

PARALLEL GUIDE 28

The Deuteronomic Reform

Summary: Contemporary with Isaiah but more concerned with the poverty and desolation of “the people of the land,” the prophet Micah speaks a message of uncompromising doom. This chapter places Micah during the Deuteronomic reform, taking a close look at Josiah, who purged the temple and other shrines of foreign idols and centralized the cult in Jerusalem. In the process we study Deuteronomy, sample the Deuteronomic code, and discuss the nature and place of “the Law.”

Learning Objectives

- Read **Micah, II Kings 21:1-23:30**, and **Deuteronomy 1-34**
- Cite Micah’s summary of the religion of the Old Testament
- State the theory we adopt in this lesson which probably accounts for the origin of the Deuteronomic “book of the Law”
- State the major difference between the Code of Deuteronomy and those which preceded it
- Describe a new regulation the Code of Deuteronomy made about the slaughter of animals for food, and state how it changed the relation between worship and daily life

Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

1. What is the *Shema* and what is its relationship to Christian worship and the creeds?
2. From your point of view does the new code of law advance or impede civilization?
3. **How do you perceive the role of law and the need to protect the well being of the public when those restrictions may inhibit freedom? What does this say about the way we handle food or respond to dangerous communicable diseases?**

Preparing for Your Seminar

If the *Shema* was important to Israel, how does this carry over to us today? Try to develop a group statement about the faith of the Old Testament that we have inherited.

Additional Sources

John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd ed. (The Westminster Press, 1981).

W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981).

Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (Harper & Row, 1962). von Rad’s work is in two volumes, the first subtitled “The Theology of Israel’s Historical Traditions,” and the second, “The Theology of Israel’s Prophetic Traditions.” Both

Deuteronomy and the theology of the Deuteronomic historian are treated in the first volume, on pp. 219-231 and 334-347, respectively.

Chaim Stern, ed., *Gates of Repentance* (Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1978).

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Chapter 28 THE DEUTERONOMIC REFORM

Micah prophesied during Hezekiah's reign, while Isaiah was also at work. We look briefly at part of his book, particularly because his message shows the viewpoint of the rural countryside of Judah. He demonstrates a strain of the conservatism that harks back to the story of the Exodus and of YHWH's covenant with Moses. The royal theology which prevailed in Jerusalem, the city of David, apparently did not win much support among the "people of the land," the landed farmers who were the mainstay of Judah's economy and for whom the centralized government of the monarchy was still a new and distrusted institution. In Micah's words we hear sentiments that are expressed again—in an entirely different setting and to a different end—in the Book of Deuteronomy.

With the withdrawal of Sennacherib's forces, the threat of the immediate destruction of Jerusalem passed and Judah could enjoy a period of peace. The peace was bought at the cost of tribute money to Assyria and—for those who had rejoiced when Hezekiah purified the YHWH cult—the humiliation of the reappearance of Assyrian gods and the resurgence of idolatry. **Manasseh** was king—according to the Deuteronomic historian, the most detested king ever to reign in Judah. Nevertheless, it was a time of relative quiet.

The seeds of reform were growing during Manasseh's long reign, and they bore fruit when his grandson, Josiah, became king. The blueprint for the reform is found in the Book of Deuteronomy. The "discovery" of this book during the restoration of the temple contributed to, if it did not prompt, a sweeping reform, the effects of which produced the "Deuteronomic" interpretation of history we have been reading in the books of Judges through II Kings. But more of this reform after a brief look at Micah.

Micah 1:1

Although the title verse says that the prophet spoke during the reign of three kings, he was active only toward the end of the reign of Ahaz, if at all, and largely during the reign of Hezekiah. At any rate, he and Isaiah were roughly contemporaries. Isaiah was a city dweller, probably a member of the Jerusalem upper class. Micah was from rural Judah. The town of Moresheth is southwest of Jerusalem near the Philistine city of Gath.

The international political situation in which Micah worked was the same as that which prompted Isaiah's oracles: the rebellion in Ashdod which was crushed by Sargon of Assyria in 711 BCE and the anti-Assyrian uprisings following Sargon's death which brought his successor, Sennacherib, to the gates of Jerusalem in 701 BCE. But Micah, living in the Judaeon countryside directly in the path of the warring armies, may have felt the destruction which threatened Judah more immediately than did Isaiah, living in the relative security of the walled city of Jerusalem.

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Perhaps because of his rural origins, Micah seems more concerned than Isaiah with socioeconomic abuses, particularly with the oppression of peasant landowners by a Jerusalem nobility that seems too confident of YHWH's continuing grace. Micah's answer to their confidence is "a message of uncompromising doom. . . .

The confidence, supported by the official theology [of the Davidic covenant], that YHWH had chosen Zion as his dwelling place . . . is rejected outright” (Bright, *A History of Israel*, pp. 293-294). It is interesting that some hope in the Davidic covenant is retained, if not by Micah, then by the disciples of Micah who preserved his sayings. Jerusalem may fall—it will fall—but the time will come when Judah, now delivered, will be ruled by a prince of the house of David, a prince who will spring from Bethlehem to bring in an age of peace.

The Text of Micah

Except for a few verses, chapters 1-3 are almost certainly the work of Micah himself. Most of chapters 4-5 are either post-exilic or have been edited and altered in the light of the events of the Exile. Attention has already been drawn to the fact that the verses in Micah 4:1-3 are identical to Isaiah 2:2-4. Chapter 6, which until recently was believed by most scholars to be from a hand later than Micah’s, is now generally accepted as being in large part the prophet’s own work. Chapter 7 is a liturgical text added to the Micah collection during the Exile. It consists of psalms, possibly from among those used in the temple before the Exile.

Micah 1:2-9 A Lawsuit Against the Nation

YHWH brings an accusation against the people and calls upon all people and the earth itself to witness to the testimony against Judah. The fact that Israel, which was destroyed in 721 BCE, is accused in the lawsuit along with Judah has raised questions concerning the date of this oracle. If the oracle was delivered while Israel still existed, it must be dated at least ten years earlier than 711 BCE when the Ashdod rebellion was crushed. The context of the oracle, however, indicates that it is this rebellion of which Micah is speaking. Either an earlier oracle has been inserted into the context of a later one, or, more likely, Micah has used the already accomplished destruction of Israel to give weight to his prophecy of a similar fate yet to come upon Judah. Judah is no better than Israel, Jerusalem no better than Samaria. There are no special privileges to claim. What has come to pass there, will also happen here. The outlook of a country dweller toward cities appears in v. 5: as the city of Samaria has been responsible for the transgression of Israel, so the city of Jerusalem is responsible for the sin of Judah. This saying may in part reflect the conservative outlook of “the people of the land,” for whom, as for rural people of many ages, the big city is the cesspool of the nation’s life—corrupt, sinful, and decadent. It may also reflect, however, the older tradition of the Mosaic covenant placed in contrast to the new royal theology which was at this time entrenched in Jerusalem.

Micah 1:10-16 Destruction of Western Judah

Micah makes the fate of Judah especially vivid by speaking of the misery that will prevail in specific cities in its western region. *If, as most scholars believe, Micah spoke this oracle during the time of the Ashdod rebellion, it may be that he is describing a desolation which in some cases has already occurred and which he himself has seen.*

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Micah 2:1-5 The Rich Take Land from the Poor

In an accusation similar to that which Elijah made against King Ahab, Micah chastises those who take land and homes from their traditional owners. They do it “because it is in their power”—they are the rich and powerful—but they do it without regard for the ancient law that protected future generations by making sacred a family’s right to the land (vv. 1-2). In the time of retribution (their “evil time”), a taunting song shall be sung against them. They will be reminded of the sin they have committed in changing the people’s “inheritance”—their share of the land (v. 4). No one will cast a “lot in the assembly of the LORD” (v. 5) to regain for them their own share of the land.

