

Deuteronomy

Lesson #4

Introducing Torah

(4: 44 – 5: 33)

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Review

In Lesson #3 we concluded Moses' 1st Discourse (1: 1 – 4: 43) as Moses emphasized the sacredness of God's covenant and the mutual obligations contained within it. As sovereign, God promises Israel land—real estate in the land of Canaan—as well as a rich, full life in a covenant relationship with him; conversely, Israel is to promise to “fear” the Lord and to obey his commands, commands that govern every aspect of human life, from the food the Israelites eat, to the land they farm, to the relationships they have with one another and with outsiders.

Most importantly, the Israelites are to worship YHWH exclusively, an ineffable, transcendent God, one who is beyond “seeing,” a God who stunningly invites the Israelites into an intimate, spousal relationship.

If the Israelite obey the terms of the covenant, God will bless them abundantly and they will live long in the land; if they do not, God will curse them and they will lose the land—and their lives.

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Preview

Moses' 2nd Discourse sprawls across Deuteronomy 4: 44 – 29: 1, a expansive body of teaching that forms the core of Deuteronomy. The Torah is not simply the Pentateuch, or the five books of Moses, but rather God's comprehensive, foundational teaching, a teaching that—if followed—enables God's covenant people to live life fully in the Promised Land, a life blessed and abundant.

Like a light shining in the darkness, God's covenant people will be a "light to the nations," a model of fulfilled human potential, humanity fully formed.

In Lesson #4 we examine the very heart of Torah, the Decalogue or the Ten Commandments.

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As Deuteronomy 1: 1-4 introduced Moses' 1st Discourse, so Deuteronomy 4: 44-49 introduces his 2nd Discourse.

It consists of two parts:

- 1. 4: 44-49, which creates expectation and gravitas; and**
- 2. 5: 1-5, which pushes the covenant forward to the present time on the plains of Moab and infuses it with deeply personal relevance.**

“This is the law which Moses set before the Israelites. These are the decrees, and the statutes and ordinances which Moses proclaimed to the Israelites after they came out of Egypt, beyond the Jordan in the valley opposite Beth-peor, in the land of Sihon king of the Amorites, who reigned in Heshbon, whom Moses and the Israelites defeated after they came out of Egypt. They took possession of his land and the land of Og, king of Bashan, as well—the land of these two kings of the Amorites in the region beyond the Jordan to the east: from Aroer on the edge of the Wadi Arnon to Mount Sion (that is, Hermon) and all the Arabah beyond the Jordan to the east, as far as the Arabah Sea under the slopes of Pisgah.”

(Deuteronomy 4: 44-49)



“This is the **law** which Moses set before the Israelites. These are the **decrees**, and the **statutes** and **ordinances** . . .

Introducing Moses’ 2nd Discourse with a flurry of legal vocabulary emphasizes the strict rule of life and rigorous structure that God demands of the Israelites if they are to fulfill their destiny as God’s covenant people.

The word “law” is *torah* in Hebrew, but as we noted it refers not simply to a set of rules and regulations, but to God’s comprehensive teaching.

Around 250 B.C., however, Jewish scholars in Alexandria, Egypt translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. They translated the Hebrew “*torah*” as νόμος, the usual Greek word for “law,” and so it typically appears in English translations.

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“This is the law which Moses set before the Israelites. These are the decrees, and the statutes and ordinances which Moses proclaimed to the Israelites after they came out of Egypt, **beyond the Jordan in the valley opposite Beth-peor, in the land of Sihon king of the Amorites, who reigned in Heshbon,** whom Moses and the Israelites defeated after they came out of Egypt. They took possession of his land and the land of Og, king of Bashan, as well—the land of these two kings of the Amorites in **the region beyond the Jordan to the east: from Aroer on the edge of the Wadi Arnon to Mount Sion (that is, Hermon) and all the Arabah beyond the Jordan to the east, as far as the Arabah Sea under the slopes of Pisgah.**”

(Deuteronomy 4: 44-49)



Here Moses shifts focus from a legal vocabulary to geography, locating the very place where the Israelites stand, the very soil on which Moses plants his feet as he delivers his discourse.



“Sihon king of the Amorites, who reigned in Heshbon, whom Moses and the Israelites defeated after they came out of Egypt. They took possession of his land and the land of Og, king of Bashan, as well—the land of these two kings of the Amorites . . .”

