

Deuteronomy

Lesson #9

The Deuteronomic Code, Part 1

(12: 1 – 13: 19)

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Review

In Lesson #8 we continued our introduction to Moses' 2nd Discourse, the main body of which contains a vast collection of laws, ordinances and statutes, spanning chapters 12-26.

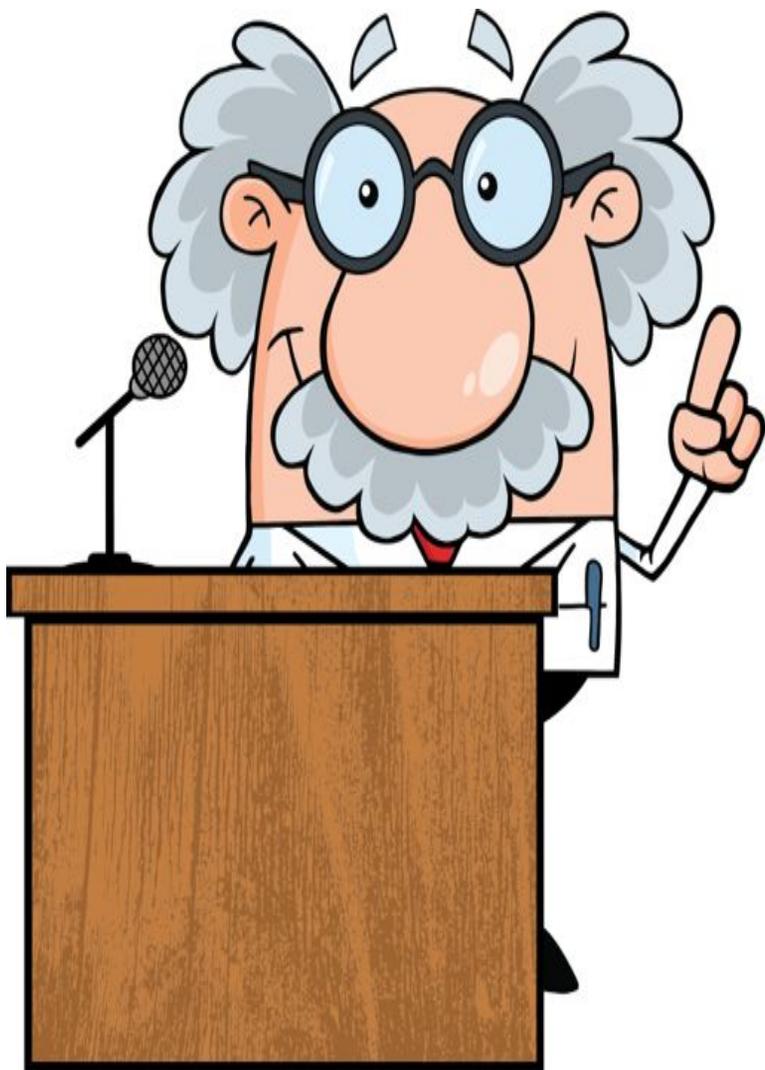
In Lesson #8 we further developed the theme of obedience to God, an obedience rooted not in a system of rewards and punishments, but in a profound love of God, a love that returns in full measure God's extravagant, magnanimous and passionate love for Israel.

Preview

Now, as we move into Lesson #9, we encounter the main body of Moses' 2nd Discourse, 12: 1 – 26: 15, a collection of laws, statutes and ordinances that comprise the essentials of Israel's communal lifestyle: its collective worship, its governing structures, its judicial principles, and its liturgical forms.

Collectively, Deuteronomy 12: 1 – 26: 15 comprises a single, great legal corpus, a body of laws, statutes and ordinances that—if followed—create the structural framework for a just and holy society, a society rooted in an intimate, covenant—indeed, familial—relationship with God.

Importantly, the *motive* for obeying these laws, statutes and ordinances is *love*, not the hope for reward or the fear of punishment. Deuteronomy's legal corpus enunciates the “rules of the house” for God's family, much as the “Manual of Discipline” offered a coherent structure for the Essene community at Qumran or St. Benedict's “Rule” offered a coherent structure for Benedictine monastic life.



As we might expect—and as Steven L. Cook so insightfully observes—the flow of chapters 12-26, Deuteronomy’s core legal corpus, mirrors the sequence of the Ten Commandments.¹

Consequently, the initial chapters reflect the first two commandments:

1. **You shall have no other gods before me;**
and
2. **You shall make no graven images of me.**

Thus, Deuteronomy 12 commands that once in the land, all vestiges of other gods be removed: torn down, smashed, chopped down and burned.

¹ *Reading Deuteronomy, a Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishers, Inc., 2015), p. 105.