Micah 2:6-11 True Prophets Forbidden to Speak

False confidence has settled over the evildoers, and false prophets forbid the preaching of doom. They ask four questions (v. 7), the answers to which they assume will be favorable to the oppressors. Micah cites the outrageous injustices these oppressors have committed against the people: they have robbed the poor; they have failed to teach the glory of YHWH. So, Micah concludes, the only prophets who are appropriate for them are prophets full of “wind and lies,” prophets who preach drunkenness.

Micah 3:1-12 Oracles Against the Rulers and the False Prophets

The rulers of both nations, Israel and Judah, are condemned as butchers (vv. 2-3) and as perverters of justice (vv. 9-11), and the prophets are accused of tailoring their oracles to those who offer them a bribe (vv. 5, 11). The situation could hardly be bleaker. Micah, however, claims the authority of the spirit of YHWH for his own message (v. 8)—YHWH shall be heard, whatever conspires against that—and Micah prophesies, in that spirit, that Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins.

If these oracles were delivered during the campaign of Sargon against the Philistine rebellion at Ashdod, Micah’s prediction did not come true. Most scholars believe that, like Isaiah, who pronounced a similar fate for Jerusalem, Micah was discredited and withdrew from public prophecy, possibly to speak again during the crisis of 701 BCE—the siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib.

Chapters 4 and 5 are likely not from Micah. Whoever wrote 5:2-4 provided Christian commentators with a text by which to claim the messianic role for Jesus: the ideal king will come from Bethlehem, a tribe which is “little to be among the clans of Judah.”

Micah 6:1-8 A Covenant Lawsuit, Summary of the Terms Once again, as in 1:2ff., YHWH brings a case against the people. The form of the lawsuit is apparent. The court is called into session (vv. 1-2) and YHWH presents the case (vv. 3-5). A response is made on behalf of the people, who do not seem to know how to respond (vv. 6-7). And the prophet pronounces the judgment of the court (v. 8).

YHWH’s accusation this time takes the form of grief-filled questions to his people—“What have I done to you? In what have I wearied you?” (v. 3) Then follows a recitation of the gracious acts of God toward the people when God redeemed them from bondage in Egypt and brought them into the land (vv. 4-5). The tradition of

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promise is the tradition of the Mosaic covenant. Although this tradition of YHWH as savior may have been absent in Jerusalem, where the official theology espoused the tradition of the everlasting covenant with David, it was apparently still alive in rural Judah.

A representative of the people—perhaps the prophet himself—asks how one can come before YHWH in response to the fatherly reproof. The sacrifices of the cultus simply will not suffice. YHWH has shown the people in the law of Moses what God requires: “to do justice, and to love kindness (chesed), and to walk humbly with your God” (vv. 6-8). In this famous summary of the Old Testament ideal of religion, Micah declares the unbreakable union between worship and ethics.

Neither Micah nor Isaiah was heeded. Jerusalem barely escaped destruction, and Judah was once again firmly under Assyrian control. The Deuteronomic history continues in II Kings with the rise of Manasseh to the throne.

Only eighteen verses are given by the Deuteronomic historian to the reign of Manasseh, a reign which lasted some forty-five years according to modern scholarly estimates. But Manasseh is more completely condemned than any other king of Judah. Under Assyrian threat he undoes all the reforms which his father, Hezekiah, had accomplished. Hezekiah's show of independence from Assyria had been rewarded by a siege of Jerusalem which only at the last moment failed to destroy the city. Manasseh chooses to be a willing servant of Assyria.

II Kings 21:1-18 The Reign of Manasseh

According to the account in Kings, Manasseh became a king when he was only twelve years old (v. 1). During his early years counselors undoubtedly exercised real power. It is unlikely that Assyria would have permitted any but pro-Assyrians to serve. When Manasseh took control, he continued to follow a pro-Assyrian policy. However, if the episode recorded in II Chron. 33:11-13 (where he is brought before the Assyrian king—presumably for disloyalty) is historically accurate, he was no more loyal than he had to be. Still, the gods of Canaan and the “astral deities” of Assyria seemed to dilute YHWH worship, almost to the point of the latter's disappearance. According to the D historian, Manasseh began by building altars for the “host of heaven” in the courts of the temple. (The term “host of heaven” refers to the sun, moon, and stars, all of which played an important role in the astrological religions of Mesopotamia. The “Wise Men” who, according to Matthew 2 came to Bethlehem in search of Jesus, may have been astrologers from Mesopotamia.) It does not stop there. The king even placed a graven **Asherah** within the temple itself and restored the practice of human sacrifice.

There is a tradition that Manasseh also slaughtered the prophets, killing one a day every day of his reign. If he reigned for forty-five or, as the Kings account has it, fifty-five years, this is hardly possible, but there is little doubt that prophets who spoke against his policy found their lot a difficult one. Tradition also has it that he executed Isaiah in a spectacularly fiendish manner: he had the prophet put into a hollow log which was then sawed in two. Apparently, the prophets continue to speak during his reign. The prophecy of v. 13 reminds us of Micah 1:5-7. Jerusalem will

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be measured with the same plumb line YHWH used to measure Samaria. The result of the measurement will be the same. Eventually Jerusalem, too, will be completely destroyed, wiped clean “as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down.” Yahwism was corrupted, but it was not to be destroyed in the reign of Manasseh. During Manasseh's reign Babylon begins to increase in strength and to challenge Assyrian control over the region. An earlier Babylonian uprising, made with the support of Egypt, had been the occasion of Hezekiah's disastrous display of independence (II Kings 20:12-19). Assyrian power was sufficient to overcome the rebellion then, but Babylon's strength continued to grow, while the far-flung Assyrian empire showed increasing signs that it would fall apart. **Eventually Babylon emerges victorious in the struggle between the two giants.** In the meantime Judah cannot always tell which side offers her greater promise—or, at the least, a lesser threat.

II Kings 21:19-26 King Amon

After the death of Manasseh, his son Amon becomes king. Amon apparently continues the policies of Manasseh and receives no higher marks from the Deuteronomist than his father did (v. 20). A palace revolt results in the assassination of Amon, only two years after he comes to power. The motive behind the assassination is uncertain. Some scholars have seen in it the hand of anti-Assyrian nationalists. But, whatever the reason—whether the time for revolt against Assyria was not yet ripe or perhaps because political assassination, although long a way of life in the northern kingdom, ran completely contrary to the tradition of a stable Davidic dynasty—the assassination of even so unattractive a king as Amon provoked a vehement protest from the conservative landowners of rural Judah (v. 24). **Josiah, the young son of Amon**, is acclaimed

king and so the Davidic line continues.

II Kings 22:1-20 The Discovery of “The Book of the Law”

We may assume that the early years of Josiah’s reign—he was still a young boy—saw the country governed by a council of regents. Unlike the pro-Assyrian counselors who—scholars generally suppose—held power during Manasseh’s early years, those who ruled in Josiah’s name presumably represented the “people of the land.” This assumption is supported by the first recorded act of the king, eighteen years into his reign: he orders repairs on the temple, using money donated for this purpose (vv. 4-7).

The “high priest”—an anachronistic title, for the office of high priest did not exist at this time—reports during the temple renovation the discovery of “The Book of the Law” (v. 8). Most scholars agree that the book consisted of chapters 12-26 of our present Book of Deuteronomy. Indeed that name for the book, which is not its name in the Hebrew Bible, may indicate that it has been connected with Josiah’s “Deuteronomic reform” from ancient times.