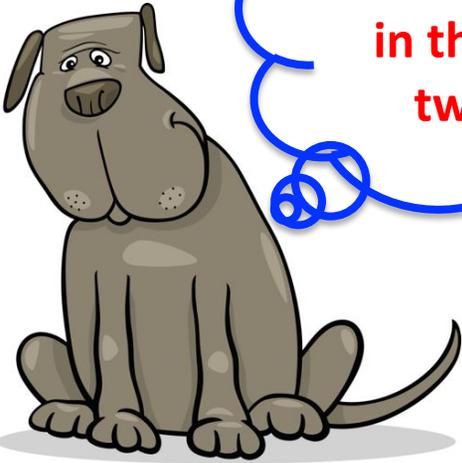
Now Moses illustrates how the Israelites got to this specific piece of land. Against all odds they conquered the two mighty kings of the Amorites, Sihon and Og. The sons of the very slaves who fled Egypt, who trembled in fear at the report of the spies whom Moses sent into Canaan, who complained about every inconvenience they experienced on their wilderness journey, these very sons defeated two larger-than-life kings!

Only with God’s aid and strong right arm could the Israelites have accomplished such a victory.





The land taken from Sihon and Og on the east side of the Jordan River is roughly the same size as the land of Canaan on the west side.



If it were me, I'd settle for what I have. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush!

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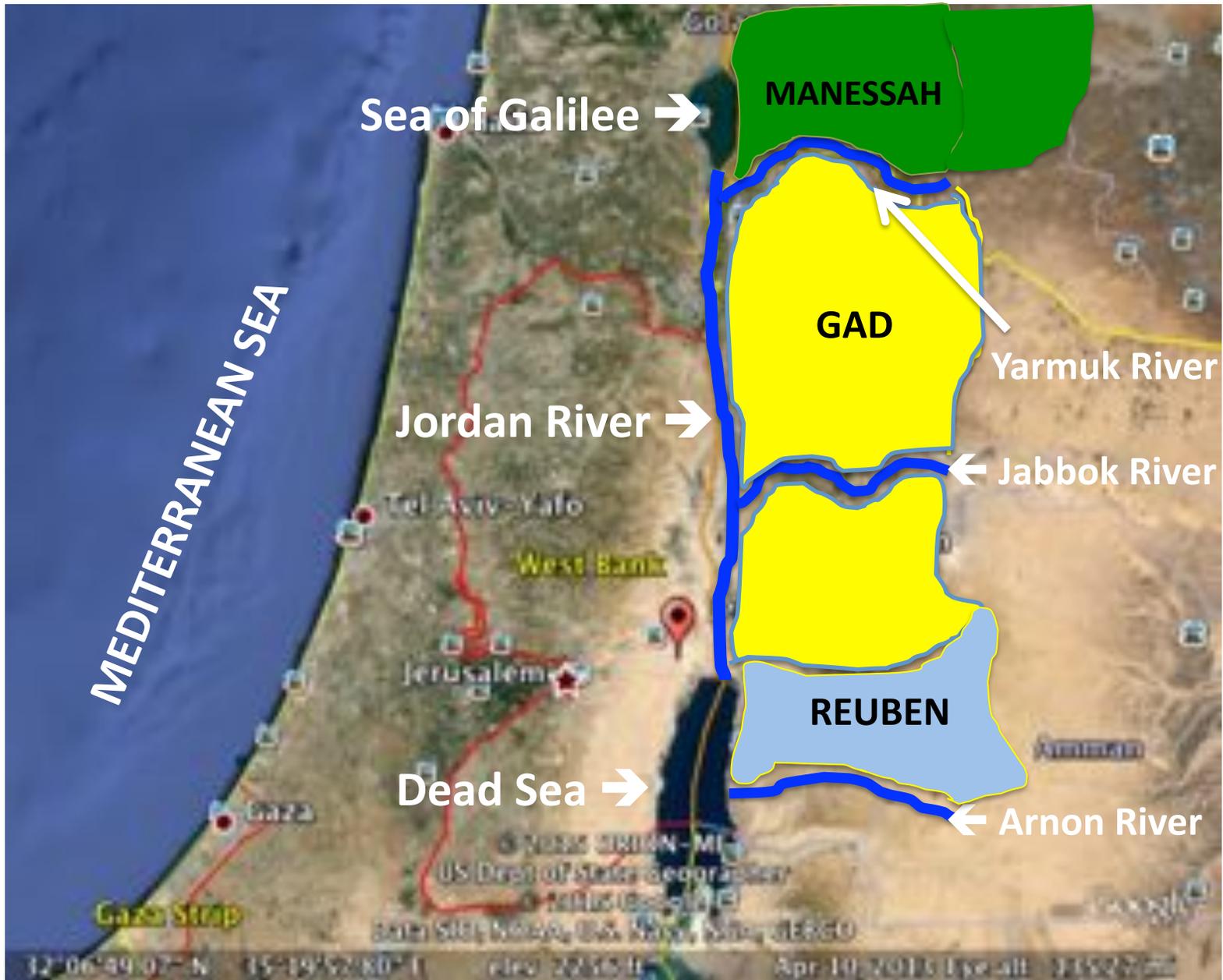


That's true, and that's exactly what the tribes of Ruben, Gad and half of Manasseh wanted to do. Recall the bargain they strike with Moses in Numbers 32: 1-5—

“Now the Reubenites and Gadites had a very large number of livestock. Noticing that the land of Jazer and of Gilead was a place suited to livestock, the Gadites and Reubenites came to Moses and Eleazar the priest and to the leaders of the community and said, ‘The region of Ataroth, Dibon, Jazer, Nimrah, Heshbon, Elealeh, Sebam, Nebo and Baal-meon—the land which the Lord has laid low before the community of Israel, is a land for livestock, and your servants have livestock.’ They continued, ‘If we find favor with you, let this land be given to your servants as their possession. Do not make us cross the Jordan.’”

