

09. The Priestly School



The Deuteronomistic School focused on the need for obedience and fidelity. The blessings of the covenant depended upon Israel's fidelity. The Priestly School sought for a foundation that was more basic than human fidelity and infidelity, and they found it in the unilateral and unconditional covenant which God made with Abraham (Genesis 17). Obedience matters, but God's gift of God's Self to Israel transcends our sin.

YHWH is the creator of the universe (see Genesis 1). The Priestly School highlights the presence and redeeming action of YHWH in the life of Israel.

They were, as one would expect, interested in the cult, but only as a response to YHWH present in the life of the community.

A key theme that picks up this perspective is 'glory'.

I. 'Glory' in the cult

Exodus 40:34-35 (see 29:43) YHWH takes possession of the tent of meeting and journeys with Israel leading his people through the wilderness to the Promised Land.

“The cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of YHWH filled the tabernacle. Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled upon it, and the glory of YHWH filled the tabernacle.”

Leviticus 9:23 YHWH manifests his glory during the inauguration of the cult.

“Moses and Aaron entered the tent of meeting, and then came out and blessed the people; and the glory of YHWH appeared to all the people.”

2. 'Glory' in the life of Israel

Exodus 14: 4 (and 17-18) YHWH frees Israel and defeats the power of Egypt.

“I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them, so that I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army; and the Egyptians shall know that I am YHWH.”

Exodus 16:10-12 YHWH nourishes Israel with manna

“The glory of YHWH appeared in the cloud. YHWH spoke to Moses and said, “I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am YHWH your God.’”

2. 'Glory' in the life of Israel

Exodus 24:16-17. The glory of YHWH covers Mount Sinai

“The glory of YHWH settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days.”

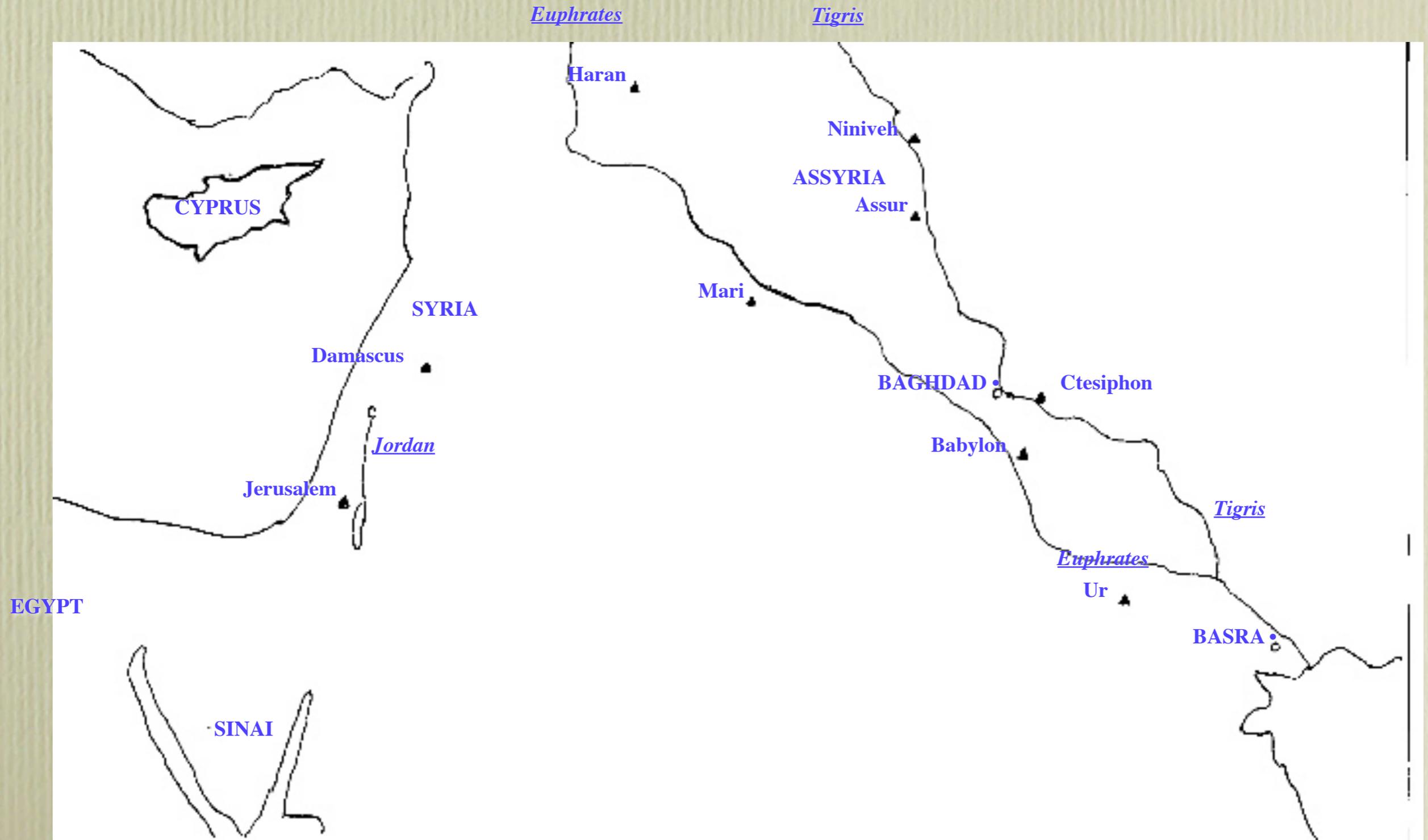
Numbers 20:6 YHWH gives water from the rock.

