayer or any other element of the worship of Israel’s God. Esther does ask her people to fast, but that would have been a normal thing to do as part of Persian religion.

One can therefore read Esther in two ways. One way is to assume that although God is not mentioned, he is obviously there behind what is going on and engineers or approves of all that is happening. The other is to assume that the lack of reference to God is deliberate—indicating that he did not want to be associated with what was going on—neither with the activities of Persians nor those of Jews. The challenge for readers is to look at what the text is actually saying—rather than what we would like it to have said—and to decide for ourselves how we think the God who reveals himself throughout Scripture would view what occurs.

Mary Evans

REVELATION 10–22

THE TRIUMPH OF GOD

The book of Revelation is not written to satisfy our curiosity but to stimulate our holiness. It was written when the church was under attack, both by persecution by the Romans from without and by sin mixed with error from within. Conscious of their weakness, the author of this book wrote it to put heart into God's people of every age. The underlying message, told in a variety of colorful ways, is that, despite appearances, God remains on the throne and in the end, wins! This is a revelation by God of Jesus Christ to the Church. Its aim is that we should know Jesus better and in a fuller way and not to give us a coded timetable of the end of the age. It contains a picture gallery of Jesus, sometimes depicted in ways you have never considered before.

Although I have taken one way (among several) of interpreting this book, I hope that most of what I write is applicable to all, whichever approach you favor. I believe this book speaks both to the time in which it was written and also to all ages of the church. The writer covers the whole of the “last days”—i.e., the time between Christ's first and second comings—in a variety of cycles (chs. 1–3; 4–7; 8–11; 12–14; 15–19; 20–22), each one coming to a climax with the victory of God and the defeat of evil (e.g., Michael Wilcock, *I Saw Heaven Opened, third edition*; John Stott, *Basic Introduction to the New Testament*). In earlier notes on this book we have seen Christ supervising his churches on earth and sharing God's throne in heaven. We take up the story where he is controlling the course of history. We see him calling a world to repentance, riding a white horse to judgment, sitting on a great white throne, and promising to return soon to claim his bride. Never forget that the “friend of sinners” is also the Lord Christ and that our Savior is also the judge. We need a Savior because without him we would not escape judgment. The good news of the Gospel shines all the brighter against the darkness of evil as the consummation of the age draws near.

Colin Sinclair