“These are the statutes and ordinances which you must be careful to observe in the land which the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has given you to possess, throughout the time you live on its soil. Destroy entirely all the places where the nations you are to dispossess serve their gods, on the high mountains, on the hills, and under every green tree. **Tear down** their altars, **smash** their sacred pillars, **burn up** their asherahs, and **chop down** the idols of their gods, that you may destroy the very name of them from that place.” (12: 1-3)



God will broach no competition with other gods in his land. All evidence of other gods must be totally destroyed: wiped clean, scoured and eradicated.

We've encountered this severe iconoclasm in Deuteronomy 7, where we read much the same:

“But this is how you must deal with them: **Tear down** their altars, **smash** their sacred pillars, **chop down** their asherahs, and **destroy** their idols **by fire**. For you are a people holy to the Lord, your God; the Lord, your God, has chosen you from all the peoples on the face of the earth to be a people specially his own . . .”

(7: 5-6)



As we noted previously, the violent energy of the verbs in 7: 5 captures well the iconoclastic theology of Deuteronomy: “tear down,” [*na-thats*] “smash” [*sha-vair*], “chop down” [*ga-dah*], “destroy by fire” [*sa-raph*].

As Robert Alter observes: “The statement moves from one verb of violent destruction to another, more intense one, ending with the utter consummation by fire of all pagan icons.”²

² *The Five Books of Moses*, p. 917.



However, unlike Deuteronomy 7, chapter 12 couples its iconoclasm with a truly revolutionary concept: once in the land, Israel is to have only one place of worship, a singular cultic site associated with the Lord's name.

“That is not how you are to act toward the Lord, your God. Instead, you shall seek out the place which the Lord, your God, chooses out of all your tribes and designates as his dwelling to put his name there. There you shall go, bringing your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and personal contributions, your votive and voluntary offerings, and the firstlings of your herds and flocks. There, too, in the presence of the Lord, your God, you and your families shall eat and rejoice in all your undertakings, in which the Lord, your God, has blessed you.”

(12: 4-7)

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That *is* revolutionary! The Egyptians had many places of worship, and the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites worshipped their gods *“on the high mountains, on the hills, and under every green tree”* (12: 2).

So did the precursors of the Israelites! Recall that Abraham built an altar on Mount Moriah (Genesis 22: 9); Isaac built an altar at Beersheva (Genesis 26: 25); and Jacob built an altar at Bethel (Genesis 35: 1).

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Even Moses commands that an altar be built on a high place when the Israelites gain a foothold in the land of Canaan:

“When you cross the Jordan, on Mount Ebal you shall set up these stones concerning which I command you today, and coat them with plaster, and you shall build there an altar to the Lord, your God, an altar made of stones that no iron tool has touched. You shall build this altar of the Lord, your God, with unhewn stones, and shall offer on it burnt offerings to the Lord, your God. You shall also offer communion sacrifices and eat them there, rejoicing in the presence of the Lord, your God.”

(Deuteronomy 27: 4-7)

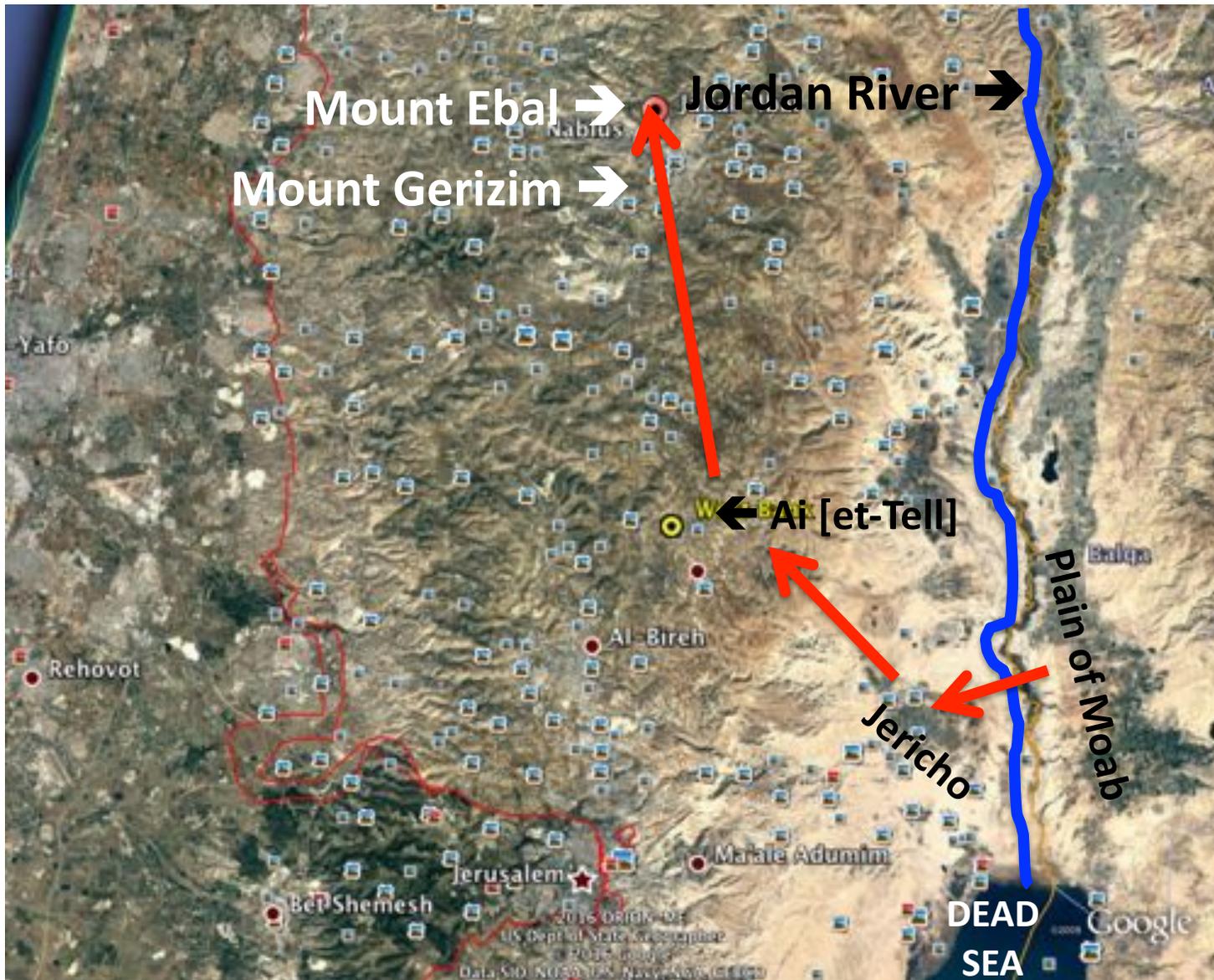
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It is this very mountain—Mount Ebal—where, after conquering Ai, Joshua builds the altar Moses had commanded be built:

“Later, on Mount Ebal, Joshua built to the Lord, the God of Israel, an altar of unhewn stones on which no iron tool had been used, just as Moses, the servant of the Lord, had commanded . . . on this altar they sacrificed burnt offerings to the lord and made communion sacrifices . . . and all Israel . . . stood on either side of the ark facing the levitical priests who were carrying the ark of the covenant of the Lord. Half of them were facing Mount Gerizim and half Mount Ebal . . . then were read aloud all the words of the law, the blessings and the curses, exactly as written in the book of the law.”

(Joshua 8: 30-35)







Stone altar on Mount Ebal.

Source: www.bible.ca

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Mount Ebal stands 3,080 ft., one of the highest mountains in Israel's West Bank; Mount Gerizim is slightly lower, 2,880 ft.

Archaeologists have found potshards at Mount Ebal dating from 1220-1000 B.C., as well as charred bones from bulls, goats and fallow deer.

As Scripture suggests, Mount Ebal was doubtless a place of cultic worship and animal sacrifice.³

³ **Ralph K. Hawkins. *The Iron Age I Structure on Mt. Ebal: Excavation and Interpretation* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012).**



Having one place of worship and sacrifice for all Israel creates unity and cohesion in the community, and that works as long as the entire community stays together in close geographic proximity.

After the conquest and distribution of the land among the tribes, however, unity and cohesion quickly break down.

The boundaries of tribal territories follow, for the most part, natural topographical markers: rivers, valleys, mountains, and so on. Consequently, the tribes are often isolated from one another by both distance and terrain, making one place of worship problematic.



The 12 Tribes of Israel at the time of Joshua—before Dan moved north—are separated north to south by nearly 200 miles and west to east by nearly 130 miles.

The terrain varies from mountainous in the north to barren desert wilderness in the south; the flat coastal plain is isolated from the Jordan Valley by the towering 2,500 ft. central mountain range, which is itself isolated from the eastern mountain range by the Sea of Galilee, Jordan River and Dead Sea, the great Jordan Rift Valley.



The geographical problem is solved to some degree by the portable Tabernacle, which can be moved from place to place.

At the beginning of 1 Samuel (around 1100-1050 B.C.), for example, we find Hannah and her husband Elkanah, parents of the prophet Samuel, living in the hill country of Ephraim in the central mountain range. Once each year they travel to Shiloh to offer sacrifice at the Tabernacle with Eli the high priest.

