

THE LOST LAWS OF THE ISRAELITES

THE EXODUS AND THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

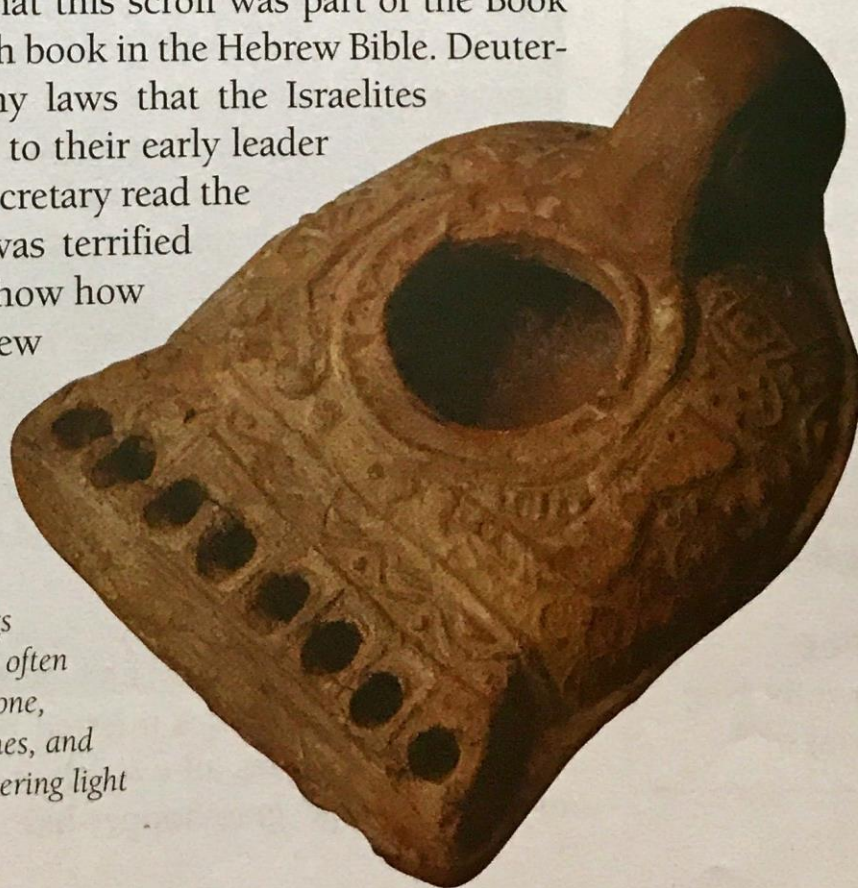
King Josiah came to Judah's throne when he was only eight years old. According to the Second Book of Kings, Josiah grew up to be a just and good king. In the 18th year of his reign, he decided to repair the old temple that King Solomon had built in Jerusalem 300 years earlier. He hired carpenters, builders, and stonemasons for the job. As it turned out, these workers did more than restore God's temple. In the course of their labors, they discovered a scroll, a rolled document, that had been lost or hidden there for decades, perhaps centuries. According to the Second Book of Kings, when they showed it to the high priest, he was overjoyed and said: "I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the Lord."

Historians believe that this scroll was part of the Book of Deuteronomy, the fifth book in the Hebrew Bible. Deuteronomy lists many, many laws that the Israelites believed God had given to their early leader Moses. When Josiah's secretary read the book aloud, the king was terrified and tore his clothes to show how upset he was. He knew that the Israelites had forgotten God's laws.

This oil lamp has eight openings for eight wicks. Biblical writers often mentioned lamps, such as this one, giving light in tents, caves, homes, and in the Temple, where their flickering light symbolized the sacred spirit.

“ THE BOOK OF SECOND KINGS, EXODUS, AND DEUTERONOMY

“ II Kings, Hebrew Bible



66 II Kings, Hebrew Bible

Fearing God's fury, he declared, "Great is the Lord's anger that burns against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book."

According to the Book of Kings, Josiah decided that he had better give a public speech. "He went up to the temple of the Lord with the men of Judah, the people of Jerusalem, . . . all the people from the least to the greatest. He read . . . the words of the book, which had been found in the temple." The king promised to keep God's laws, and all the people who listened that day agreed to follow God.

The hero of Deuteronomy is an Israelite named Moses, but his story actually begins in **Exodus**, the second book of the Hebrew Bible. As Exodus begins, Abraham's great-grandson Joseph has died, and the Israelites have lost favor with the Egyptian pharaoh. In fact, by the time of Moses' birth, Pharaoh had enslaved the Israelites. Despite the hard work they were forced to do, the Israelite tribe grew so large that Pharaoh got nervous. He commanded the midwives, who helped women during childbirth, to kill all of the infant sons born to Israelite women. According to the Hebrew Bible, Pharaoh said: "If it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live."

The Book of Exodus tells how one Israelite woman managed to hide her newborn son for three months. Then, desperate, she "took a basket made of bulrushes . . . and put the child in it." She set it afloat on the Nile River. When Pharaoh's daughter "came down to bathe, . . . she saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to fetch it." The princess adopted the child and named him Moses.

