

COVENANT COMMUNITY
Meta-stories in the Pentateuch

LESSON EIGHT: REVISIONIST HISTORY
THE DEUTERONOMY DOCUMENT

Opening prayer

God of every nation, grant us clarity about the requirements of citizenship. We live amidst mighty militaries and our loyalty to the Prince of Peace is strained. Help us to discern the statutes of your eternal Kingdom. Amen.

Navigating this lesson

Deuteronomy repeats much of what we have already read. It retells the Moses saga with several variations. It contains one of the greatest sermons in Scripture. The *Deuteronomy* document itself has a fascinating story.

Read: *II Kings 22:8-13; Deuteronomy 1:1 - 10:12-22; Deuteronomy 26:1-19; Deuteronomy 30:11-29; Matthew 5:1 – 7:29; I Peter 2:1-10*

Focus texts: Deuteronomy 6:4-9; II Kings 22:8-13; Deuteronomy 26:5-11;
Matthew 5:1-20; I Peter 2:1-10

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We all want progress, but if you're on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; in that case, the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive. – C.S. Lewis

In our Bibles several history documents follow the Pentateuch. They describe what happened after the People of the Covenant settled down in Canaan. They became a nation, selected a king, planted crops, paid taxes, built a Temple, raised families. In general they tried to become like other nations. The priests and the prophets constantly reminded them that they were **NOT** like other nations. They were a priestly people. YHWH provided (providence) for them so they could fulfill their covenant relationship with YHWH.

But as the people became more prosperous, they “remembered” their past less and less. Generation succeeded generation. Centuries passed. The “House of the Lord” fell into disrepair. Foreign idols were introduced. Finally King Josiah ordered a cleansing and restoration of the Temple.

As workers began tearing out old walls and carting off accumulations of junk, they uncovered a scroll. None of the workers could read, so they took the scroll to the High Priest. When the High Priest saw what it was, he hurried to King Josiah’s envoy and ordered him to deliver the scroll to the King.

Shaphan the secretary informed the king, “The priest Hilkiah has given me a book.” Shaphan then read it aloud to the king. When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes. Then the king commanded the priest... “Go, inquire of the Lord for me, for the people, and for all of Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found; for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our ancestors did not obey the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us.” { *II Kings 22:10-13* }

The book Shaphan read aloud to King Josiah was probably *Deuteronomy* – the “Book of the Law,” now the fifth book of the Pentateuch. No one knows exactly when it was written. Some think it may have been “planted” in the Temple so it would spark a religious revival. It’s “discovery” came at least 500 years after the events it describes – the same events we studied in *Exodus*, *Leviticus* and *Numbers*.

During the centuries between the events of *Exodus* and the writing of *Deuteronomy*, Israel’s fortunes rose and fell. There were good kings, bad kings, and worse kings. People worried more about the weather than who was in power in Jerusalem. Neighbors squabbled over property rights. There were citizenship issues involving Canaanites and Moabites (Ruth was a Moabite). People struggled to pay their tithes. The rich got richer and the poor got poorer – until debts were cancelled in Jubilee years.

As the people became more prosperous, their allegiance to the **Covenant** weakened. Israel became a nation but abandoned its role as a **Holy Community**.

It was **providence** that brought *Deuteronomy* – the “Book of the Law” - to be “discovered” by illiterate workmen and read aloud to a good king.

When King Josiah hears the blessings and curses contained in *Deuteronomy* he rends his clothes. He orders the population of Jerusalem to report to the Temple where the Book of the Law is read aloud to them. Then the Temple is cleansed of foreign idols, the worship of Ba'al is outlawed, and corrupted priests are sacked. A religious revival based on the words of *Deuteronomy* is attempted. Frankly, we don't know how successful it was.

Deuteronomy is an imagined sermon (or series of sermons) delivered by Moses, as the Israelites prepare to occupy Canaan. It was written by scribes with priests watching over their shoulders. It was written many generations after Moses died. It is full of priestly glosses putting words in Moses' mouth as if they had come along with the Ten Commandments. These glosses describe rituals and laws that emerged only after the Israelites settled in Canaan and built the Temple.

Moses' sermons remind the Israelites of all that *YHWH* has done for them. It retells the sacred story – *YHWH* liberated them from slavery in Egypt, *YHWH* provided *manna* in the wilderness, *YHWH* came down from the mountain to dwell with them. Moses' sermons in *Deuteronomy* reiterate the meta-stories of **covenant** and **providence** and **holy community** all over again. Plus Moses spells out the temptations they will face (have already faced!) once they reach the promised land. He urges them to remember the **Covenant**, to remember all *YHWH* has done for them, and to remain a **Holy Community**. *Deuteronomy* is a plea to let *Torah* guides their lives.

Moses convened all Israel, and said to them: Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances that I am addressing to you today; you shall learn them and observe them diligently. The Lord our God made a **covenant** with us at Horeb. Not with our ancestors did the Lord make the covenant, but **with us, who are all of us alive today**. The Lord spoke to you face to face at the mountain, out of the fire.

{ *Deuteronomy 5:1-4* }

Today you have obtained the Lord's agreement: to be your God; and for you to walk in his ways, to keep his statutes, his commandments, and his ordinances, and to obey him. Today the Lord has obtained your agreement: **to be his treasured people, as he promised you, and to keep his commandments**; for him to set you high above all nations that he has made, in praise and in fame and in honor; and for you to be **a people holy to the Lord your God**, as he promised. {
Deuteronomy 26:16-19 }

Deuteronomy envisions the elderly Moses, knowing his death is near, sad that he will not see the promised land for himself, gathering up all his energies and exhorting the people with whom he had shared so many hardships:

“See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curse. **Choose life** so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for this means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.” { *Deuteronomy 30:15-20* }

This portion of *Deuteronomy* belongs alongside Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, George Washington's farewell address, and Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. It is a clarion call for a nation to live up to its highest calling.