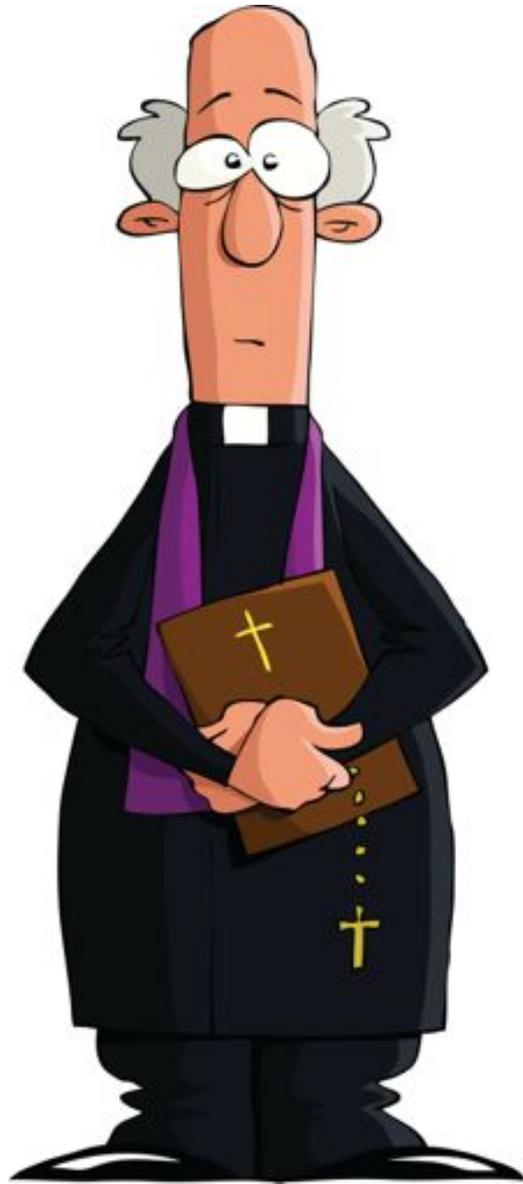
Shiloh is also in the central mountain range, about 28 miles north of Jerusalem. It is close enough for Hannah and Elkanah to visit, but far enough away that they only visit once each year.



A generation later, at the time of David, the Tabernacle is at Nob, a village on the border of Benjamin and Judah, near Jerusalem (1 Samuel 21: 2).

When David becomes king ten years later, uniting the 12 tribes under his leadership, the Tabernacle is at Kiriath Jearim (about 9 miles from Jerusalem near the modern Israeli Arab town of Abu Ghosh).

David famously moves the Ark of the Covenant from the Tabernacle at Kiriath Jearim to a tent on his own palace grounds in Jerusalem, where it will stay until his son Solomon builds the 1st Temple, 966-959 B.C., retiring the Tabernacle and moving the Ark of the Covenant into the Temple's Holy of Holies.



But even with the availability of the portable Tabernacle, many found it too inconvenient to travel and to gather together as one people . . . or they were simply drawn to older pagan places of worship “under the leafy trees.”

The prophet Hosea (active at the same time as Isaiah, 740-686 B.C.), excoriates such behavior:

*“On the mountaintops they offer sacrifice
and on the hills they burn incense,
Beneath oak and poplar and terebinth,
because of their pleasant shade.
Therefore your daughters prostitute themselves,
and your daughters-in-law commit adultery.”*

(4: 13)



Having one place of worship and sacrifice creates another problem as well.

As we learned in our study of Leviticus, slaughtering animals for food is a cultic activity that must be conducted only by the priests, for all life is sacred, including that of animals, and the shedding of their blood must be done properly, accompanied by the prescribed rituals.

So, how will people eat meat?

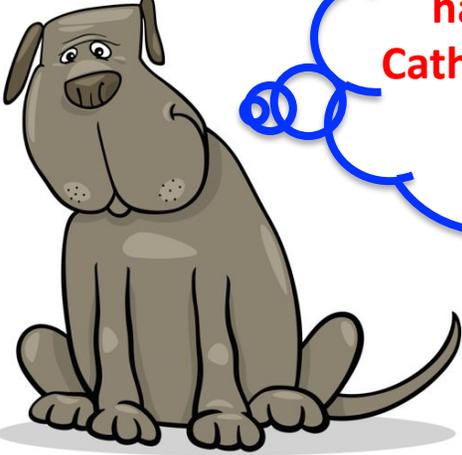
“Be careful not to sacrifice your burnt offerings in any place you like, but offer them in the place which the Lord chooses in one of your tribal territories; there you shall do what I command you. However, in any of your communities you may slaughter and eat meat freely, according to the blessing that the Lord your God, has given you; the unclean as well as the clean may eat it, as they do the gazelle or the deer. Only you shall not eat the blood, but must pour it out on the ground like water. Moreover, you may not, in your own communities, partake of your tithe of grain or wine or oil, of the firstborn of your herd or flock . . . these you must eat in the presence of the Lord, your God, in the place that the Lord, your God, chooses.”

(12: 13-18)

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A cartoon illustration of a man with brown hair, wearing a white shirt, a red tie, and blue pants. He is leaning against a vertical line on the left, with his hand to his chin in a thinking pose. A blue thought bubble is connected to his head.

Ah, ha! God gives an exemption! That's sort of like Roman Catholics being allowed to eat meat on Fridays!

A cartoon illustration of a grey dog sitting on the ground. A blue thought bubble is connected to its head.

I wonder what will happen to all those Catholics who are in hell on a meat rap?

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Ha, ha, ha!