The Israelites believed that God had chosen Moses to lead them out of their slavery in Egypt. The Book of Exodus describes how Moses, when he grew to manhood, stood up to the Egyptian ruler and demanded, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go.'" When Pharaoh refused to release the Israelites, God rained down punishments on the Egyptians. The Nile River turned to blood. A swarm of gnats and flies infested the earth, and the people broke out with sores all over their bodies. Finally a swarm of locusts, large grasshopper-like insects, "covered . . . the

Exodus comes from the Greek word *exodos*, which means "departure." The word is related to the English word *exit*.

66 Exodus, Hebrew Bible

whole land, so that the land was darkened, and they ate all the plants . . . until not a green thing remained." Desperate at last, Pharaoh begged Moses to take all the people, the cattle—everything—and leave. "Get away from me," he pleaded, "never see my face again."

For Jews, the Exodus is a central event in their history. The escape from Egyptian slavery demonstrated God's continued connection to the Jewish people. It is also a powerful symbol for all people showing the importance of freedom that has lasted throughout the ages. Every year Jewish families remember the Exodus during Passover. In



In this early Christian mosaic, Moses has parted the waters of the Red Sea. The Israelites cross on dry land, but Pharaoh's soldiers, chariots, and horses drown in its churning waves.

THE JEWISH JOURNEY

before 1500 BCE
Abraham leads
Hebrews to Levant

around 1200 BCE
Moses leads Israelites
from Egypt to Levant

around 1020 BCE
Saul's reign begins

around 1000 BCE
David's reign begins

around 960 BCE
Solomon's reign begins

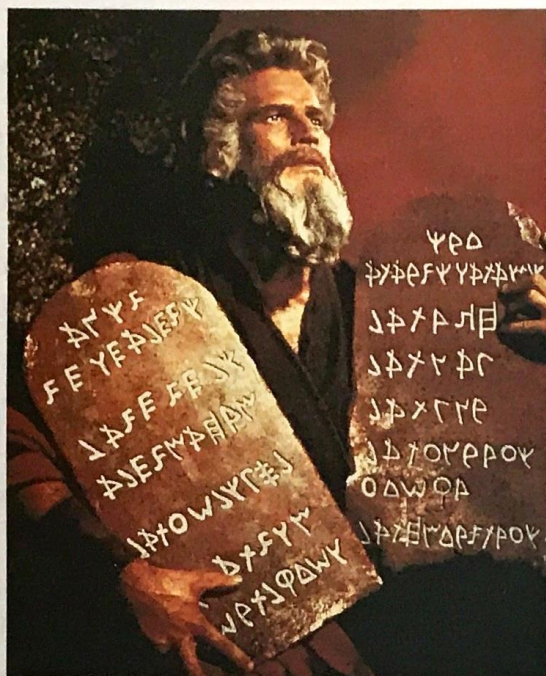
922 BCE
Israel divides into two
kingdoms

722 BCE
Assyrian conquest
of Israel

598–597 BCE
Jehoiachin of Judah
reigns

587 BCE
Final Babylonian
conquest of Judah;
Babylonian exile
begins

539 BCE
Jews allowed to return
to Jerusalem



Moses—played by Charlton Heston in the 1956 movie *The Ten Commandments*—holds the two stone tablets on which the laws were written.

their ceremony they rededicate themselves to the cause of freedom for all people.

According to the Hebrew Bible, Moses led the former slaves on their journey from Egypt into Canaan. Along the way, Moses received a message from God as he stood at the top of a mountain in the wilderness. God promised that if the Israelite people would obey his commandments, he would protect

them and take care of them. Moses announced to the people these ten laws, expressed as God's will:

66 Deuteronomy, Hebrew Bible

1. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt. . . . You shall have no other gods before me.
2. You shall not make . . . any graven images [idols]. . . . You shall not bow down and worship them . . .
3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. . .
4. Observe the Sabbath day to keep it holy. . . . Six days, shall you labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath unto your God. . .
5. Honor your father and your mother. . .
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery [by being unfaithful to your husband or wife].
8. You shall not steal.