(32: 1-5)

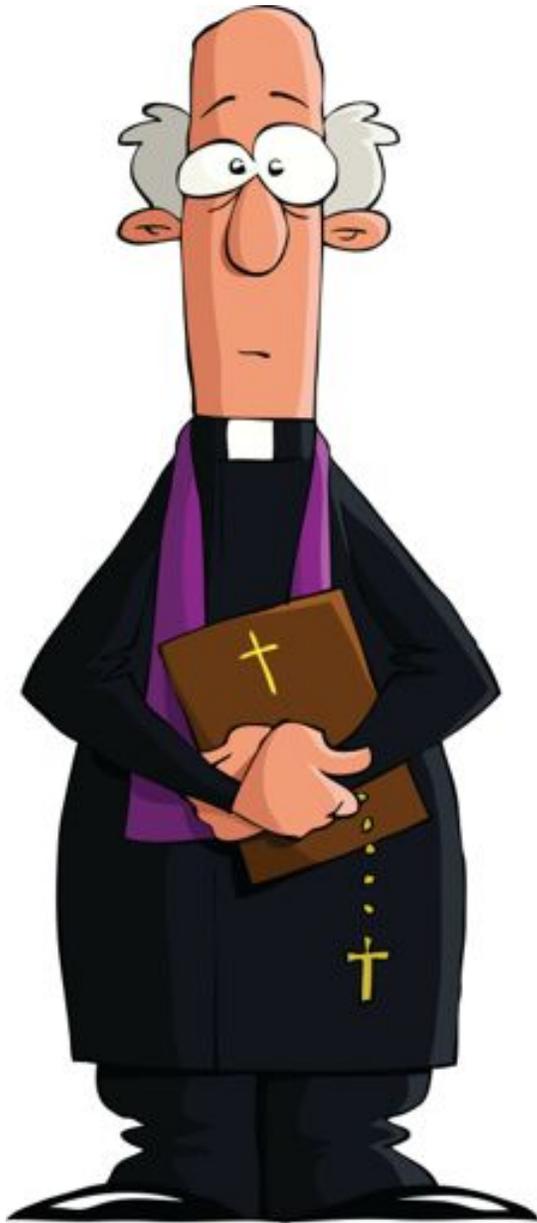
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But just when the Israelites feel secure in their victories, God shakes them from their complacency. Their victories over Sihon and Og are but a prelude of things to come.

They are not to stay east of the Jordan River; their destiny lies on the west.



**God has a way of doing that.
Just when we start feeling
comfortable, he pulls the rug
out from under us!**





Now we move to part 2 of the introduction:

1. 4: 44-49, which creates expectation and gravitas; and
2. **5: 1-5, which pushes the covenant forward to the present time on the plains of Moab and infuses it with deeply personal relevance.**

“Moses summoned all Israel and said to them, Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances which I proclaim in your hearing this day, that you may learn them and take care to observe them. The Lord, our God, made a covenant with us at Horeb; not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, all of us who are alive here this day. Face to face, the Lord spoke with you on the mountain from the midst of the fire, while I was standing between the Lord and you at that time, to announce to you these words of the Lord, since you were afraid of the fire and would not go up the mountain.”

(5: 1-5)

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“Moses summoned all Israel and said to them, Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances which I proclaim in your hearing **this day . . .”**

As the community assembled at Mt. Sinai to receive God’s *torah*, so does the new generation assemble now on the plains of Moab to hear it again. “*This day*” stresses the immediacy of the event: “*Moses summoned all Israel*” [right here, right now]!”



“The Lord, our God, made a covenant with us at Horeb; **not with our ancestors** did the Lord make this covenant, **but with us**, all of us who are alive here this day . . .”

As we observed in Lesson #2, God’s *torah* transcends time and place, and here Moses’ striking rhetoric makes what happened at Mt. Sinai forty years earlier immediately applicable to the new generation.

The covenant is not for their ancestors alone, but for all those who are present on the plains of Moab, as well as for all those who will come in future generations.



“The Lord, our God, made a covenant with us at Horeb; not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, all of us who are alive here this day”

God’s *torah* applies to all, cutting across lines of status, gender and ethnicity. It applies even to those of “*mixed ancestry*” (Exodus 12: 38), to “*men, women and children, as well as resident aliens who live in your communities*” (Deuteronomy 31: 12).