“Moses and Aaron went away from the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting; they fell on their faces, and the glory of YHWH appeared to them. YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and your brother Aaron, and command the rock before their eyes to yield its water.

It seems that the key role in composing the Torah as we have it was taken by priests. Beginning, perhaps, in the reign of Josiah towards the close of the seventh century, and continuing during the exile and for a number of generations after the return to Judah, it was probably this Priestly School (**P**) who played a leading role in linking the narrative of creation and the flood, the patriarchal narrative and the Exodus narrative in one work, and so producing Genesis, Exodus and Leviticus, followed later by the Book of Numbers.

Their primary interest, as one would expect, was to ensure that the relationship of Israel with YHWH was in accordance with the traditions handed down. Besides reflecting on their own experience, they studied the manuscripts, including the priestly material they inherited, intent on ensuring that every aspect of God's revealed will would be obeyed.

Their work during the Babylonian Exile was done under the shadow of the tragic destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.



Their work in the period after the exile was done in light of the 'miraculous' return to the Holy City and the reconstruction of the temple.



In his *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch* (Eisenbrauns 2006 page 94) Jean Louis Ska SJ writes: ‘The legislative texts and the narratives have been re-read, corrected, reinterpreted and updated several times in accordance with new situations and the need to answer new questions.’

He goes on to say (page 141): ‘The reconstruction of the temple and the restoration of a faith-community within the Persian Empire created a new situation that undoubtedly called for the revision and reinterpretation of the “data” presented by the sources and the most ancient traditions.’



Ska speaks of 'the Priestly Writer' and says: 'He knows the ancient sources and presupposes that the reader knows them. He dialogues with these traditions, corrects and reinterprets them, and proposes a new vision of Israel's history. Throughout all of this he develops his own theology, which is both independent of and related to the ancient tradition'(page 147).

A good basis for dating the work of the Priestly School is found in the various codes found in the Torah

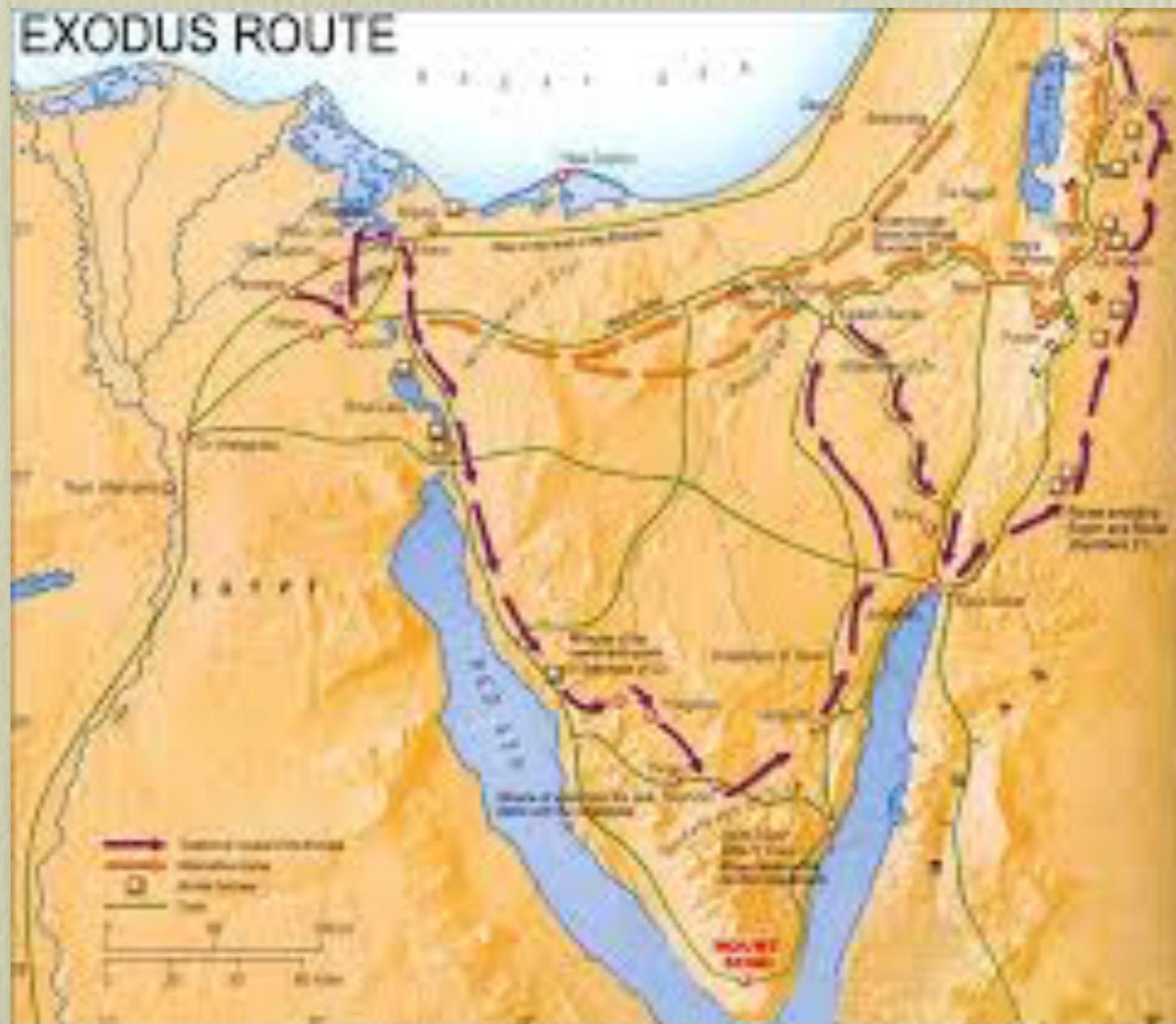
1. Covenant Code (Exodus 21-23) - Pre-exilic
2. Deuteronomistic Code (Deuteronomy 12-26) - King Josiah
3. Deuteronomistic Theology - end of monarchy and Exile
4. Priestly Narrative - First generation after Return
5. Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-26) - Post 2 and Post 4