The Deuteronomic historian seems to accept at face value the idea that the book was simply found in this way—an “archaeological discovery” of an ancient text. If it was the Book of Deuteronomy, or at least chapters 12-26, it is impossible to believe that its “discovery” in the temple occurred in just that way. For the book was not an ancient one, hidden or lost in some dusty nook for centuries, but, as we see later in this lesson, it was written to speak to current conditions in the nation. The legal

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sections of the book, it is true, are ancient, but **they have been edited and expanded in the light of contemporary affairs.**

However the book came to be found, and however it may have been written, its effect on the young king seems to have been profound. When it is read to him, he is so disturbed by the threats of destruction which it makes concerning those who break the laws of YHWH that he sends messengers to “inquire of YHWH” about it. This is not to seek certification of the authenticity of the book, as modern scholars would do with an archaeological find. It is to ask for an oracle. The king wishes to find out from YHWH something about himself and his reign.

Josiah’s messengers go to a prophet named Huldah, about whom we hear nothing further except in the parallel passage in II Chronicles 34:22. She declares that all the punishment of which the book speaks will come to pass (vv. 16-17). But she prophesies too that Josiah’s penitence will ensure that it will not happen in his reign and that he will die in peace. The last part of this oracle will not come true, for the king will eventually die violently. Of revolutionary significance is Huldah’s assertion that these written words are somehow “the word of the LORD.” This is the first time such had been declared. Yes, of course, there had long been written texts, probably including some prophetic oracles. Up until this time, the power of the Lord was held to be in the moment of the speaking of an oracle. Now Huldah is saying that God still “speaks” through the written word. It is hard for us to grasp the shattering significance of this declaration.

II Kings 23:1-3 A Covenant-Renewal Ceremony

Josiah reads “The Book of the Law” aloud before the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem. Then he and the people renew the covenant with YHWH, pledging to live by God’s law. The ceremony is similar to those that occurred at Sinai under Moses (Exod. 24:3-8) and at Shechem under Joshua (Josh. 24). The similarity to the Shechem ceremony, combined with other features of the book, leads many scholars to think that “The Book of the Law” was originally a northern composition connected with the Shechem shrine.

At this point in the account the impression conveyed is that the reform of Josiah—of which we are soon to discover more detail—is the direct result of the discovery in the temple of the lawbook. But, as we have implied, that seems most unlikely. In fact the reform must have already been in progress, for the repair and the purification of the temple, itself a reform measure, actually provides the occasion for the lawbook's discovery. At this point, the account of the Chronicler (II Chron. 34-35) is a helpful addition, if only because it provides the picture of reform in several stages. The probability is that the internal reform did take place over some time, and that it was not unrelated to external conditions, particularly to the demise of the Assyrian empire. This is taken into account in John Bright's reconstruction of the reform (History, pp. 317-319). Bright suggests that it is possible that the decision to repudiate the Assyrian cult may have taken place as early as the eighth year of Josiah's reign (633/2 BCE), and that "by his twelfth year (629/8 BCE), coincident with the accession of Sin-shar-ishkun to the throne of Assyria"—which was the occasion of civil strife in that land that would have taken attention away from external affairs—"a

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radical purge of idolatrous practices of all sorts was begun which extended itself into northern Israel also as Josiah moved into that area." In the eighteenth year, then, when Assyrian control was quite at an end, the finding of the lawbook "gave the reform direction and drove it to its conclusion" (Bright, p. 318). Whatever else can be said of the reform, it is true that it did not happen all at once as if by the "magic of the book." It was not a strictly internal matter, and reform paralleled Judah's drive for independence from Assyria. These facts must be kept in mind as we examine the Kings account of the reform itself.

II Kings 23:4-27 Josiah's Reform

The details of the reform which Josiah conducts provide convincing evidence that "The Book of the Law" was indeed the core of the Book of Deuteronomy. The king has all the foreign cult objects in the temple destroyed (v. 4). Then he purges the "high places" that dotted the Judaeen countryside, ridding them of foreign idols and deposing their Canaanite priests (v. 5). The Asherah, a female fertility symbol which had been in the temple, is removed and burned outside the city (v. 6—the brook of Kidron lies just south of Jerusalem), and the male cult prostitution centers within the temple complex are torn down (v. 7).

All these things could have been done under the terms of any of the Israelite legal codes. But the next act shows a peculiarity of the Deuteronomic code: Josiah closes down all the "high places," even those dedicated to the worship of YHWH, and he brings "all the priests out of the towns of Judah" (v. 8). These priests of YHWH are apparently invited to come to Jerusalem, their jobs in the countryside having been abolished, but many of them will not come. They "ate unleavened bread among their kindred" (v. 9). Deuteronomy 12:12 and 19 command that the rural priests, the Levites, should be cared for by the people "since [they have] no allotment or inheritance with you" (Deut. 12:12; cf. Num. 18:20-24). Only in Deuteronomy among the pre-exilic legal codes of the Old Testament does this mean centralization of the cult in Jerusalem which Josiah attempts.

In Jerusalem the old religious customs had been forgotten for so long that the Passover had ceased to be observed. Perhaps the Jerusalem cultus, under the influence of the royal theology, had de-emphasized the older Mosaic covenant to the extent that the rite of Passover which commemorated it was no longer celebrated at all. (Or perhaps the general laxity of the times in the observance of Yahwism is sufficient to account for the neglecting of the rite.) It seems unlikely, at any rate, that it would have been forgotten throughout all the land for the length of time indicated in v. 22. At any rate, Josiah orders Passover reestablished (v. 21).

The brief note in these two verses says simply that Josiah was killed when he "went to meet" Pharaoh Neco at Megiddo (v. 29). The Egyptian pharaoh is an ally of the Assyrian king at this time, when Assyria is continuing the attempt to preserve its empire against the rising power of Babylon. Josiah, casting his lot with

Babylon against the Assyrians, apparently joins in the battle and is killed by Neco. Second Chronicles 35:20-24 presents an expanded account of this battle. The two books of Chronicles usually simply parallel the accounts given in the books of

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Kings, though they do embellish them with the theological views of the post-exilic priestly compilers. However, rarely does reading them supply anything of historical import not already known from reading the Deuteronomic history in the books of Samuel and Kings. Occasionally, material appears which seems accurate and which has been omitted from the Deuteronomic history. Many scholars accept the accuracy of the passage in II Chronicles 35, while others consider it made up to fill an unseemly silence.

According to Chronicles, the battle of the Assyrian-Egyptian allies against Babylon was to take place at Carchemish on the northern reaches of the Euphrates River. Josiah meets Neco at **Megiddo** in the valley through which the caravan route from Egypt must pass on its way inland to Syria via the coastal plain of Palestine. Pharaoh Neco is presented as trying to dissuade Josiah from entering a war in which his own interests are not involved, but Josiah persists. He is shot by archers and fatally wounded. His officers take him back to Jerusalem, where he dies. Chronicles mentions that the prophet Jeremiah sings a lament to the dead king.

Deuteronomy

In its present form the **Book of Deuteronomy** may be divided into four major sections:

- a) Deut. 1-11—introduction. (Actually there are two distinguishable introductory speeches—chs. 1-4 and 5-11—joined together.) The format is an address by Moses to the Israelites as they are poised on the east bank of the Jordan just prior to the invasion of Canaan.
- b) Deut. 12-26—the “Deuteronomic Code,” presumably the bulk of “the Book of the Law” discovered during the reign of Josiah.
- c) Deut. 27-30—an appendix, containing closing speeches.
- d) Deut. 31-34—a continuation of the story of the Israelites’ march to Canaan, concentrating especially on the death of Moses.