The inclusiveness of *torah* is stunning!

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And God's *torah* goes beyond status, gender and ethnicity: it spans time, as well.

Steven L. Cook invokes an apt metaphor. He writes:

“For Deuteronomy, Israel’s solidarity is that of a huge branching tree, planted on the promised land. All generations—even those that have passed on—are as one.”

Moses insists that all generations form one large branching community, whose life spans time, as well as place.¹

¹ *Reading Deuteronomy, a Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishers, Inc., 2015), p. 60.

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Psalm 1 expresses this quite well:

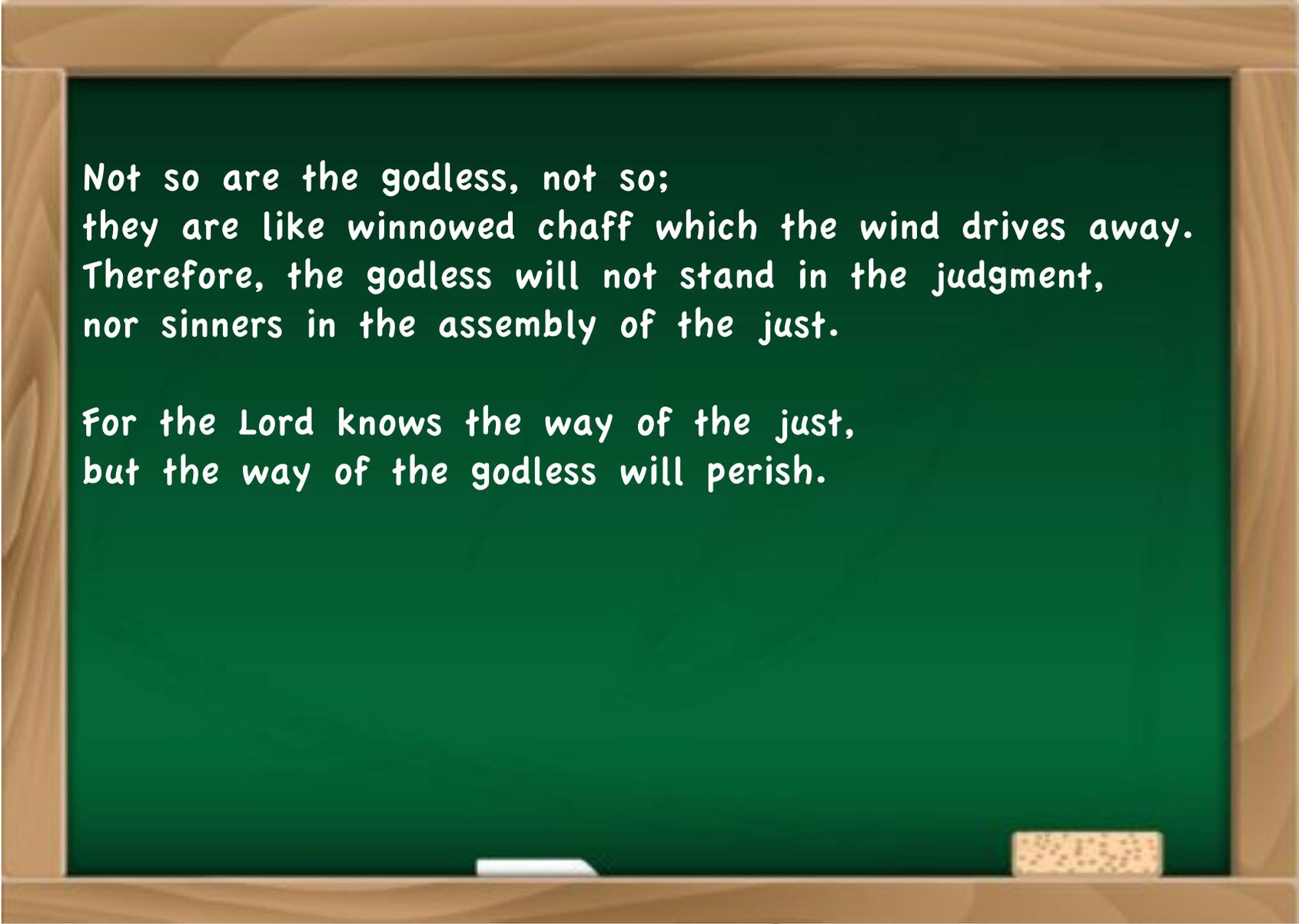
“David & Christ, Psalm 1,” *Latin Glossed Psalter* (illuminated Ms Add. 18859, fol 39r), c. 1150. British Library, London.

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Psalm 1

Blessed, indeed, is the man
who walks not in the counsel of the godless,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scorners,
but his delight is in the law [torah] of the Lord,
and on his law [torah] he meditates day and night.