Exodus

In the Book of Exodus we read the story of the escape of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt under the leadership of Moses. We read of their journey to Mount Sinai and the revelation that they receive there. In the Book of Exodus we find the core of Israel's faith.

It is possible that parts of the story of the Exodus go back to an experience of slaves who escaped from Egypt and journeyed in the Sinai wilderness, where they formed into a religious community, bound together by their commitment to each other and to God under the name of YHWH: the Liberator God whom they believed was responsible for their escape.

The sequence of 'events' we now have in Exodus, however, is a late construction that weaves together several traditions of various groups to create a unique collective memory of this special people



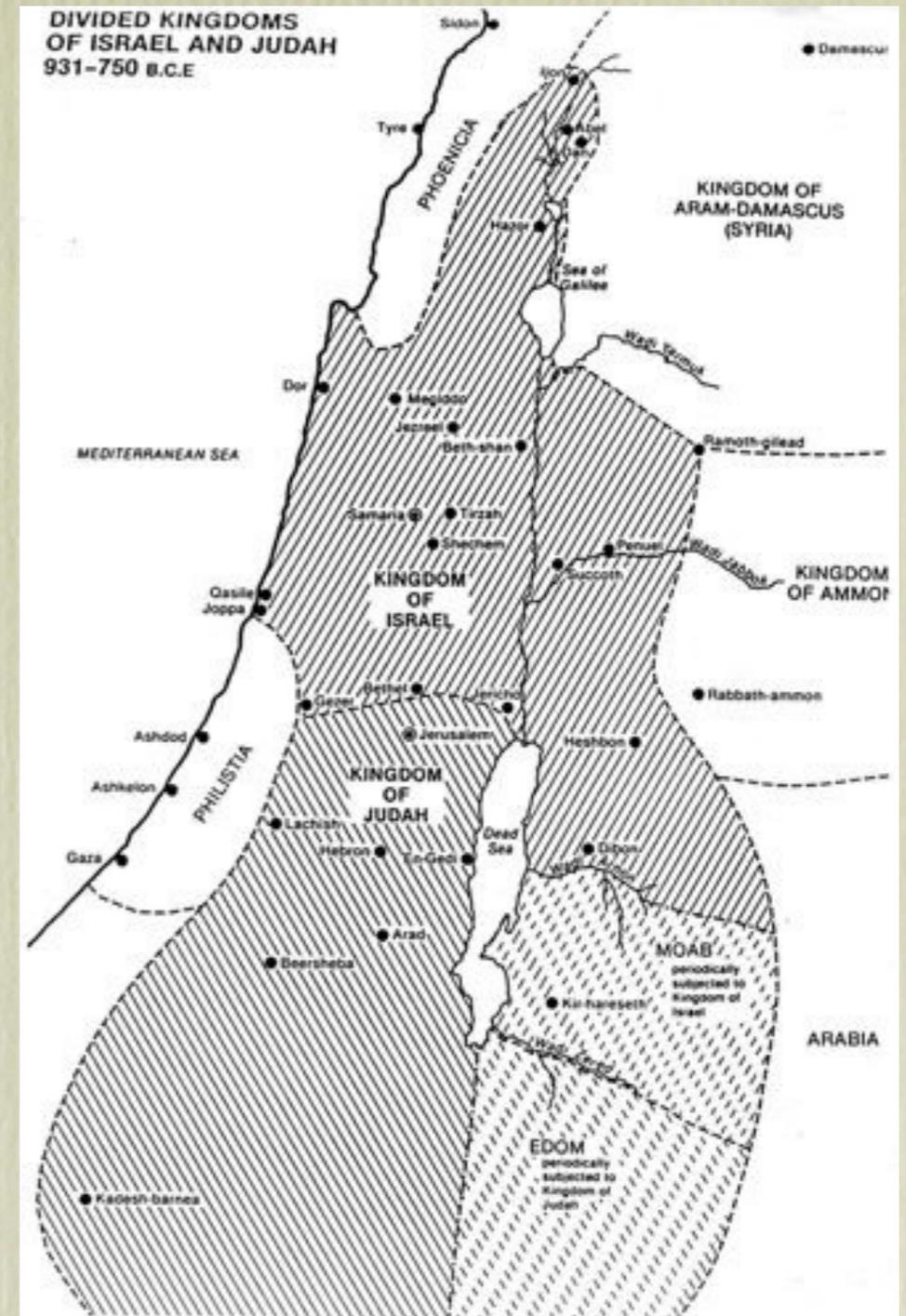
TRIBES OF ISRAEL
BEFORE THE MONARCHY



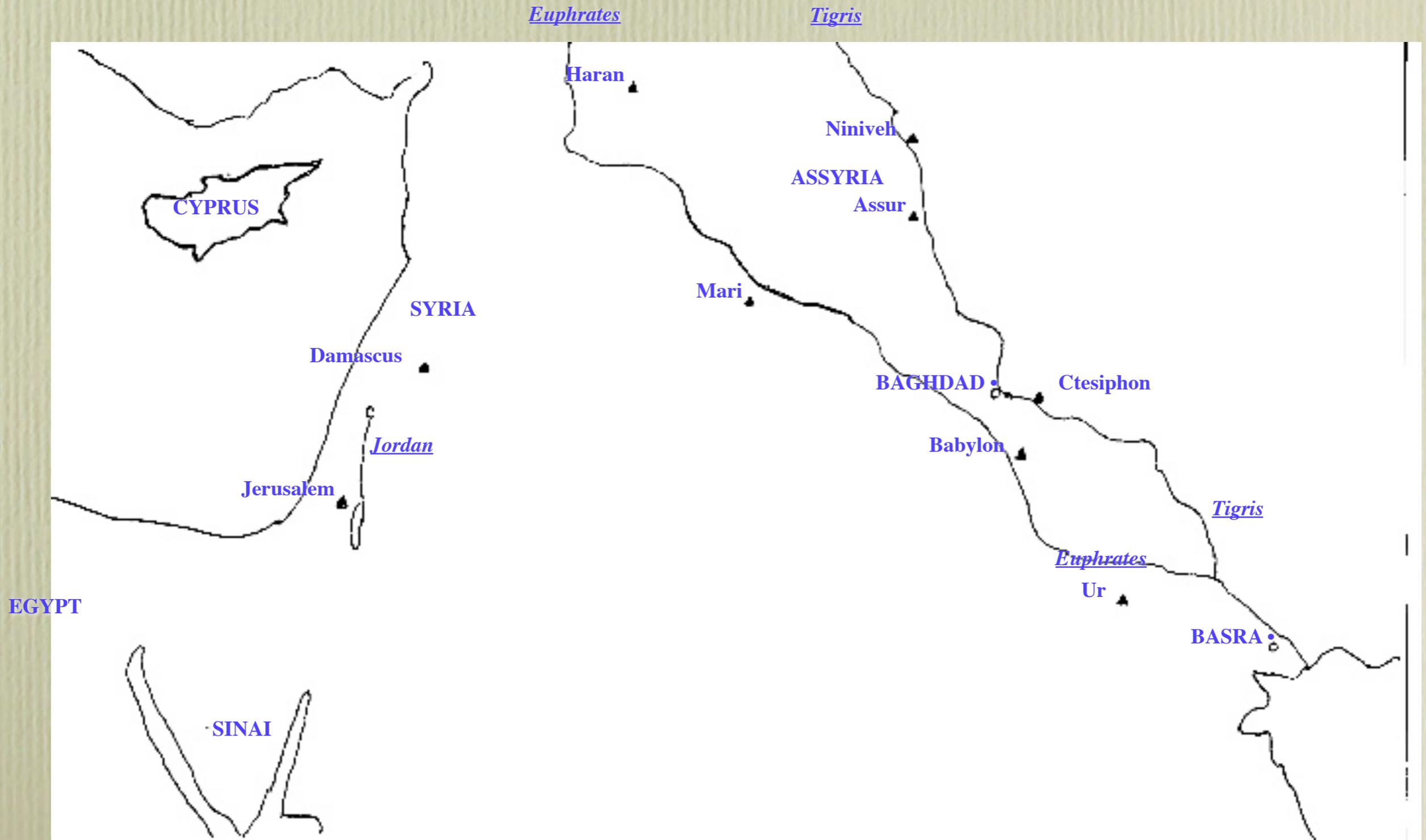
One can imagine the story of the exodus holding a special power for the tribes of the hill country of Canaan that espoused the religion of YHWH.