It is a vexing problem to determine how and by whom Deuteronomy was written. Some scholars have suggested that it was composed during the reign of Manasseh by a group of prophets who were attempting to preserve the fundamentals of Yahwism for a later time—after the apostate king’s death—when reformation could occur. In support of this theory, it can be noted that the book shows a concern for justice similar to that of the great prophets; also the prophetic role is depicted in the book, as it was not in earlier codes. Other scholars have seen Deuteronomy as a product of the northern kingdom prior to its fall in 721 BCE. Associations with the shrine of Shechem, an awareness of the tradition of the ark—so prominent in the northern tradition—and the indefinite location of the central shrine—which is spoken of only as “the place which YHWH shall choose”—lend support to this theory. A combination of the two theories seems most probable: a northern document was brought to Judah by Israelite “displaced persons” after the defeat of 721 BCE; in Judah, prophetic circles—possibly with the support of some of the “people of the land”—preserved and modified it.

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The book is clearly based on older legal and historical material. The code which forms its core is very similar to the Covenant Code in Exod. 20:18-23:33, and its Decalogue (5:6-21) obviously comes from the one found in Exod. 20:1-17. It is important to remember regarding both the Book of Exodus and the Covenant Code in its present form, that neither one comes from the ancient period of which the Book of Exodus speaks. Though containing very ancient elements, the Exodus Covenant Code dates from about 750 BCE, and is contemporaneous with the eighth-century prophets. In its short apodictic form the Exodus Decalogue is older and contains very ancient material. However, the earliest date which present scholarship can confidently claim for it is “sometime earlier” than 850 BCE.

The Covenant Code and the Decalogue may well have been circulating in what is essentially their present form at the time of the compilation/composition of the Deuteronomistic Code, and they could have been one basis for it, though even earlier material may have provided the source for both Exodus and Deuteronomy.

Whatever the sources of the material used in the Deuteronomistic code, it is presented in an original manner in Deuteronomy. The Law is not so much promulgated as it is preached. It is put into the mouth of Moses as the content of a sermon which he preaches to the Israelites, and during the time of Josiah it is read as a preachment to Judah. The commandments of the Law are stated, essentially in their old form, interpreted in the light of conditions in seventh-century Judah, and finally preached to the people. The result is a book which, probably more than any other in the Old Testament, expresses the graciousness of YHWH, the reasonableness of God’s commands, and the high level of life to which God has called the people. Jesus turned constantly to this book and to “Second Isaiah” to find scriptural expression for his own concepts of life under God. In fact, the Book of Deuteronomy is so often quoted in the New Testament (83 times) that some have been led to call it “the gospel of the Old Testament.”

Deuteronomy 1-11

A note on terminology: “D,” “the Deuteronomistic editor,” “the Deuteronomistic historian,” and “the Deuteronomist” have not been defined with unwavering precision by the scholars who use them. They are more or less interchangeable. Two matters are important to remember. First, we are not talking about a single individual, but a group which existed over time. A rough analogy would be phrases such as “the Albright school” in Old Testament studies or “Jeffersonian Democrats” in politics. Second, when we use the descriptions “historian” and “editor,” we are still in the realm of analogy. It is not fair to the ancient writers to expect them to conform to our notions of what a proper historian or careful editor does—to call them “clumsy” or “careless” when their resulting texts are different from what we imagine they should be.

The Introductions

Deuteronomy 1:1-4:43, cast in the form of an address by Moses, is actually an introduction to the entire Deuteronomistic history. Added by the Deuteronomistic editor to an earlier introduction to the code, it sets forth the major ideas which run through

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the books from Joshua through II Kings. The D editor was inspired by the Deuteronomistic Code and by the reform under Josiah, but D should not be considered as the compiler of the central core of the Book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy 1:1-4:43 now stands immediately before another much longer and earlier introduction to the code in chapters 12-26. This introduction, which could properly be called the introduction to the Book of Deuteronomy itself, is found in chapters 4:44-11:32. We examine a short passage from the later introduction to the history before turning to passages from the earlier one.

Deuteronomy 4:32-40

Sometimes the most revolutionary documents are also the most conservative. The Jerusalem theology of the “everlasting covenant” with the house of David was an attempt to insert into the new notion of a monarchy some of the basic features of an older Yahwism from the time of the tribal confederation. The idea of a covenant with YHWH was preserved, although it was made with the king rather than directly with Israel. The tradition that said that Israel’s election as the people of God was due solely to YHWH and YHWH’s grace rather than to the status or achievements of the people was also preserved—the house of David was to endure in spite of the defects of individual kings, for it was YHWH’s grace which supported it.

The royal theology had come on bad times. Isaiah, and others after him, built the idea of a remnant and a future ideal king on the foundations of the royal theology, but the heart of the message of the prophets, including Isaiah, testified to the fact that under the monarchy YHWH and YHWH’s will for the people had been forgotten or rejected. **So the Deuteronomist tells Judah to “ask of the days that are past” in order to rediscover the roots of Yahwism. In its roots the people will find directions for a revolutionary reform.**

The word “radical,” so often associated with those who seem to want the complete overthrow of the present status, comes from the Latin word radix, which means “root.” **The true radical is one who returns to the roots of that which he or she wishes to reform.** This is what the Deuteronomist does, and what is learned by returning to the roots is that YHWH, “because he loved your ancestors” (v. 37), brought them out of Egypt and gave them this land. Therefore, know “this day”—that is, the day in which the Deuteronomist is writing, having momentarily discarded (or forgotten) the fiction that it is Moses who is speaking—“so acknowledge today and take to heart that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other” (v. 39). The movement toward a clear-cut statement of monotheism reaches its goal in this statement. From the time of Amos on, the prophets have spoken in a manner which clearly implied monotheism, but this is the first explicit statement of it. Furthermore, Judah will learn that what follows from such a belief in YHWH is the theology of history that the Deuteronomic historian will continue to preach while recounting the story of the people, saying “keep his statutes and his commandments, which I [Moses] am commanding you today, for your own well-being and that of your descendants after you, so that you may long remain in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for all time” (v. 40). All that is left to round out the Deuteronomic theology of history is to add that obedience leads to the blessing of YHWH, but disobedience leads to disaster.

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While there is general agreement among scholars that the “introduction” by the Deuteronomic historian ends at 4:43, there is no agreement about where the “introduction” by the Deuteronomist begins. The verses from v. 44 to the end of chapter 4 are obviously an introduction of some kind, but so are the opening verses of chapter 5. This has led some to speculate that 4:44-49 may be misplaced from elsewhere in the book, perhaps from its very beginning.

It is worth noting that verse 44 is recited (in Hebrew) at all synagogue services as the Torah scroll is lifted up before the congregation. These words are followed by the words of Numbers 4:37, “according to the commandment of the LORD by Moses.”

Deuteronomy 5:1-6:25 Decalogue and Shema

The introduction to “The Book of the Law” begins with a restatement of the Decalogue—the “ten words” given, according to the exodus tradition, to Moses by God himself on the “mountain of God.” But the “restatement” seems to come from a tradition different from the “statement” in Exodus. Note for example that in the Deuteronomic writings this mountain is called Horeb (E’s designation) rather than Sinai (J’s). D’s use of the E name may be seen as an indication of the northern origin of the Deuteronomic Code. Some other differences between the versions are noted below. The differences are most pronounced in the fourth commandment.