He is like a tree planted by flowing water
that yields its fruit in due season,
and its leaf does not wither,
and in all that he does he prospers.



Not so are the godless, not so;
they are like winnowed chaff which the wind drives away.
Therefore, the godless will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the assembly of the just.

For the Lord knows the way of the just,
but the way of the godless will perish.



We now move on to the very heart of *torah*, the Decalogue or the “Ten Commandments.”

As we noted in our study of Exodus, the “Ten Commandments” are ten principles by which a covenant people is to live with God and one another.



Every society, ancient or modern, must have a set of laws governing moral and ethical behavior, if that society is to survive.

- In ancient pre-literate societies, such laws may be embodied in long-established cultural norms passed on orally from generation to generation, often in stories designed to teach such cultural norms and behavioral expectations.
- In more complex, literate societies, such laws may be codified and written down, accompanied by a judicial system to ensure compliance.

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The ancient Near East produced numerous examples of such written laws, many of which predate the Exodus story.

- **The Code of Ur-Nammu**, king of Ur (Abraham's home town), the oldest known law code, written in Mesopotamia on tablets in the Sumerian language, c. 2100-2050 B.C., the time of Abraham.
- **The Laws of Eshnunna** (a settlement north of Ur on the Tigris River), two cuneiform tablets were discovered at Tel Abū Harmai in Bagdad, Iraq, dating from c. 1930 B.C.
- **The Code of Hammurabi**, the Babylonian law code of ancient Mesopotamia, dating to c. 1772 B.C., the most well-known of the ancient law codes.

The Code of Hammurabi



The Code of Hammurabi (diorite stele), c. 1772 B.C.
Louvre Museum, Paris.
[Close-up of inscriptions: Getty Images.]

Inscribed in the Akkadian language in cuneiform script, the code of Hammurabi consists of 282 laws:

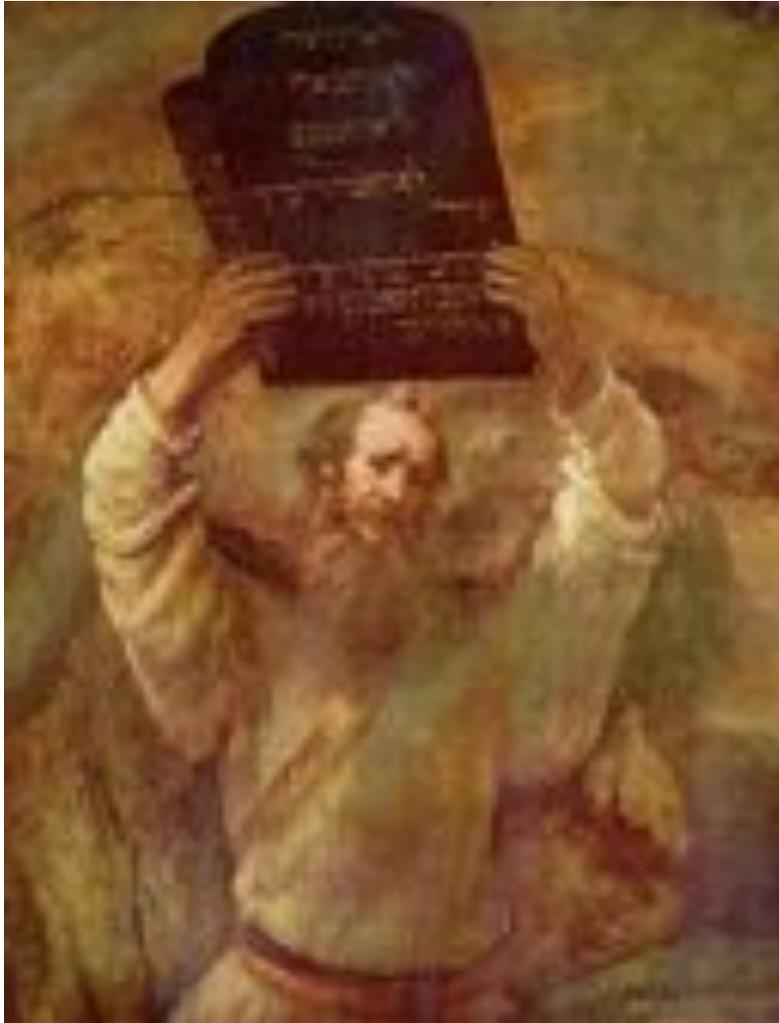
- Nearly 1/2 of the Code addresses contractual law;
- About 1/3 of the Code addresses household and family relationships, including sexual behavior; and
- The rest addresses judicial and military issues.

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Hammurabi, 6th ruler of the Amorite dynasty of Babylon, c. 1750. Louvre Museum, Paris.

