

# Lesson 1d - Jeremiah and the Deuteronomistic Code

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"The words of Jeremiah the son of Hilkiah, of the priests that were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin: to whom the word of the Lord came in the days of Josiah the son of Amon king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign" ([Jer. 1:1,2](#)).

This announcement, referring as it does to King Josiah, not only provides the words of introduction to the book of Jeremiah but indicates the relationship that exists between Jeremiah and the book of Deuteronomy. Josiah was deeply conscious of the importance of "the book of the law" ([II Kings 22:8](#)), found in the temple during his reign, identifying it with the traditional teaching of Moses and putting it into effect as the law of the land. The prophetic inspiration of Jeremiah was undoubtedly encouraged by Josiah's action in instituting a sorely needed religious reformation, one Jeremiah seems to have upheld at the start (see Jer. 11:1-8).

Those who participated in the preparation and repeated editing of Deuteronomy clearly recognized the vital necessity for the Hebrew people of a thorough knowledge of their own history. In historical terms the book sets forth its message, its demand for a return to the heritage of monotheism as stressed by Moses. This theme is presented as having been recorded in one or perhaps even three main addresses of varying length given by Moses in Moab before the entry of the Israelites into Canaan under the leadership of Joshua.

In repeating the Ten Commandments in Chapter 5, the book calls attention to the necessity of continuing obedience. "The Lord made not this covenant with our fathers, but with us, even us, who are all of us here alive this day" (verse 3).

In Chapter 6 is found the famous declaration, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord" (verse 4)" and the command to love Him without reservation. Not only so, but all these words must be diligently taught to the children and kept constantly alive in the thought of the people. God had given the land to their forefathers because they were His chosen people, not because of their vast

numbers or of any merit on their part (see Deut. 7:6-8). He had given the promise to their forebears to grant the land to their descendants.

The book of Deuteronomy, the main portion of which is generally considered the first book to be canonized as the Word of God, has often been described as **"The Gospel of the Old Testament."** Its themes of harmony, unity, joy, mercy, and love provided a source of inspiration not only for the prophets but also for Christ Jesus, who more than once quoted from Deuteronomy when giving his own gospel to the world. A twentieth century writer has even declared that "this Book of Deuteronomy may be truly regarded as one of the most potent and far-reaching books of all time" (*A Guidebook to the Biblical Literature* by John F. Genung, p. 227).

Every student of the Old Testament is familiar to some extent with the work of the priests and the prophets, great leaders of their day. They did not always agree, but on occasion they united to serve the common good in the face of national crisis. Such a crisis arose during the reign of Manasseh, king of Judah, in the seventh century B. c., a reign as lengthy as it was notoriously wicked.

**In an effort to stem the rising tide of paganism,** cult worship with its accompanying immorality, witchcraft, necromancy, superstition, and determined evils of all kinds, it appears to have been **a group of prophets and priests who formed a secret committee to compile a "book of the law" ready for presentation and adoption at the proper time.** This book probably became the basis of the great, though somewhat disorderly and intricate, **code of reform now called Deuteronomy.**

In a book composed in such unusual circumstances, being prepared over such a long period, and necessitating the close cooperation of priests and prophets, oneness of thought must have been demanded. **In this one book the three intimate phrases "thy God," "our God," "your God," occur more than two hundred and seventy times,** while in all four remaining books of the Pentateuch, there are less than seventy such appearances.

Again and again Deuteronomy stresses the glorious fact of God's love for man, and the necessity of man's love for God (see Deut. 7:13; 10: 15; 6:5). Joy is typical of this book, as it was to be of the teaching and practice of the Master. The book's

more kindly attitude toward the rights of women, children, slaves, and the poor, its recognition of the parenthood of God (see 1:31; 32:6, 11), and the brotherly conduct due to all men (see 24:10-22)', all help to offset the severe curses sometimes found in its pages. Even the rain is seen as controlled by God, following obedience of the people to His commandments (see 11:13-15).

In the program governed by such ideals, Jeremiah seems to have given to Josiah strong support, providing for the king's policies of reform justification from the Lord from whom he had received his own call. "Hear ye the words of this covenant," he proclaimed, announcing it to "the men of Judah, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem" ([Jer. 11:2](#)). Moreover, failure to obey it would be to incur God's judgment, for "thus saith the Lord God of Israel; Cursed be the man that obeyeth not the words of this covenant, which I commanded your fathers in the day that I brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, . . . saying, Obey my voice . . . according to all which I command you: so shall ye be my people, and I will be your God" (verses 3, 4; see also [Deut. 28:15; 30:8-20](#)).

Jeremiah was a young man of priestly background, who lived in Anathoth, near Jerusalem, and received his call from God to be one of the prophets of Israel. Jeremiah hesitated to accept this commission because of his relative youth, but was assured that he had been chosen for his career even before he was born (see Jer. 1:5). A priest by birth and a prophet by destiny, Jeremiah was in a unique position to represent both professions.

In setting forth the basic principles of his reform, in accordance with the "book of the covenant" ([II Kings 23:2](#)) found in the temple, Josiah felt he was expressing the ideal of Moses, echoed in the words of Deuteronomy ([12:5](#)), "Unto the place which the Lord your God shall choose out of all your tribes to put his name there, even unto his habitation shall ye seek, and thither thou shalt come." This and other similar verses in the same chapter were interpreted as requiring that Jerusalem be established as the central sanctuary for all Palestine.

While this interpretation might be acceptable to many, some of Jeremiah's relatives and neighbors, members of the local priestly community at Anathoth, would doubtless conclude that their livelihood was in jeopardy. Indeed Jeremiah's own attitude toward the new movement, particularly as it developed in its formal,

ecclesiastical aspects, has been questioned by some scholars. In any event, the prophet became the target of his neighbors' bitter enmity. "Prophecy not in the name of the Lord," they said, "that thou die not by our hand" ([Jer. 11:21](#)). But Jeremiah continued loyal to the appointment he had received from the Lord. Though he seems to have been silent for a period, after Josiah's death he is found once more crying out against evil practices and warning of the impending national danger resulting from their continuance.

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