Verses 2-3 emphasize the contemporaneity of the covenant—it was not made with the ancient Israelites alone, but also with the present generation. In the context of the passage itself, it is still Moses and the band of Israelites on the edge of the wilderness who are the subjects of the discourse, but the Jews of seventh-century Jerusalem are simultaneously addressed. For do not forget that Moses is speaking primarily to the next generation—all those who were adults at the time of the Exodus from Egypt have died during the wilderness wandering, except for Moses and Joshua. For this second generation and all subsequent generations the covenant is not an event long past but a present relationship. Contrary to the remoteness from God that most people may have felt at that time, YHWH is said to appear before the people “face to face” to establish the covenant (v. 4). Note, however, that this statement is immediately contradicted in the verse following, where Moses claims to have stood between God and the people, and in vv. 30ff., which depict Moses as YHWH’s spokesman. Several attempts have been made to reconcile the contradiction. None are without difficulties but the most satisfying is that offered by the Talmud, which suggests that God was like the Torah reader at worship, while Moses was like the translator and interpreter.

The Decalogue itself (vv. 6-21) is substantially the same as the version in Exod. 20:1-17, though the commandment concerning the Sabbath is altered, as we have indicated. Here in Deuteronomy the commandment commemorates the deliverance from Egypt rather than creation (vv. 12-15). Remembering that they were once “ser vants”—that is, slaves—in Egypt should help the Israelites to observe the command that all, even male and female slaves, be given a day of rest. In his commentary on Deuteronomy, Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut comments on the difference between the two versions.

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Both versions of the Sabbath commandment state why the day has been specially set aside and they state it differently. In Exodus, Israel is bidden to imitate God the Creator; even as He rested on the seventh day so must His chosen ones. Once a week they are to reenact the creative process and thus renew their own creative power. Here, in Deuteronomy, the duty to observe the Sabbath is linked not to God the Creator but to God the Redeemer. In remembering its own liberation from Egyptian slavery, Israel is to recall that all servants are human and therefore must extend the duty and privilege of Sabbath rest to them as well. Week after week the humanity of the servant is brought into the focus of social conscience. In consequence, Judaism became a religion in which social justice, equity, and decency occupied a central position. (The Torah: A Modern Commentary, p. 1360)

The commandment to honor father and mother (v. 16) is slightly different from its form in Exodus. Here, it stresses the Deuteronomic belief that it is obedience to YHWH that results in well-being—the Exodus version claims that well-being follows simply as a result of giving parents the honor due them.

The Decalogue states YHWH’s will for the people. Now Deuteronomy proceeds to a commentary on the Law. This characteristic pattern is to be repeated throughout the book. A statement of the ancient law becomes the occasion for a sermon-like address in which the law is interpreted to relate it to the circumstances of the seventh century. Finally, the people are exhorted to keep the Law faithfully so that the blessings of YHWH may come upon them.

The Decalogue is addressed to the people directly, but the rest of the Law is delivered to them through Moses. Verses 23-31 speak of the people’s fear at being so close to the divine power and of YHWH’s instruction that Moses be the one to mediate to them “all the commandments and the statutes and the ordinances” that he will receive from YHWH. Thus the reader is prepared for what is to come in the rest of the book—he will be led by Moses into a study of the Law. The rest of the introduction is largely intended to impress upon the reader the importance of keeping the Law. In the course of this preaching, the essence of the Law and its place in Jewish life are summarized.

The first summary is found in chapter 6. The closest that the Old Testament comes to a creed—a formalized summary of the beliefs of the community—is contained in 6:4-5. The passage is usually called by the Hebrew word that opens it, *shema* (she-MAH): *Shema Yisrael YHWH eloheynu YHWH ached.* (When reading aloud, YHWH is most often pronounced “Adonai,” which means “Lord,” thus the verse is: *Shema Yisrael Adonai eloheynu Adonai ached.*) Literally, “Hear, Israel, YHWH our God, the YHWH is one.” The RSV translation, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one,” is perfectly possible, but there are several alternatives equally possible, including those given in the OAB, “YHWH our God, YHWH is one”; “YHWH is our God, YHWH is one”; “YHWH is God, YHWH alone.” It is not simply God’s unity that is at stake. YHWH and only YHWH—with no assisting gods or consort—is God for Israel. And—or perhaps, so—God is to be loved with

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all one’s heart and soul and might. (Because English grammar is so different from Hebrew, we require all these alternative translations to begin to capture what is in the one Hebrew statement.)

The traditional translation of “heart . . . soul . . . might” do not simply represent divisions or compartments of a person—the “heart,” one’s intellect, the “soul,” one’s emotions, “might,” one’s physical strength; together they express a totality of commitment. Remember what was discussed before about “love”: “love” should not be interpreted sentimentally—it is not, in its primary sense, a feeling. It is the faithful constancy, loyalty, and commitment which is the creature’s due response to God’s fidelity to creation. This kind of love is expressed in obedience, springing from respect and awe which border on fear—though not the fear which one has in the presence of danger. This fear does not have to do with the sense of standing at the boundary between life and death. The “fear of YHWH” is the sense of standing at the boundary between life and that which is utterly beyond life. It is awe at its ultimate level. The fidelity which necessarily springs from such a “fear” is what is commanded in the injunction to “love YHWH your God.”

“Heart” represents the seat of human will; it is where one thinks and makes decisions. “Soul” is the usual translation of *nephesh*, which we saw as far back as Genesis 1, and includes both “aliveness” and “individuality.” One might paraphrase this verse into our own idiom as “Be loyal to the LORD your God with all your thoughts and decision-making, with all your unique aliveness, and with all your efforts.” Verses 6-7 express another idea characteristic of Deuteronomy: the Law, which includes all the “teachings” as well as the legal code itself, is to be taught to children generation after generation. A tradition such as Yahwism, which demands a total ordering of all of life, cannot be maintained without a thorough immersion in the Law. It must be the main topic of discussion, its meanings deeply explored and its implications expanded. “Religious education” is not for the head only, but for the whole person.

Verses 8-9 express this thought with instructions originally intended as figures of speech. The Law is to be kept before one constantly, as if written on the hands with which one acts, ever in sight, the “sign” of every Jewish home. In later Judaism, Deut. 6:4-9, 11:13-21, and Exod. 13:1-16 were written on small scrolls placed in two sets of *teffilin*, small boxes with leather straps for attaching them on the head and the left arm at the time of the reading of the *Shema*. Jewish tradition understood v. 9 as a command to put a *mezuzah* (muh-ZOO-zah) on the doorposts of one’s home. The Hebrew word originally referred to the doorpost itself, but it has come to indicate also the small container with scrolls of Deut. 6:4-9 and 11:13-21.

Because of its importance to Judaism, the *Shema* has become the subject not only of special practices, but of liturgical controversy. For example, “it is a custom among orthodox Jews to cover the eyes while saying the words, in order to increase one’s concentration, and to linger on the last letter (d) which is written large in the Hebrew text,” though why it was originally written large no one knows. There has even arisen controversy over the posture one ought to assume

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while reciting the Shema. So, at the turn of the era, Shammai held that verse 7 was to be taken literally: at night speak the words lying down, and in the morning standing up; while Hillel (whose teaching prevailed) ruled that one should not change one's position during the recital. [Today] Reform practice provides for the congregation to stand in order to emphasize the importance of the Shema, while in orthodox and most conservative synagogues it is recited sitting down. (Plaut, p. 1371)

These practices are more than matters of simple curiosity; they indicate the growing importance of the Shema in Jewish life. Plaut describes it rightly as “the best-known words in Judaism’s liturgy, the ‘watchword’ of Israel’s faith . . .” (p. 1369). The rest of chapter 6 contains three brief “sermons,” vv. 10-15, 16-19, and 20-25. Here are recited particularly the acts by which God brought Israel out of Egypt and gave her the land of Canaan. But the recitation of history is not done for its own sake. In Canaan the people of Israel were given a land with a civilization already built; cities, houses, water supply, and crops were there for them to inherit. It was not their doing; it is no indication of their own ability that they now—in the seventh century—live in a Judah which has such a civilization (vv. 10-11). Therefore they are not to become proud and forget YHWH, deserting YHWH for the gods of the people around them (v. 12).