Such ancient legal codes are typically the end result of codified cultural norms handed down by a political ruler, usually a king, written on clay or stone tablets.



Rembrandt. *Moses Smashing the Tablets of the Law*
(oil on canvas), 1659. Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.

The “Ten Commandments” are exceptional, in that Deuteronomy tells us they are not the result of codified cultural norms handed down by a political ruler; rather, they are given directly by God. Moses says in Deuteronomy:

“The Lord gave me the two stone tablets inscribed, by God’s own finger, with a copy of all the words that the Lord spoke to you on the mountain from the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly.”

(9: 10)

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With the “Ten Commandments” God becomes the moral and ethical arbiter of human behavior. Inscribed by “God’s own finger” and spoken aloud from the smoke and fire of Sinai, they carry a higher moral authority than anything else in Scripture.



Those tablets reside inside the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of holies. You can’t get more important than that!

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And, yet, after receiving the “Ten Commandments” at Mt. Sinai in 1446 B.C., the Israelites go on to blatantly disobey them!

Hosea works as a prophet during the early years of Isaiah, before the reforms of King Hezekiah (740-686 B.C.), and he writes:

“Hear the word of the Lord, Israelites, for the Lord has a dispute with the inhabitants of the land: there is no fidelity, no loyalty, no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying, murder, stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed . . .”

(4: 1-2)

The Israelites completely ignore the 6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th commandments.

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Half a century later, during the time of King Josiah (640-609 B.C.), when Hilkiyah the priest finds the book of the law in the Temple, things were even worse:

“Thus says the Lord: I am about to bring evil upon this place and upon its inhabitants—all the words of the book which the king of Judah [Josiah] has read. Because they have abandoned me and have burned incense to other gods, provoking me by all the works of their hands, my rage is ablaze against this place and it cannot be extinguished.”

(2 Kings 22: 16-17)

The Israelites also blatantly break the 1st and 2nd commandments.



By Ezekiel's day (593-573 B.C.), the Israelites hit rock bottom:

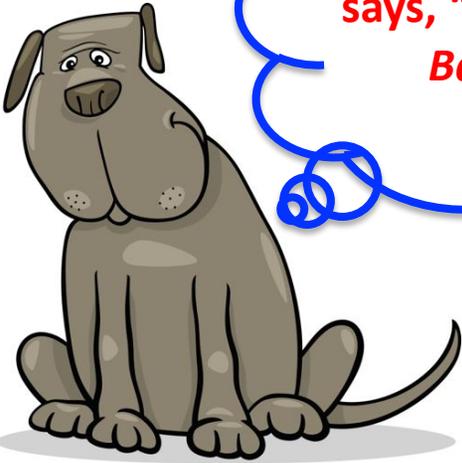
"In the sixth year on the fifth day of the sixth month [September 5, 592 B.C.] . . . [the Lord] said to me: Son of man, lift up your eyes to the north! I looked to the north and there in the entry north of the altar gate was this statue of jealousy. He asked: Son of man, do you see what they are doing? Do you see the great abominations that the house of Israel is practicing here. so that I must depart from my sanctuary? . . . I went in and looked—figures of all kinds of creeping things and loathsome beasts, all the idols of the house of Israel, pictured around the wall. Before them stood seventy of the elders of the house of Israel . . . each with a censer in hand, a cloud of incense drifted upward . . ."

(8: 1-11)

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**How low can the Israelites possibly sink?
This is the last straw. Babylon lays siege to
Jerusalem four years later in 588 B.C., and
after a 2-year siege, Jerusalem falls to
Babylon on August 14, 586 B.C.; the
Temple is destroyed; the city sacked; and
the survivors deported to Babylon.**



**God carries out the punishment
he promised. 1 Chronicles 9: 1
says, "Judah had been exiled to
Babylon because of its
treachery."**

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The trajectory of Israelite history points steeply downward: God knows it, and Moses knows it.

Hence, in the time of King Josiah the augmented “Book of the Law,” written in the divinely-sanctioned voice of Moses, stresses the urgency of obedience to the law as the only possible way to create a *“kingdom of priests, a holy nation”* (Exodus 19: 6); the only possible way to be fully human, to live a covenant relationship with God and with one another, blessed and dwelling on the land God has provided.



The “Ten Commandments” in Exodus 20 form heart of *torah*, the core of the covenant, and Deuteronomy restates those Commandments, mirroring, augmenting and refocusing what the Israelites heard at Mt. Sinai.

We studied each of the “Ten Commandments” in detail in Exodus; here, we’ll focus on their function as a whole in Deuteronomy.

Commandment #1

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall not have other gods beside me.”

(5: 6-7)

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Commandment #2

“You shall not make for yourself an idol or a likeness of anything in the heavens above or on the earth below or in the waters beneath the earth; you shall not bow down before them or serve them. For I, the Lord, your God, am a jealous God, bringing punishment for their parents’ wickedness on the children of those who hate me, down to the third and fourth generation, but showing love down the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.”