**Watch out, buster,
you're on thin ice!**



Clearly, this command to worship and sacrifice in only one place, reinforcing unity and cohesion in the community, could only come into play much later, during the time of David, after Israel had become a united monarchy, centered in Jerusalem.



As we learned earlier, after the Israelites cross the Jordan River and begin the conquest of Canaan it will take nearly 400 years to fully control the land.

From the time of Joshua until the time of David (1406-1010 B.C.), Israel is at best a loose confederation of 12 tribes, each living their own lives on their own tribal lands, coming together only when outside threats demand it, as we witness during the time of the Judges (1300-1050 B.C.).

Even under Saul, Israel's first king, the 12 tribes continue to be more or less autonomous.

That changes with David.



A prodigy at warfare, David becomes a national hero as a teenager when he kills Goliath, the Philistine's greatest warrior, in a *mano a mano* fight, delivering Goliath's head to King Saul.

David rises quickly through Saul's military ranks, soon commanding Saul's most elite warriors, the SEAL Team 6 of his day, the tip of the spear.

But with David's meteoric success, Saul's jealousy and paranoia boil over. After Saul hires assassins to kill David, David goes on the run, ultimately commanding an elite force of 600 very tough mercenaries . . . and working for Israel's mortal enemy, Achish, king of Gath—a Philistine king!



**Caravaggio. *David with the Head of Goliath* (oil on canvas), 1606-1617.
Galleria Borghese, Rome.**



With the death of Saul and his three sons—Jonathan, Abinadab and Malchishua—the door opens for David to become king.

But David has spent the last ten years a wanted felon on the run, working for Israel’s enemy, the Philistines. David had no claim whatsoever on Israel’s kingship, which dwelt firmly in the House of Saul, within the tribe of Benjamin. David was an outlaw from the tribe of Judah, a traitor to many, fit only for the gallows!

After turning on the Philistines and defeating them, however, David becomes king (or, more accurately, tribal warlord) of Judah, his own tribe. It is only through some very deft political maneuvering (and a few targeted assassinations) that David rallies the eleven other tribes, who ultimately fall under his kingship.



David's capital—his headquarters—is in Hebron, the largest city within the southern tribe of Judah. To buttress support from the northern tribes, David moves his capital north to Jerusalem, a city he must first conquer, taking it from the Jebusites.

Jerusalem, the “City of David,” is a political concession.

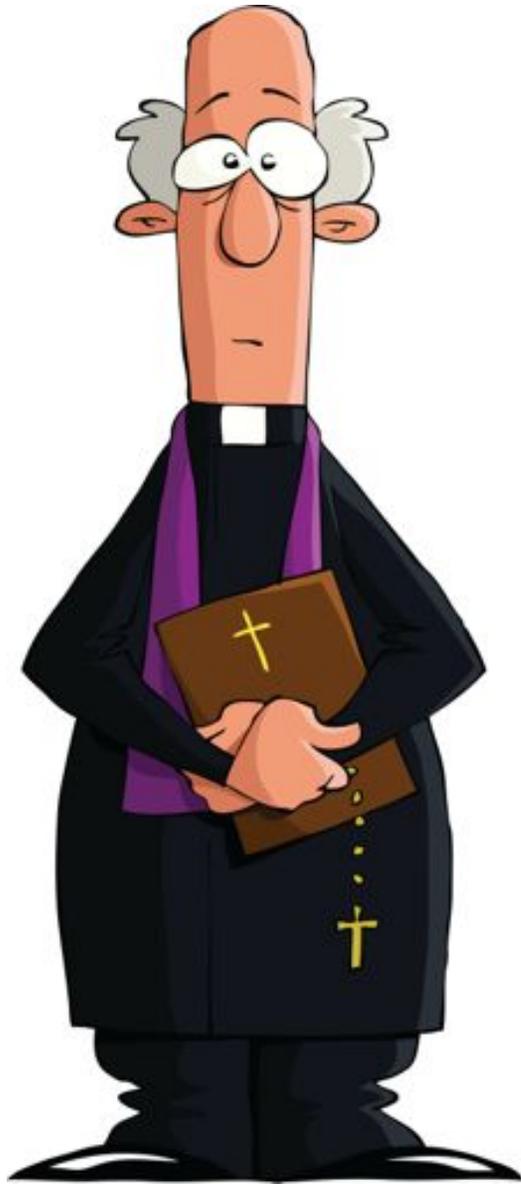
With David's death in 970 B.C., his son Solomon becomes king, and Solomon consolidates power in Jerusalem, building the Temple, a permanent structure—one place where all Israelites will worship God and offer sacrifice.

And God is apparently very pleased, for when Solomon dedicates the Temple in 959 B.C. we read:

“The priests brought the ark of the covenant of the Lord to its place, the inner sanctuary of the house, the holy of holies, beneath the wings of the cherubim . . . There was nothing in the ark but the two stone tablets which Moses had put there at Horeb [Mount Sinai], when the Lord made a covenant with the Israelites after they went forth from the land of Egypt. When the priests left the holy place, the cloud filled the house of the Lord so that the priests could no longer minister because of the cloud, since the glory of the Lord had filled the house of the Lord. Then Solomon said, ‘The Lord intends to dwell in the dark cloud; I have indeed built you a princely house, the base for your enthronement forever.’”