Perhaps the exodus story encouraged the northern kingdom in the struggle against Assyrian power. The prophets certainly used it in their critique of the abuses of government and life that they opposed in the name of YHWH (in Israel see Amos 2:10; 3:1-2; and later in Judah, Micah 6:4). Hosea also speaks of it (Hosea 11:1-5; 12:14).

Some of the story may have been written prior to the destruction of Samaria (721BC), and we find some of it recorded in Deuteronomy, where it supported Josiah's movement to re-conquer and liberate the Promised Land.



Clearly the Exodus story supported the exiles, who found themselves outside their land longing for the call to return.



Finally we have the experience of the post-exilic community, attempting to form a renewed Israel, and recalling the experiences of their beginnings, determined to be faithful to the covenant with God made in their name by their ancestors, a covenant which defines them as a people.

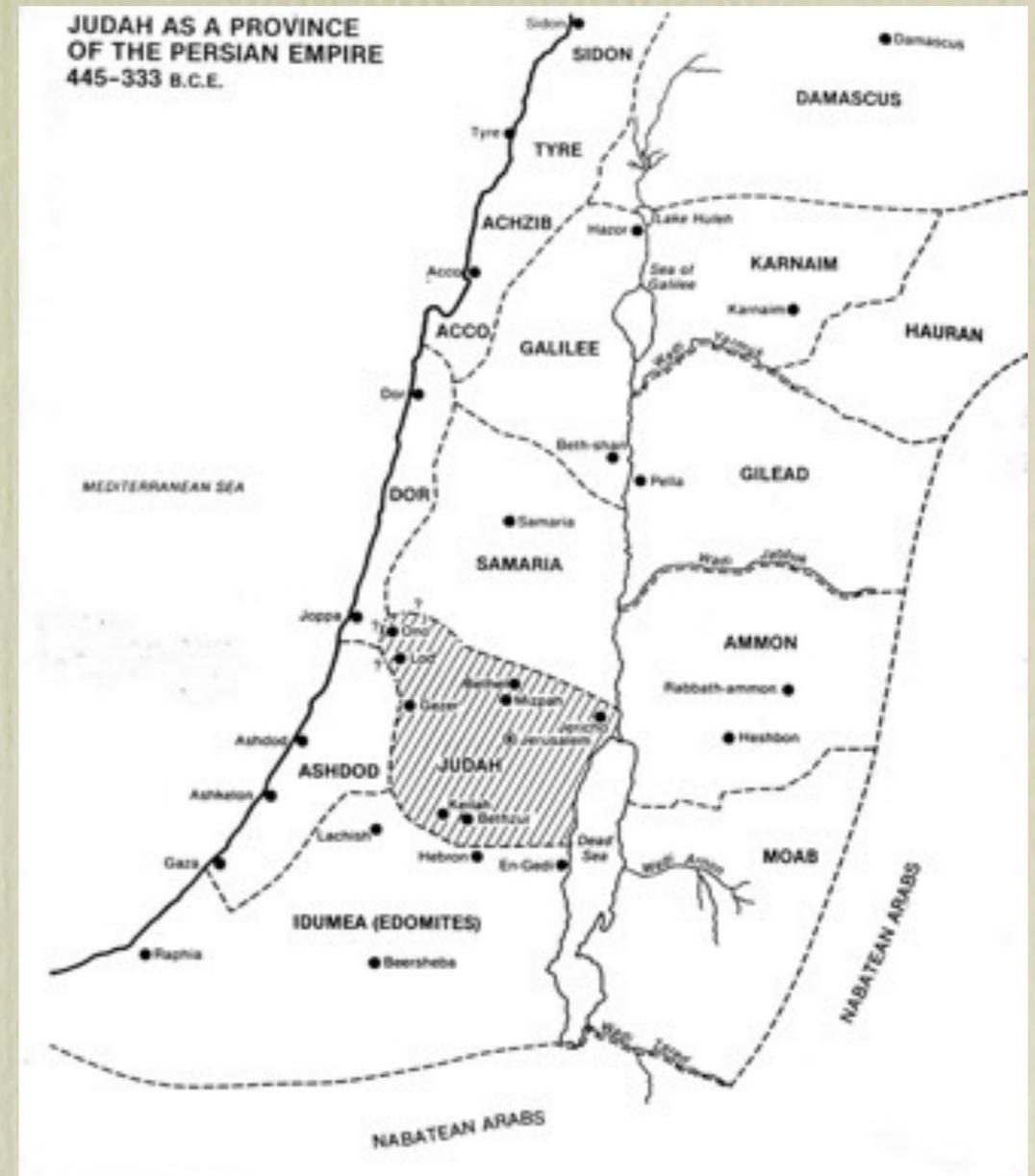


The authors-editors of the Book of Exodus inherited the story that had passed through 700 years of Israel's history, and they wrote the story for their contemporaries. They drew on folklore and legends, and on the pieces of narrative composed in Israel and in Judah, and on Deuteronomy, as these had been re-imagined and re-edited during and after the exile.

The best way to read the Book of Exodus is to put ourselves among the returned exiles and hear it as they would have heard it, keeping in mind that the texts witness to different ways of understanding that history.

The influence of the Priestly School (**P**) is apparent in parts of Exodus 1-19, in Exodus 20:1-21, and in chapters 25-31 and 35-40. Exodus 21-23 (The Covenant Code) is Pre-exilic.

The influence of the Deuteronomic School (**D**) is apparent in parts of Exodus 1-19, and in parts of chapters 32-34.



Besides narrative, the Book of Exodus contains law codes, including norms for regulating the cult. It is important that we read these laws as expressions of practices that have come down through the tradition, a tradition that the Priestly School understood to be guided by their God, YHWH.

These laws express ways in which their ancestors, and they themselves, have solved various problems that have emerged in the community, as well as ways of organising personal and communal life in ways that are consistent with their religious insights.

Some of the legal material (see especially 20:22 - 23:19 and 34:17-26) may well have been composed in the northern kingdom prior to the collapse of Samaria (721BC). Some comes from writers in Judah during the reign of Josiah, and some comes from after the return from the Babylonian Exile.

It is important to observe that those who thought about the essence of Yahwism recognised that not everything was equally central. We have seen this is the Deuteronomic recognition that listening to YHWH is absolutely basic, as is love of YHWH (a commitment to carry out God's will).

Deuteronomy 6:4-5

‘Listen, O Israel:

YHWH is our God, YHWH alone.

You shall love YHWH your God with all your heart,
and with all your soul, and with all your might.

Again and again the prophets rail against those whose focus is locked on the strict observance of legal and ritual matters, but who miss the essence of their part in the special covenant they have with God.

The following from Amos (5:21-24) is typical:

‘I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.’

Jesus has the same perspective. He puts the focus on love (quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-5), and twice we here him challenge the religious leaders in words taken from Hosea: Go and learn the meaning of the words: “I want mercy, not sacrifices”(Matthew 9:13 and 12:7).

Matthew 5:38

Jesus quotes the following, but goes well beyond it

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’(Exodus 21:24).

Matthew 11:10

In reference to John the Baptist, Jesus quotes:

This is the one about whom it is written,

‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you (Exodus 23:20).

All the Gospel Writers portray Jesus as fulfilling one of the most powerful scenes in the Book of Exodus: God feeding his people as they journeyed through the wilderness to the Promised Land (Exodus 16).

John is especially interesting. After portraying Jesus nourishing the crowd in the wilderness, he has the people catch up with him at Capernaum. They ask him for a sign and quote from Psalm 78:24 which declares that God gave the people bread from heaven to eat. Jesus replies:

‘Very truly, I tell you, it was not **Moses** who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is **my Father** who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.’ They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty’(John 6:32-35)

Mark 10:19

In response to the rich man who asked about sharing Jesus' life,

Jesus first reminded him of the commandments

'You know the commandments: You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; honour your father and mother.'(Exodus 20:12-16 and Deuteronomy 5:16-20).

Mark 12:26

Jesus quotes from the Torah in an attempt to free the Sadducees from their ignorance in regard to resurrection

‘As for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush, how God said to him, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’?

(Exodus 3:6, 15).

Luke 2:23

‘It is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”(Exodus 13:12).

John 19:36

Having described how they did not break Jesus' legs, John states:

‘These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled,
“None of his bones shall be broken”(Exodus 12:46).

Stephen's speech

Acts 7:18

'A king who had not known Joseph ruled over Egypt'(Exodus 1:8).

Acts 7:27-28, 35

'When Moses went out the next day, he saw two Hebrews fighting; and he said to the one who was in the wrong, "Why do you strike your fellow Hebrew?" He answered, "Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Then Moses was afraid and thought, "Surely the thing is known"(Exodus 2:13-14).