(5: 8-10)

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Commandment #3

“You shall not invoke the name of the Lord, your God, in vain. For the Lord will not leave unpunished anyone who invokes his name in vain.”

(5: 11)

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Commandment #4

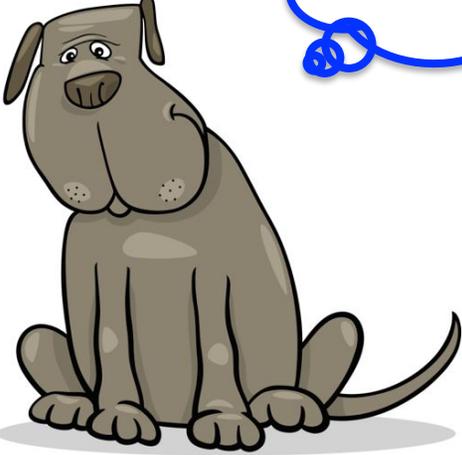
“Observe the Sabbath day—keep it holy, as the Lord, your God, commanded you. Six days you may labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God. You shall not do any work, either you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your ox or donkey or any work animal, or the resident alien within your gates, so that your male and female slave may rest as you do. Remember that you too were once slaves in the land of Egypt, and the Lord, your God, brought you out from there with a strong hand and outstretched arm. That is why the Lord, your God, has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.”

(5: 12-15)

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**Notice that the first four
commandments focus on our
relationship with God; the last six
will focus on our relationship with
one another.**



**God comes first.
I like that!**

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Commandment #5

“Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord, your God, has commanded you, that you may have a long life and that you may prosper in the land the Lord your God is giving you.”

(5: 16)

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Commandments 6-10

- 6 You shall not kill (5: 17).
- 7 You shall not commit adultery (5: 18).
- 8 You shall not steal (5: 19).
- 9 You shall not bear dishonest witness against your neighbor (5: 20).
- 10 You shall not covet your neighbor's wife (5: 21).
You shall not desire your neighbor's house or field, his male or female slave, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

(5: 17-21)



In contrast to the “Ten Commandments” in Exodus 20, by sheer weight and augmentation, the 4th commandment to “observe the Sabbath day” becomes the focal point in Deuteronomy.



With Hilkiah’s discovery of the “Book of the Law,” the augmented Deuteronomy reflects King Josiah’s reforms that strive to create a just society, wholly obedient to God, a society that embodies a wondrous intimacy with a transcendent God, an intimacy that blossoms in the land and that manifests itself in all the details of daily life: of working, eating, playing and even sleeping.

It is a utopian vision.¹

But it is possible, if lived within the context of God’s covenant.

¹ **St. Thomas More coined the word “utopia” in his 1516 Latin satire of the same name. “Utopia” is Greek, meaning “no place.”**

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At the center of this utopian vision in Deuteronomy is “rest.” The Hebrew word “*nuwach*” [noo’-akh] has a wide range of meaning, but here it is rest in the broadest and deepest sense, not simply the absence of work, but a positive state of well-being and fulfillment, a state of completeness.

Deuteronomy aims to create a form of communal life centered in God, a life of sacred intimacy with him. Observing the Sabbath week in and week out, schools the people to “remember” God and to “remember” who they are. They are not like other nations, they are to be a “kingdom of priests, a holy nation,” and in rigorously observing the Sabbath the Israelites resist being dragged down into the moral and ethical sewer of the nations around them.

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In Deuteronomy, unlike Exodus, the Lord God commands rigorous observance of the Sabbath, and that command frames the 4th commandment.

Commandment #4

“Observe the Sabbath day—keep it holy, **as the Lord, your God, commanded you.** Six days you may labor and do all your work, but **the** seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God. You shall not do any work, either you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your ox or donkey or any work animal, or the resident alien within your gates, so that your male and female slave may rest as you do. Remember that you too were once slaves in the land of Egypt, and the Lord, your God, brought you out from there with a strong hand and outstretched arm. That is why **the Lord, your God, has commanded you** to observe the Sabbath day.”

(5: 12-15)

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Deuteronomy then emphasizes the vivid, visceral experience at Mt. Sinai that anchors the “Ten Commandments” in the 1st generation’s lived experience, as they heard the words emerge from the very lips of God.

“These words the Lord spoke with a loud voice to your entire assembly on the mountain from the midst of the fire and the dense black cloud, and added no more. He inscribed them on two stone tablets and gave them to me. But when you heard the voice from the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was ablaze with fire . . .

(5: 1-5)

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The Israelites at Mt. Sinai cringed in terror as God spoke, awestruck at the words they heard with their own ears.

They trembled and fell back as God's words thundered from the fiery mountain, and they begged Moses to intercede for them, to stand in the gap and deliver God's words secondhand, lest they all die.