Either to forsake YHWH or to “put the LORD your God to the test,” demanding that YHWH give evidence worthy of worship, will provoke the jealousy and anger of YHWH; the acts of olden time have proven YHWH is jealous (vv. 14-16).

In v. 20, we encounter once again the motif of educating the young, but we have here, in contrast to the passages which surround it, more than another little sermon. Within that sermon is, to use Gerhard von Rad’s words, an “out and out . . . confession of faith,” a recapitulation of Israel’s life with God, “with close concentration on the objective historical facts” (Old Testament Theology, vol. I, p. 122). These are facts in Israel’s existence, but you will note (vv. 21-24) that Israel is not the protagonist in its own history. That role belongs always and only to YHWH. It was YHWH who freed Israel, who worked the miracles of deliverance to bring the people into the land of promise. And it is YHWH who has commanded reverence and obedience to the Law, which, finally, YHWH has given.

Deuteronomy 7:1-11 A Holy People

Israel is YHWH’s own people and therefore a holy people. They are holy because they belong to God. God chose them simply because of love. They themselves were an insignificant people (vv. 6-8). The love which God bestowed on them is their only claim to significance, and it carries with it the demand that they be faithful to God. If they keep God’s commandments, God will bless them; if they do not, he will destroy them. This is the message of Deuteronomy at its starkest, a message reflected in the Deuteronomic history in which the sins of Israel and Judah are recited as signs of the coming destruction of both lands.

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The holiness of Israel carries with it the necessity for purity. Israel must not be contaminated with the religions of other lands. Therefore Israel is commanded to destroy utterly the nations she finds in the land of Canaan. The provision stands in sharp contrast to the generally humane nature of the Book of Deuteronomy, and the harsh brutality of the command is probably best read in the context of reality, in which the command was never carried out. If it had been, the warning against intermarriage that follows would have been unnecessary. In retrospect—from the position of the reader of Deuteronomy—it can be said that “the rampant idolatry which characterized Israel’s history . . . could have been avoided had the native peoples been destroyed” (Plaut, p. 1381).

The fact that endogamy (en-DOG-amee, marriage within a particular group) was encouraged among the

Israelites from early in their history can be discerned from the stories of Isaac and Rebekah (see especially Gen. 24:14 and 26:34-35). But it would not be until the time of Ezra (c. 400 BCE)—that is, after the return from the Exile—that marriages outside the people became forbidden and endogamy became state policy.

Deuteronomy 9:6-21 Israel is a Stubborn People

The story of the golden calf is retold to demonstrate that Israel—and now seventh-century Judah—is a stubborn (literally, “stiff-necked”) people. In spite of all that has been said about the Law—the necessity for keeping it and the motivation which God’s graciousness provides for doing so—the fact remains that YHWH’s people have not kept the covenant. From the very outset, immediately after the covenant was sealed at Horeb/Sinai, the people resorted to idolatry. They have been “rebellious,” and acted “corruptly,” “provoking the LORD by doing what was evil in his sight” (v. 18). The anger was deserved—there can be no doubt of that. And the message to Judah is clear—YHWH’s anger was barely averted then by the intercession of Moses, and Judah, continuing in her stubbornness now, cannot expect such a means of escape.

It is interesting that the Yom Kippur liturgy contains even today a congregational confession that they remain a stiff-necked people:

Our God, God of our mothers and fathers, grant that our prayers may reach You. Do not be deaf to our pleas, for we are not so arrogant and stiff-necked as to say before You, Lord our God and God of all ages, we are perfect and have not sinned; rather do we confess: we have gone astray, we have sinned, we have transgressed. . . . We are arrogant, brutal, careless, destructive, egocentric, false; greedy, heartless, insolent, and joyless. Our sins are an alphabet of woe. (Gates of Repentance, Chaim Stern, ed., pp. 269, 327)

Deuteronomy 10:8-9 Duties of the Levites I-2006

Here are listed in brief three of the four duties assigned the Levites in the Book of Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy the term Levite refers almost always to the Levitical priests. Here they are assigned the duty of carrying the ark—though in Num. 3:31 and 4:41, representing a different tradition, the task is given to the non-priestly Kohathites. The Levites are also “to stand before the LORD to minister to him,” that is, to the people in his name. The fourth duty, added in Deut. 33:10, involves the

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burning of incense. These duties are said to belong to the tribe of Levi to this day, meaning the time of the writing of Deuteronomy. By the time of Jesus, the Levites were non-priests whose primary function was to sing at temple services, though they also attended the priests and performed menial tasks about the sanctuary. When the temple was destroyed in CE 70, Levitical functions practically ceased.

Deuteronomy 10:12-22 “. . . what does YHWH your God require of you . . . ?”

In a passage reminiscent of Micah 6:8—possibly directly influenced by Micah—the duty of God’s people is stated in summary terms in an attempt to impress upon the reader the essence of life under YHWH. They are to “fear YHWH your God.” The word here translated “fear” (NRSV) is translated “revere” in the translation of the Jewish Publication Society (cf. Today’s English Version, “have reverence”). In his commentary, W. Gunther Plaut describes the term here as combining “both fear and love . . . to form the most desirable relationship with God” (p. 1405). The Talmud suggests that God asks “only” reverence—“What does YHWH your God require of you but to fear” God—in the sense that everything is in God’s power except our reverence. That must be supplied by us, and it includes “to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God, and his decrees that I am commanding you today for your own well-being” (vv. 12-13). This expresses the nature of Yahwism and the inclusiveness of its demands. The demand is for complete and radical obedience.

Therefore, “do not be stubborn any longer” (v. 16). Moses pleads with Israel—and the Deuteronomic writer with Judah—to repent. The acts of God are appealed to once again to bolster this plea (vv. 17-22).

Deuteronomy 11:26-28 A Blessing and a Curse

The climax of this introduction to Deuteronomy comes in this section. The Law, the reasons why the people should obey it, the stubbornness which is their record, and the plea for them to repent—all this means that the people must make a choice. If they revere YHWH and keep the commandments, they will receive a blessing; if they choose not to, they will receive a curse. This message runs throughout the Deuteronomic writings, but in these verses it is put as an immediate choice. “See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse.” It sounds like Elijah at Mt. Carmel, or like Jesus proclaiming that the kingdom of God is at hand.

The Deuteronomic Code

The great bulk of the Deuteronomic Code is similar to the Covenant Code in Exodus 20:18-23:33. We do not examine it in detail, but we look at some sample passages that demonstrate the emphasis of the Deuteronomic revision. Please read the passages indicated in conjunction with the discussion.

Deuteronomy 12:1-19; 16:1-22 Centralizing Worship

Apart from the style in which the code is phrased, the major difference between the Deuteronomic Code and preceding ones is the attempt to eliminate all cultic worship at local shrines in Judah and concentrate worship at the Jerusalem temple. All attempts by earlier prophets such as Elijah to put a stop to the syncretistic practices of the people had failed. It was apparently impossible to persuade a majority of the people that it was a betrayal of their God and of the foundation of their national life to worship as all the other peoples they knew worshiped. Monotheism was a concept foreign to virtually all the cultures of the ancient world. The brief attempt

Akh-en-aton made in Egypt to establish a religion with at least the appearance of monotheism had ended in failure.