It is a fascinating exercise to compare Moses' *Deuteronomy* sermons with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (*Matthew 5:1 – 7:29*) and Stephen's post-resurrection sermon to the High Priest and Temple Council (*Acts 7:1-53*). In his post-Resurrection sermon, Stephen condemns futile sacrifices and empty rituals. He cites Moses and Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. But he belittles the Temple as a vain attempt to contain *YHWH*. This foreshadows early Christian worship.

Moses' sermon contains both blessings and curses. He contrasts those who live by the Book of the Law and those who don't. Those who don't will be cut off from the land of the living.

Luke remembers Jesus' blessings (beatitudes) followed by "woes." "Woe to you who are rich..., woe to you who are full now..., woe to you who are laughing now..., woe to you when all speak well of you..." (*Luke 6:24-26*). These are not so much curses or threats as the natural consequences of spiritual blindness.

Matthew remembers Jesus' beatitudes even more sympathetically.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Bless are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven . . . You are the salt of the earth . . . You are the light of the world . . . { *Matthew 5:3-14* }

In Judaism is found the concept of *t'shuvah*, meaning returning and accountability, returning to the awareness of who we are through re-aiming at the right target. Jesus teaches *t'shuvah*. He teaches us to re-aim at the right target, at holiness that is a blessing for the world, not just personal self-righteousness. Perhaps that is what he means when he says,



Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill... For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.
{ *Matthew 5:17-20* }

Deuteronomy is a “Fourth of July” speech to remind Israel of its roots and its ideals. *Deuteronomy* is “revisionist history” linking current events with ancient events. There is a lot of hellfire and brimstone in Moses’ sermon, but in the midst of it Moses shouts **“Choose life!”**

Jesus chose life, even though it led to a Cross. And God did not let life end there on the Cross. That’s the message we carry for our time and place. The resurrection is a cry from heaven itself: **“Choose Life!”**

The first Christians carried this message into far reaches of the Roman Empire. They abandoned the Jerusalem Temple. They brought the Gospel message to people whose customs and traditions were foreign. They had to forge a Covenant Community out of Gentiles and Jews, rich and poor, women and men, slaves and free. It was a diverse lot who made up the early Church.

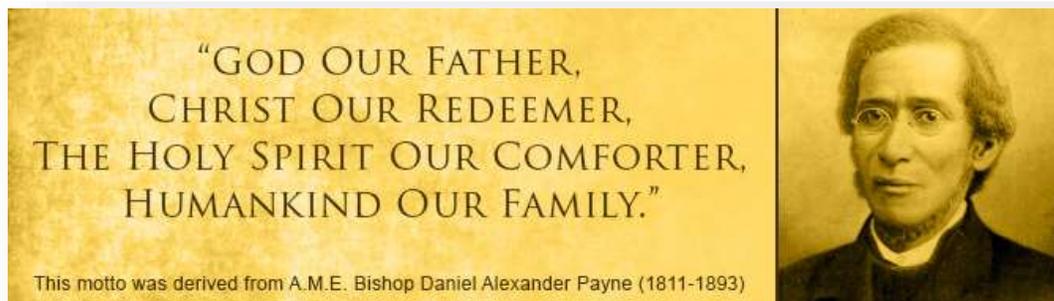
The writer of *I Peter* had such a mixed congregation in mind when he wrote,

*Once you were not a people, but now you are
God’s people; once you had not received
mercy, but now you have received mercy.
{ I Peter 2:10 }*

That’s a message to write on our hearts today, in El Dorado County, as the people of Federated Church. Once we were no people, but now we are God’s people. We share the Covenant of Baptism. We eat the bread of salvation together. The providence of God has brought us to this moment.

When nine African Americans were killed by a young gun-man in “Mother Emmanuel” Church in Charleston, South Carolina, many people became aware of the African Methodist Episcopal denomination for the first time. The denomination was founded by African American Methodists before the Civil War. If you visit their website, their masthead declares their faith:

“God Our Father,
Christ Our Redeemer,
The Holy Spirit Our Comforter,
Humankind Our Family.”



Most of us recognize that as a Trinitarian declaration (God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). But a fourth line is added: Humankind is Our Family. That adds a very important current article of faith to the ancient Trinitarian formula.

Federated Church is called to be a holy people, a **Covenant Community**, a current witness to what God is doing in the world. We participate in an old old story; we are called to make that story of *covenant, providence and community* current.

Once we were no people, but now we are God’s people; once we had not received mercy, but now we have received mercy, grace upon grace.

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SOME QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION AND FOR REFLECTION, PONDERING, CONVERSATION

Can you think of a sermon that re-aimed your life?

(A sermon that comes at just the right time is an example of **providence**.)

What is the “right target” we should aim for?

How can we help a current generation do *t'shuvah*?

John Shea (John Shea, Stories of God, 2007) says that the Church is called to do three things: gather the folks, break the bread, and tell the stories. Is that sufficient?

Write a "sacred history" of Federated Church.

What stories did the Presbyterians and the Methodists bring when they merged? How did they manage to merge their stories? What stories from the past can we bring to benefit the present?