(1 Kings 8: 6-13)

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At last there was one place where God's name dwelt: the Temple in Jerusalem. With both political and religious power firmly rooted in Jerusalem—and all Jews who were able making the annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Pentecost, Passover and Tabernacles—the injunction in Deuteronomy 12, to worship God in one place, became a reality.

But it was short-lived.



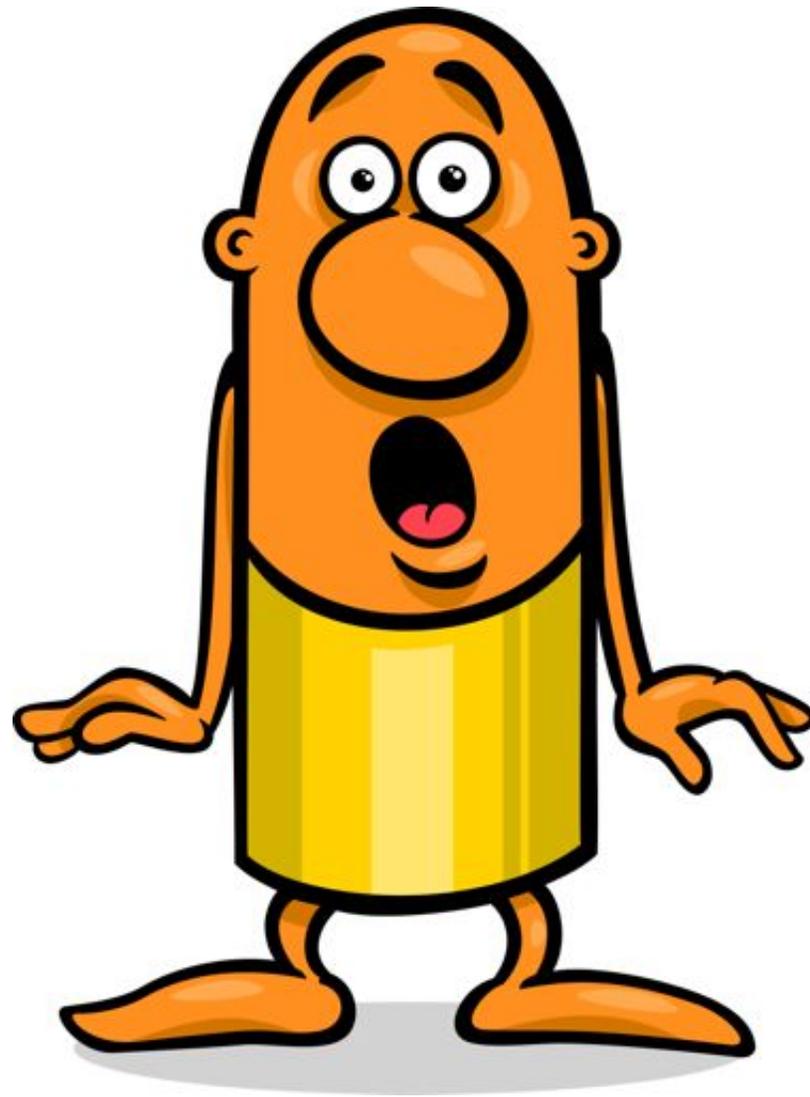


With Solomon's death in 930 B.C. civil war broke out, with the ten northern tribes forming the nation Israel, its capital at Samaria, and the two southern tribes forming the nation Judah, its capital at Jerusalem.

Jereboam, rebel leader of the northern tribes, knew what would happen if the people continued going to Jerusalem's Temple for the pilgrimage festivals, worshipping as one:

"Jeroboam thought to himself: 'Now the kingdom will return to the house of David. If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the Lord in Jerusalem, the hearts of this people will return to their master, Rehoboam, king of Judah, and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam, king of Judah.' The king took counsel, made two calves of gold, and said to the people: 'You have been going up to Jerusalem long enough. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.' And he put one in Bethel, the other in Dan."

(1 Kings: 26-29)







Driving north on a rainy day from the Sea of Galilee to Dan, blessed by a beautiful rainbow.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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**Hiking through Tel Dan National Park to the altar of the golden calf,
on Israel's boarder with Lebanon.**

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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The golden calf that chased Ana!