In our day we are so well accustomed to the idea of monotheism that even those among us who do not believe in God tend to see polytheism as a primitive religious form and monotheism as an advance beyond it. But to ancient people the notion that there might be only one God seemed to contradict observable facts. Life has many facets, each of which functions at a level deeper than its surface appearance. What some modern thinkers call the “**depth dimension**” of life—that which is below the level of superficiality—the ancients saw as divine. Since there is a “depth dimension” to many different facets of life, the ancients reasoned, there must be many gods. Thus it was not ignorance or a lack of awareness that supported polytheism, but a perception which was at once obvious and profound. Its profundity lay in its awareness of “depth,” its obviousness in the simple observation of the pluralistic nature of life.

Since persuasion had not succeeded in stamping out polytheism among the people of Israel, control was attempted. In order to control worship, it was to occur only at the central shrine. Education of the children was urged, so that the people would learn to accept monotheistic worship as true and desirable. The reformers apparently recognized that education is a slow and not always dependable means of bringing about widespread change. In the meantime, they sought to bring the cultus under control.

In 12:1-3, the Israelites are told on the eve of their invasion of Canaan to destroy all the “high places” and sacred groves of the Canaanites and all the cultic objects found there. In itself, this command would not be novel—the destruction of baalite centers had long been called for by the prophets.

In vv. 4-17, even worship of YHWH is forbidden at these local shrines. “You shall not worship the LORD your God in such ways” (v. 4), means you shall not worship YHWH at the local shrines. Instead, “you shall seek the place that the LORD your God will choose” and worship God there. Neither here nor elsewhere in Deuteronomy is Jerusalem named as “the place which the LORD your God shall choose.” The “Deuteronomic reform” under Josiah understood the reference to be to Jerusalem, but the text does not say so. Indeed there is reason to believe that Shechem was originally meant. This interpretation depends, however, on the accuracy of the assumption that the code was a northern composition brought to Judah by Israelite exiles.

The command to worship only at the central shrine was a novel one, and the compilers of the code recognized this. Verses 8-9 are included to explain why such a change is now being made. Practices which the older codes permitted are now forbidden. The older practices—“all that we are doing here this day”—in which every man acts as priest and offers sacrifices as he wishes, existed because Israel had not yet settled in the land. YHWH had not yet indicated “the place which he would choose.” When that place was indicated, then God’s “name” dwelled there and all offerings were to be made there (vv. 10-11). The “name”—and so the presence—of YHWH will

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“dwell” at the central shrine and there only. All the offerings which are to be made “before YHWH” had to be made at that shrine alone (vv. 6-7). In v. 5 we note a subtle but important theological shift concerning the way in which YHWH is thought to be present with the people. In the northern tradition of the ark, YHWH was thought to be seated on the ark, or on an invisible throne with the ark as footstool. YHWH, though invisible, was “physically” present wherever the ark was. Thus, when the Israelites carried the ark into battle, YHWH himself went with them. But this was not the only interpretation of YHWH’s presence. At the “tent of meeting”—distinct from the “tabernacle” in which the ark was housed—YHWH also came down from time to time in the cloud to meet with Moses. God’s presence there was not an abiding one, but occurred at specific times to confront the people, through Moses, with a special word.

Deuteronomy reflects the tradition of the ark—further evidence of its northern origin—but it alters that tradition in a subtle way. YHWH is too great a God to be localized; YHWH is beyond such limitations. God will “put his name” **at the place which God will choose**—in this way God will “make his habitation there” (v. 5). This is not the mode of presence described in the tradition that speaks of the “tent of meeting.” It follows more closely the tradition of the ark. It interprets this tradition in a way intended to lift it above the idea common to polytheistic idolatry that the god can be locally contained. In the context of the ancient belief in the power of a name, the “name” of YHWH means God’s presence; yet by speaking of the presence of the “name,” a certain distance, a remoteness of the person himself, is suggested. We return to chapter 12 later; turn now to 16:1-15. In this passage the calendar of yearly observances is also placed under the command to centralize. Passover, which previously had been a family rite, observed at home and never associated with a shrine, is to be celebrated only at the central shrine (vv. 6-8). The passage (16:1-8) provides an example of a frequent pattern in Deuteronomy. An older law is stated in its original form (vv. 1-5) and then amended to fit the new Deuteronomic scheme. (See the footnote to Deut. 16 in the OAB for a comparison with the older codes.) This same amendment is applied to the feast of weeks (vv. 9-12) and the feast of booths (vv. 13-15).

Return now to chapter 12. If no sacrifices can be offered except at the central shrine, provision must be made for procuring meat in the countryside away from Jerusalem. Before Deuteronomy, slaughtering an animal was considered a sacred act. Life was sacred, a gift from God, and it could be taken only in connection with a sacrificial offering. To make it possible now to obtain meat in the outlying regions of Judah, where it could not be obtained from the Jerusalem temple, the slaughter of animals had to be “secularized” (12:15, 20-21). It had always been permitted to kill wild game, like the gazelle or the hart. Now permission was given to slaughter domestic animals. Only the blood, symbol of the life, was to remain sacred. It was to be poured out

on the ground as an offering to YHWH (vv. 16, 23-25). Perhaps centralization of worship would help to counter the tendency to confuse YHWH worship with the cult of the Baals. One cannot help but think, however—from the standpoint of

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modern secular culture—that much was lost in removing the note of worship from the homely act of preparing a meal.

Deuteronomy 14:22-27; 18:1-8 Further Modifications Required by Centralization

The tithes of the grain crops, which were required at the annual harvest festival, could no longer be offered by people who lived far from the city. The sheer bulk involved would make transport impossible. Therefore, under centralization, that portion of the crops belonging to YHWH had to be sold and the money brought to the central shrine. The law, with its Deuteronomic alteration, is stated in 14:22-23, and then a modification of it is made for those who lived at some distance from the shrine (vv. 24-26). It should be noted that offering the crops to YHWH was an occasion of joyful feasting. The food was to be eaten in the presence of YHWH “that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always” (v. 23), but it was to be done with joy. It is for that reason that when one comes to the city with the money gained from selling the tithe, one may spend it for “whatever you wish, oxen, sheep, wine, strong drink, or whatever your appetite craves” (v. 26), which is to be eaten with rejoicing. The harvest festival remains a time of thanksgiving for YHWH’s blessings.

In each of the passages concerning the centralization of worship, the reader has been urged not to forsake the Levites who are in their towns, “because they have no allotment or inheritance with you” (14:27). The regulations in 18:1-8 deal specifically with problems presented to the countryside priests under the new policy of centralization. Verses 1-5 state the old provision of the law: the members of the tribe of Levi shall not participate in the distribution of the land, but they shall serve YHWH as priests. Since they have no land, they shall be provided for from the sacrificial offerings at the shrines. But now, since the local shrines are prohibited by the Deuteronomic Code, an invitation must be issued (vv. 6-8) for them to come to the central shrine, where they shall receive a share of the sacrifices and be allowed to officiate at the temple.