“But when you heard the voice from the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was ablaze with fire, you came near to me, all your tribal heads and elders, and said, ‘The Lord, our God, has indeed let us see his glory and his greatness, and we have heard his voice from the midst of the fire. Today we have found out that God may speak to a mortal and that person [Moses] may still live . . .

(5: 1-5)

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Moses concurs with the people's request, and he agrees to act as intermediary, to deliver God's words to the Israelites on God's behalf. Moses thus becomes the prophet *par excellence*.

In allowing Moses to act as intermediary, God delegates divinely-sanctioned authority to what Moses says. Consequently, crafting the final version of Deuteronomy in the *ipsissima vox*—the very voice of Moses—elevates Deuteronomy far above any other of the Hebrew Scriptures.



I have a feeling there's a fly in the ointment, though. We know how this story will turn out, and so does God. The Israelites will not obey God; they will not honor the terms of the covenant.



I'm always obedient!



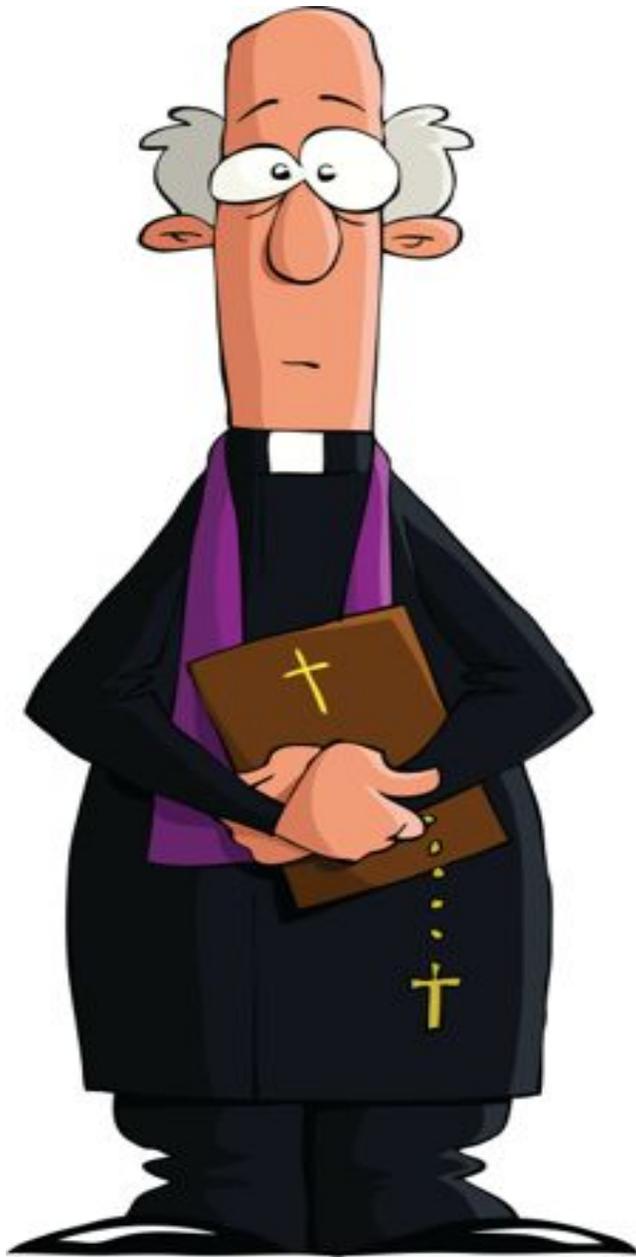
Yea, right!

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“The Lord heard your words as you were speaking to me and said to me, I have heard the words these people have spoken to you, which are all well said. Would that they might always be of such a mind, to fear me and to keep all my commandments! Then they and their descendants would prosper forever. Go, tell them: Return to your tents. Then you stand here near me and I will give you all the commandments, the statutes and the ordinances; you must teach them, that they may observe them in the land I am giving them to possess.”

(5: 28-31)

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God seems to let out a tired sigh. The people will not keep the covenant; they will fail.

And from a Christian perspective, that's the point. There is nothing wrong with the law or lacking in *torah*. But there is something dreadfully wrong with the people. They simply cannot meet God's requirements through their own effort. As St. Paul writes:

"[Now] the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, though testified to by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe."

(Romans 3: 21-22)

Only through Christ will people be saved, only through his shed blood on the cross.

Creation awaits a Messiah.

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Questions for discussion and thought

1. What is God's *torah*?
2. What function does the "Ten Commandments" serve in God's *torah*?
3. Why would the introduction to the "Ten Commandments" begin with a flurry of legal vocabulary?
4. Why in Deuteronomy is the 4th commandment to "observe the Sabbath" so prominent?
5. The "Ten Commandments" form the very core of *torah*, but are they unique to Scripture?

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