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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The Dan River, one of three major run-off streams from Mount Hermon that form the Jordan River. The other two are the Banias and the Hasbani.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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Approaching the altar of the golden calf.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

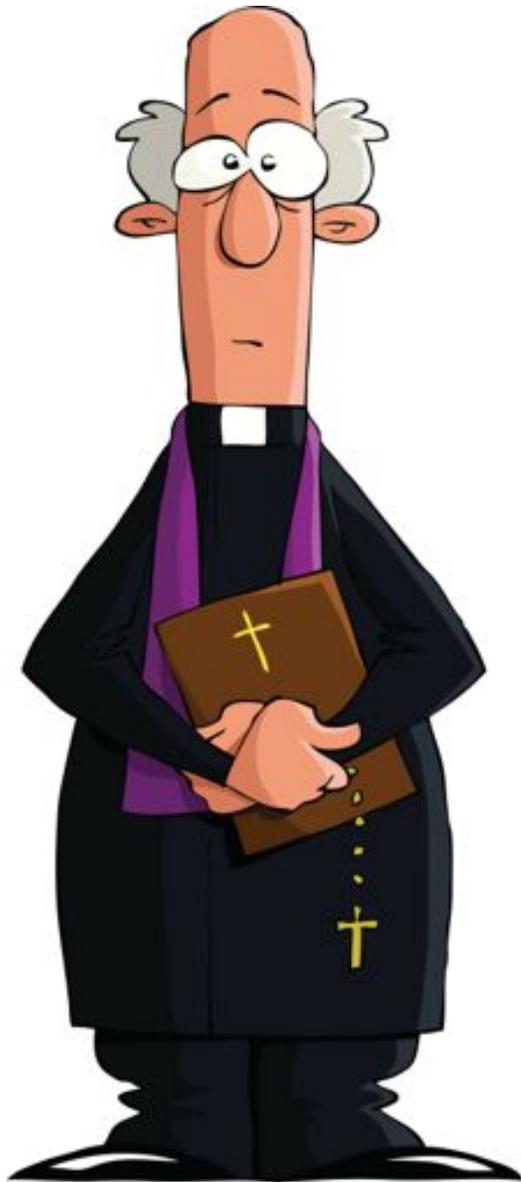
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The altar of the golden calf. Notice the lush, forested surroundings, with the sound of rushing water from the Dan River in the background.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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Forbidden to go to Jerusalem for the pilgrimage festivals, an old priest at Dan laments:

*“Like the deer that yearns for running streams,
so my soul is yearning for you my God.*

*My soul is thirsting for God,
the God of my life:*

*When can I enter and see
the face of God?*

*My tears have become my bread,
by night, by day,*

*As I hear it said all the day long:
“Where is your God?”*

*These things will I remember
as I pour out my soul:*

*How I would lead the rejoicing crowd
into the house of God*

*Amid cries of gladness and thanksgiving,
the throng wild with joy.”*

(Psalm 42: 1-5)

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As civil war rages for over 80 years, unity and cohesion among the Israelites collapse, with the northern kingdom falling to the Assyrians in 722 B.C. and the southern kingdom falling to the Babylonians in 586 B.C.

With the Temple destroyed, Jerusalem in ruins and the people taken captive to Assyria and Babylon, God's injunction to worship him in one place as a covenant community—the place where his name dwells—fades like a dream, leaving behind only regret and remorse:

*“By the waters of Babylon
there we sat weeping
when we remembered Zion.
On the poplars in its midst
we hung our harps.”*

(Psalm 137: 1-2)



I wonder what ever
happened to the
golden calf altar at
Bethel?

Oooooo! I know
the answer to
that!

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We read that after the High Priest Hilkiyah discovered the “book of the law” in the Temple in 622 B.C., king Josiah initiated major reforms, including tearing down pagan places of worship . . .

“The altar which was at Bethel, the high place built by Jeroboam, son of Nebat, who caused Israel to sin—this same altar and high place he tore down and burned, grinding the high place to powder and burning the asherah. When Josiah turned and saw the graves there on the mountainside, he ordered the bones taken from the graves and burned on the altar, and thus defiled it . . .”

(2 Kings: 23: 15-16)



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But once again God rescues his people, raising up Cyrus the Great, king of Persia, who defeats the Babylonians in 539 B.C. and allows all the captive people, including the Jews, to return to their homes and rebuild their cities and temples.

By 516 B.C. the returning Jews rebuilt and dedicated the 2nd Temple, and by the mid-400s Jerusalem once again prospered. God had given his people a second chance:

*“When the Lord restored the captives of Zion,
we though we were dreaming.
Then our mouths were filled with laughter;
our tongues sang for joy.
Then it was said among the nations,
‘The Lord has done great things for them.’
The Lord has done great things for us;
Oh, how happy we were!*