Acts 7:33-34

Stephen reminds his persecutors of the following

‘The Lord said to him, ‘Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. I have surely seen the mistreatment of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to rescue them. Come now, I will send you to Egypt’(Exodus 3:5-10).

Romans 9:15

Paul quotes the following to highlight God's freedom:

‘God says to Moses: I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion’(Exodus 33:19).

Romans 13:9

‘The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”(Exodus 20:13-17); and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

1 Corinthians 10:7

‘Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written,
“The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play.”

(Exodus 32:6)

Paul speaks of Jesus as the icon of God and encourages the Christian community in Corinth to look at Jesus with unveiled faces and allow themselves Jesus' Spirit to transform them into him. He contrasts this with imagery from the Exodus account of Moses needing to cover his face when he came down to the people after his encounter with God (Exodus 34:29-35).

2Corinthians 3:18

'All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.'

1Peter 2:9

The Christian community inherits the privilege enjoyed by Israel:

‘You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people (see Exodus 19:5-6), in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.’

Hebrews 8:5

They offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one; for Moses, when he was about to erect the tent, was warned, “See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.”(Exodus 25:40)

Hebrews 9:20

As part of his argument that the new covenant is superior to the old, the author of the oration to the Hebrews quotes from Exodus:

“This is the blood of the covenant that God has ordained for you”(Exodus 24:8).

The crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 15) and the manna in the desert (Exodus 16) form the background of the dramatic creations of the multiplication of the loaves (Mark 6:30-34) and Jesus walking on the water (Mark 6:47-52).

Moses on Mount Sinai receiving the Law from God (Exodus 19:24) provides the backdrop to Jesus instructions (the new Law) on the Mount of Beatitudes (Matthew 5-7).

Leviticus

The key role played by the Priestly School (**P**) in the production of the Torah is most apparent in Leviticus where, from the content, the language and the style, it is apparent that the entire book is the product of that school. The word 'School' is important. We are not speaking of a document that was written at one time and by a single group of priests. There are clear signs that Leviticus chapters seventeen to twenty-six (The Holiness Code) is a later work that qualifies and supplements the legislation found in the earlier chapters.

Nor should we imagine the priests who composed Leviticus chapters one to sixteen as creating their text out of nothing. First of all there is the obvious fact that they were drawing on centuries of practice, especially from the cult in the Jerusalem temple, but also from the sanctuaries in the northern kingdom, such as Shiloh (Joshua 18:1).

What was said in relation to the legal and cultic laws in Exodus is even more important here. For Jesus, love is the origin and goal of everything we do.

Matthew 5:33

Jesus quotes from Leviticus when he speaks of truth and simplicity in speech

‘You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times: You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord’(Leviticus 19:12).

Matthew 22:39 (compare Romans 13:9)

Jesus quotes from Leviticus to speak of the central importance
of loving one’s neighbour

‘A second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself’(Leviticus 19:18).

Matthew 5:33, 37

‘You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times,

“You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows
you have made to the Lord’(Leviticus 19:12):

But I say to you ... Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’;
anything more than this comes from the evil one.’

Leviticus 13:45-46

‘The person who has the scaly skin disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, “Unclean, unclean.” He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.’

This is an example of an ancient practice in relation to health. It was also an example of a taboo, since the scaly skin condition reminded people of death, which they feared. The problem was that they saw God as the authority behind ‘the system’. The above words are presented as spoken to Moses by YHWH (Leviticus 13:1). How different is Jesus’ understanding of God and God’s will. When a leper came to Jesus and said: “If you want to, you can make me clean.” Jesus was moved with compassion, embraced the leper, and said: “Of course I want to. Be clean”(Mark 1:40-41).

Leviticus 20:10

‘If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbour, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death.’

The Gospel of John 8:3-6 records the following scene:

‘The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him.’

Jesus does not condone her behaviour, but neither does he condemn her. He loves her so that she will not seek the distraction of adultery again.

Luke 2:24

‘They offered a sacrifice
according to what is stated in the law of the Lord,
“a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”(Leviticus 12:8)

2Corinthians 6:16

Paul quotes from Leviticus:

‘What agreement has the temple of God with idols?
For we are the temple of the living God; as God said,
“I will live in them and walk among them,
and I will be their God,
and they shall be my people”(Leviticus 26:12).

Romans 10:5 and Galatians 3:12

‘Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that “the person who does these things will live by them”(Leviticus 18:5).

1Peter 1:16

Peter quotes from Leviticus ‘

‘It is written: You shall be holy, for I am holy’(Leviticus 11:44).

Numbers

The Book of Numbers follows the Israelites from Sinai ('Horeb') to Moab. There are a number of repetitions of scenes depicted in Exodus.

Baruch A. Levine writes in the Introduction to the first volume of his commentary on Numbers (Anchor Bible, Doubleday 1993, page 107):

'It would be accurate to state in summary that the priestly materials in Numbers 1-20 (as in Numbers as a whole) represent, by and large, the further development of priestly law and historiography well into the post-exilic period. Such development was not merely a matter of redactional activity, but also involved new writings by the post-exilic priesthood in Jerusalem and their associates.'