The provision may seem fair—even generous—but it could not work. Each new priest in Jerusalem meant that temple offerings had to be dispensed in smaller quantities. The result had to be rivalry between the Jerusalem priesthood, who traced their descent from David’s priest, Zadok, and the priests of the rest of Judah. Eventually—as might have been expected—members of the entrenched “Zadokite” priesthood of Jerusalem would become the only ones referred to as “priests,” and the country priests would be called “Levites.” In Deuteronomy the Levites are priests, differing only in where they lived; later, in the P writings, one reads of “the priests and the Levites” as two different orders. The “Levites” are then merely temple assistants, inferior in rank to the priests. Finally—as indicated above—the Levites lose all religious status. This exclusion of the Levites from the results of the Deuteronomic reform is ironic, especially if von Rad is correct in saying that the reform under Josiah traces its beginnings to a previous Levite reform in the north. von Rad contends that the prophecy of Hosea was an example of early Levitical preaching, and that after the fall of the northern kingdom, the circles that produced that kind of preaching, rural Levitical priests, came south. With them they brought their tradition of preaching which they then mediated into reformist circles in the south. According to this reconstruction, the

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preaching in Deuteronomy is actually Levitical, and the success of the Deuteronomic reform is in large part due to these observant and militant Yahwists.

Deuteronomy 17:14-20, 18:15-22 Kings and Prophets

The older codes contain no provisions for kings or prophets. From the viewpoint of the confederacy, there was no place for a king in Israel. But kings had come upon the scene. The older “judges” had combined some of the elements of rule with prophetic vocation. Now, with the arrival of kings, we see “prophet” becoming a separate call. When these became major figures in politics, provision for them had to be made. We see in 17:14-15 what sounds like grudging consent to the monarchy. The king must be bound by the same laws which apply to the rest of YHWH’s people. He must write out a copy of “this law”—that is, Deuteronomy—and study it all his life, keeping its commandments and not “exalting himself above other members of the community” (vv. 18-20). The picture of such kings as Solomon may well lie behind vv. 16-17—such a despotic king could not be tolerated again. Behind these verses must be lingering the confederate distrust of kings in general and a longing for the simple equality among all Israelites that was characteristic of a simpler time. Finally, underlying the organization of the community was the conviction that Israel was a kingdom of priests, all of whom had access to God. To speak in modern terms, the monarchy in ancient Israel was ‘constitutional’: the Torah was the constitution and God was the King of Kings, including Israel’s (Plaut, p. 1461).

Although kings were distrusted, the same was not true of prophets. Chapters 18:15-19 claim a high position for the prophet—as one who stands in the line of succession from Moses himself. This applies only to true prophets. Many who call themselves prophets should not be seen as stemming from the line of Moses. A test is given by which to tell a true prophet from a false one—seemingly one of the least helpful tests ever devised! A true prophet is one whose prophecy comes true. As one looks back over history, one might use this test, but at the time when one must decide whether or not to follow a particular prophet’s advice, this test is somewhat less than helpful.

Deuteronomy 26:5-11 A ‘First-fruits’ Liturgy

These verses have often been called “the Pentateuch in miniature.” The “wandering Aramean” is Jacob, the father of the nation. The story of the Exodus from Egypt is told in capsule form as part of the liturgy for the offering of the first fruits of the harvest. (This is another indication of a northern origin for Deuteronomy: according to modern scholarship, Jacob is the patriarch of the northern tribes, as Abraham is for those of the south.) The passage illustrates the Deuteronomic attempt to restore the ancient stories of the Mosaic covenant to popular worship.

Deuteronomy 27:1-26 The Shechem Ceremony

This passage is not part of the Deuteronomic Code. It is narrative in form, and there is no attempt to make it part of the address by Moses. It describes the Shechem ceremony of the renewal of the covenant (Josh. 24). A series of blessings and curses forms part of the liturgy—blessings on those who kept the terms of the covenant and curses on those who did not—but only the curses have remained in this document (though a hint of the blessings may appear in 28:3-6). The curses, taken as a unit, are sometimes called “the Curses Code.” The presence of this liturgy in the

text of Deuteronomy with Shechem specifically named has been cited as one of the strongest bits of evidence for a northern origin for the book.

Deuteronomy 30:11-20 The Nearness of the Law

This final passage from Deuteronomy expresses a dimension of Jewish feeling for the Law often missed by Christians. Paul and other early Christian writers make a sharp distinction between the attitude of legalism toward the Law and the liberty that characterizes the gospel of Jesus. Many Jews at the time of the early

Christian church—like many Christians since—thought that scrupulous obedience to the letter of the Law would earn for them the love of God. The message of the Christian gospel is that it was because of the love of God that Jesus redeemed us. His love came first, not our obedience.

There is a difference between legalism—an attitude out of which little joy can come and which tends to make one rigid and self-righteous—and following the Law. As Deuteronomy expresses it, the Law is not a burden imposed as something foreign to mankind. It “is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. . . . No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe” (vv. 11-14). If the Law is followed only according to its letter, without awareness or concern for the fact that it comes from the God whose love brought Israel out of Egypt—and redeemed sinful humanity in Jesus—it becomes a burden and, as Paul was to call it, a curse. But in its context in the entire Deuteronomic message, following the Law is the way of life as opposed to the way of death. For this is the choice Deuteronomy presents to the people—“See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity” (v. 15). It has been said that this verse sums up the Deuteronomic message. Perhaps that is true, but the verse must be considered in its full context. It is important to remember at this point that the Law of God, the Torah, includes not only God’s commandments and statutes and ordinances, but all God’s teaching. It is no more simply legal—in its intent or content—than it is simply religious. It is social in the largest sense of the term: it has to do with the way people live together, particularly with the way they live together before their God. It has to do then with their life. The Torah of God is also practical, meaning that it stands the test of practice and that it prescribes practical good for society at large and for the individual in society. It prescribes life for both.

Of course, there exists always the opportunity to refuse that life. The Hebrews have the opportunity put before them here. They may obey the Torah and live and multiply, or they may turn away and perish. The opportunity in fact describes a sociological principle: turn away from the good of society and evil will result, “the iniquity of the fathers” will be visited upon the children to the third and fourth generation. Turn away from the law of life, and you will die.

There are two choices, but through Moses, God pleads with the people to choose life: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. **Choose life** that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days . . . in the land that the LORD swore to your ancestors . . .” (vv. 19-20).

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This plea is important when we consider this passage in its context in the worship life of the people of Israel. Its place was most likely in a yearly covenant renewal ceremony. The people gathered in a place of importance in their history, at Gilgal, where they crossed over the river Jordan, or at Shechem, where the tribes gathered under Joshua to celebrate the conquest, or (after the reform of Josiah) at the Jerusalem temple. The choice was placed before them once again. The priest spoke on behalf of YHWH:

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live.”

And the people respond:

“We shall love YHWH our God. We shall obey his voice and cleave to him; for that means to us life and length of days in the land which he has given us.”

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End of chapter

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Are we talking about the Torah, or about civil law in the modern state? Or even "needless government regulation?"

Ahdod rebellion [back](#)

So before 711

Wind and lies [back](#)

Bad prophets feed on nations' faults

Micah was discredited ^{back}

So the false prophets were right, if only for the short term.

Likely not from Micah [back](#)

So who did write them, and why?

Manasseh [back](#)

Exact dates controversial. See [Wikipedia](#).

So a plant?

No more Passover [back](#)

A reference would be nice.

Megiddo ^{back}

Later called Armageddon.

Returns to the roots ^{back}

Perhaps to dig them out...?

YHWH's own people ^{back}

Yes but WHY? The special relationship here is what, to my mind, makes the Old Testament interesting.

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Can someone explain this sentence to me, please?

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What means this?

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True, actually

Choose life ^{back}

Which today usually means "choose coathangers."