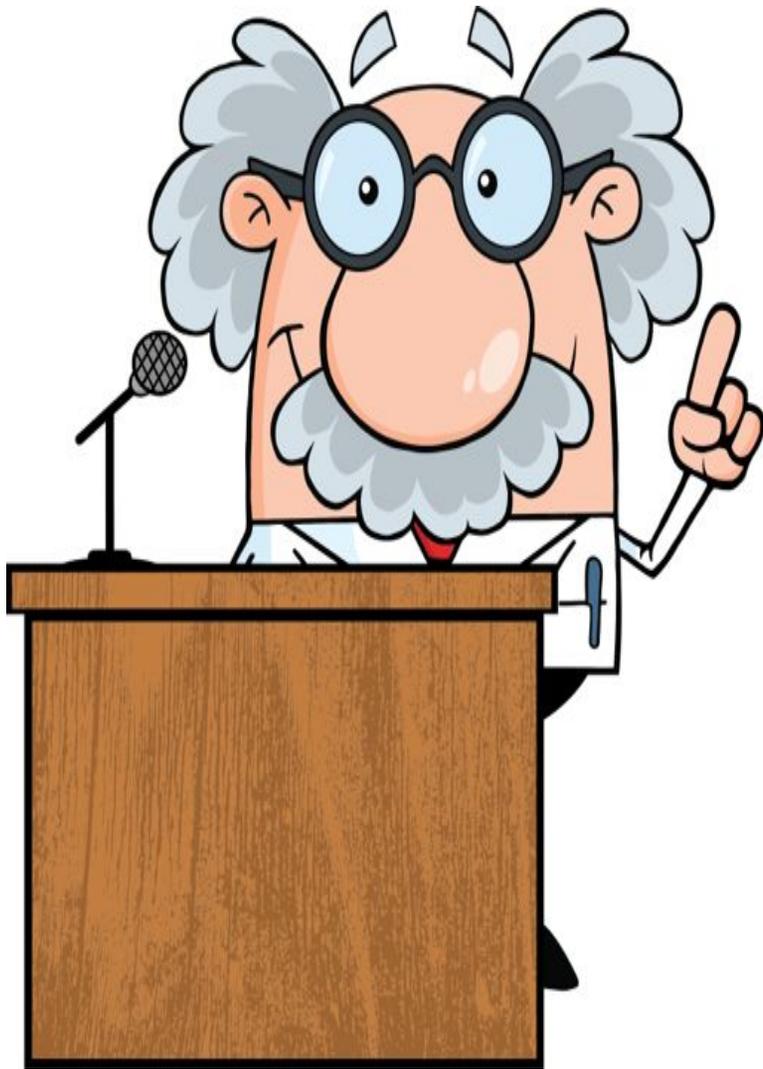
(Psalm 126: 1-3: 1-5)



After the return from Babylon, Deuteronomy acquired its final form, with the laws, statutes and ordinances of Deuteronomy 12-26 sounding an urgent and insistent note.

Moses had proclaimed his 2nd Discourse on the plains of Moab in 1406 B.C.; Josiah had proclaimed an augmented 2nd Discourse in the *ipsissima vox*, the “very voice” of Moses, from the renovated Temple in 622 B.C.; and now the levitical priesthood proclaims the final version of the 2nd Discourse to those returning from the Babylonian captivity.

Once again, the Israelites worship and sacrifice in one place as one people, a place where God’s name once again dwells, in the rebuilt Temple, in the holy city of Jerusalem.



Given this very checkered history, a history of falling away from God over and over again, a history of chasing after “other gods” repeatedly, Deuteronomy 13 reads as a dire warning:

“Every word that I command you, you shall be careful to observe, neither adding to it nor subtracting from it. If there arises in your midst a prophet or a dreamer who promises you a sign or wonder, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods,’ whom you have not known, ‘and let us serve them,’ and the sign or wonder foretold to you comes to pass, do not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer; for the Lord, our God, is testing you to know whether you really love the Lord, your God, with all your heart and soul. The Lord, your God, shall you follow, and him shall you fear; his commandments shall you observe, and to his voice shall you listen; him shall you serve, and to him you shall hold fast.”

(13: 1-5)

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If only that were the case! But we know what happens. Jesus spoke of it in the Olivet Discourse. After a scathing encounter with the religious leaders in Jerusalem, in which he calls them “hypocrites,” “whitewashed tombs,” “serpents” and a “brood of vipers,” Jesus points to the Temple and says:

“You see all these things, do you not? Amen, I say to you, there will not be left here a stone upon another stone that will not be thrown down.”

(Matthew 24: 2)

In A.D. 70 the Temple burns again, Jerusalem lies in ashes and the Israelites are scattered among the nations for the next 2,000 years—until May 14, 1948.



David Roberts. *Siege and Destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans under the Command of Titus, A.D. 70* (oil on canvas), 1850. Private Collection.

Questions for discussion and thought

1. As we enter the “core” of Moses’ 2nd Discourse, a vast collection of laws, statutes and ordinances (Chapters 12-26), how is the content arranged?
2. Why does God once again insist that when the Israelites enter the land of Canaan they destroy any vestiges of the gods worshiped by the indigenous people?
3. Why does God command that he be worshiped in only one place?
4. What are the constraints that prevent God from being worshiped in only one place?
5. If animals can only be slain under proper supervision of the priesthood, how will people living at a great distance from where the priests are have meat to eat?

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