Mark 9:38-40

‘John said to Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.’(see Numbers 11:28)

Ezra the priest and Nehemiah the governor

In 458BC the Persian army was defeated by Egypt backed by the Athenian navy. It is probable that this was the occasion for a further attempt by the Persian administration to strengthen Judah as a buffer against Egypt. Ezra, a scribe (civil servant) and a priest, arrived in Jerusalem with five thousand more returning exiles (Ezra 7:7-8).

It is likely that Ezra, in conjunction with the local priests and chief landowners established the final version of the Torah.

Megabyzus, one of the leading Persian generals, who had been governor of Syria, instigated a revolt. In the subsequent violence the wall of Jerusalem was broken down, the gates burned (Nehemiah 1:3, 2:3,13,17), and the city laid waste (Nehemiah 2:3,17, 3:34). Not even the recently re-built Temple was spared (Nehemiah 2:8, 3:34).

In 445BC Nehemiah was sent from Babylon to govern Judah (Nehemiah 1:1 and 13:6). He was commissioned to repopulate and fortify the city and to establish the rule of law based on the injunctions of the Torah.

Factors to remember in reading ancient texts

Ska (pages 165-183) highlights factors that we, as modern readers, need to be aware of as we read the text. I will note three of them here.

I

The first is that, for the authors of the Torah and for those for whom they wrote, the value of anything is directly related to its age: the more ancient, the more value. This is not something that we moderns see as obvious. For the ancients it was of primary importance. This is why genealogies are so important. They establish the antiquity of a family or an institution. This is why they begin their legislation so often with: 'YHWH said to Moses'. They want the readers to reflect on the origins of their faith and to read the text as expressing insight into the essence of the revelation that brought them into being in the beginning.

Much of the Torah is an imaginary reconstruction of the Wilderness Period, for the authors wanted their contemporaries to relate their experiences with that of the first generation of Israelites. The monarchy had failed, but the religion of Israel went back well before the monarchy. The temple had been destroyed, but the cult went back well before the temple. Assyria, Babylon and Persia had proved more powerful militarily than Israel, but it was YHWH, the God of Israel, who created the universe and the nations – all of them.

A major problem facing the returning exiles is that those who had not gone into exile resented their return. The returning exiles wanted to reclaim their land – land that others had occupied in their absence thinking that they would never come back.

The returning exiles identified closely with Moses and the people who had escaped from Egypt. Those who had stayed in the land identified with Abraham.

A key reason for composing the Pentateuch was to form a united people. It was imperative that both groups come to see that the God who revealed Himself to Moses is the ‘God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’(Exodus 3:6).

Linked to this respect for what is ancient is the essentially conservative stance of the authors. For them ancient laws and customs could not be eliminated even when circumstances required their updating. Whatever may have happened in earlier times, the leaders of post-exilic Judah were anxious to be completely faithful to God's will, so they were meticulously careful not to attempt to harmonise the material that they inherited, even though some of it no longer applied to their changed circumstances. After all, such was their faith in God's presence and action among them that they considered their laws and customs to have a divine origin: a faith expressed in the words 'YHWH said'.

They believed that it is God who commanded them to act in certain ways. Of course, God is a living God, and so is free to reveal his will in different situations, and to 'update' the law. But they were not free to put aside God's commands even when God himself had chosen to transcend them. So we will find in the text the ancient law and the more recent updating side by side. We will find ancient and modern accounts of past 'history' side by side.

A third and related factor was their desire to demonstrate that the ancient traditions had an ongoing value for their contemporaries. They preserved the ancient material, not as museum pieces, but because they saw it as a revelation from God and they trusted that it could still guide them. They attempted to point this out in the way they told the stories and in the way they commented on the text. They did not want their contemporaries to get caught up in nostalgia for the past. It was important that they live now in a way that was faithful to God and that would avoid the mistakes of the past for which they had paid such a high price.

It follows from this that, though we have some uncertainty as to how much written material the authors of the text received from earlier generations of writers, we should be confident that the post-exilic authors has a vision of Israel/Judah that transcended their own experience and their own time.

The way God is portrayed as relating to human beings and the way religion is expressed in the primeval narrative (Genesis 1-11), and in the patriarchal narrative (Genesis 12-50), is significantly different from the way God is portrayed and religion expressed in the books that aim to capture the essence of Mosaic Yahwism.

Though it is clear that the post-exilic authors have adapted the stories (orally transmitted or already written) to speak to the needs of a much later time than that of Moses, they wanted to present an understanding of God and of God's relationship to the people of Israel, indeed to the world, that reflects the different periods of their history till it reached its highest point in the revelation given to Moses.

As one would expect there are differences between the Deuteronomic School and the Priestly School.