9. You shall not bear false witness [tell lies].

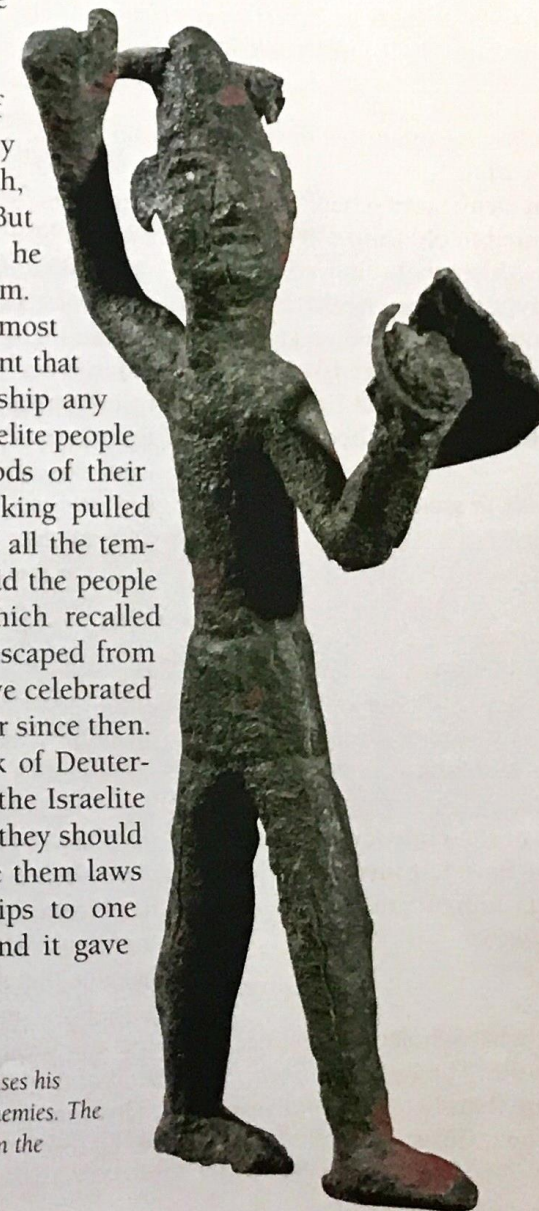
10. You shall not covet [be jealous].

The people believed that God wrote these laws, known as the Ten Commandments, on two stone tablets. These commandments were absolute laws—no ifs, ands, or buts. Absolute laws never change. The Israelites believed that if they followed the laws, they would have long life, good health, many children, and prosperity. But if they disobeyed God's laws, he would be angry and punish them.

Josiah seems to have been most worried about the commandment that tells the Israelites not to worship any gods other than God. Some Israelite people had begun to worship the gods of their Canaanite neighbors, so the king pulled down the altars and destroyed all the temples to other gods. Then he told the people to celebrate the Passover, which recalled the time when the Israelites escaped from slavery in Egypt. And Jews have celebrated the Passover holiday every year since then.

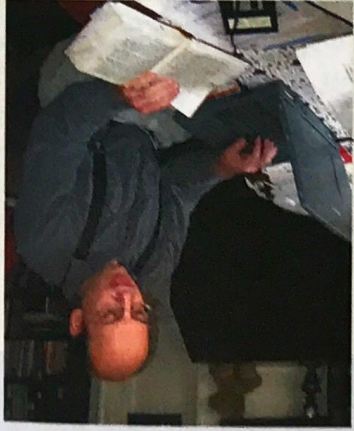
The discovery of the Book of Deuteronomy had a major effect on the Israelite people. It reminded them that they should worship just one God. It gave them laws to follow in their relationships to one another as well as to God, and it gave

A god holds a shield in one hand and raises his sword in the other, ready to attack his enemies. The statue may represent the god Baal, whom the Canaanites worshiped.



**HISTORIAN AT WORK:
AN INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM H. C. PROPP**

William H. C. Propp is a professor of ancient history and Judaic studies at the University of California, San Diego. He teaches courses on the civilizations and languages of the ancient Near East. He is an expert on the Hebrew Bible, and his book, *Exodus 1–18*, was published in 1999.



When did you become interested in studying the Hebrew Bible?
When I was in elementary school, I became interested in old things. It started with dinosaurs. After that, I moved on to the ancient Egyptians, the Greeks, and the Romans. In junior high, I studied Latin. Also, because my family is Jewish, I grew up with Jewish traditions and Hebrew. The stories in the Bible really grabbed me.

When you decide to study a biblical text, how do you begin?

First I have to figure out what the text is. We know that it won't be an ancient original manuscript. We don't have any texts that were actually written by the people who wrote the Bible. What we have are copies of copies of copies, written in Hebrew or in translations into Greek, Aramaic, and other languages. There are many versions of the same text, all slightly different. So we have to gather all of the evidence and try to figure out what the original words were.

What then?

Next, I look at what scholars before me thought and wrote. The Bible has been studied for more than two thousand years by Jewish scholars, Christian scholars,

imagine that we are slaves, hoping for freedom. Jews are no longer slaves, so "slavery" can mean persecution, grief, or any kind of distress. But the hope is always: "This year, we are slaves. Next year, may we be free."

You've done a lot of work on the Book of Exodus. How does the Exodus story affect the traditions of the modern Jewish community?

Every year, in the springtime, Jews retell the story of the Exodus, celebrating the time when their ancestors were finally freed from slavery in Egypt, according to tradition. We call it the Passover. We try to imagine that we are slaves, hoping for freedom. Jews are no longer slaves, so "slavery" can mean persecution, grief, or any kind of distress. But the hope is always: "This year, we are slaves. Next year, may we be free."

and others. I think we can mine nuggets of understanding from all sorts of sources and times. I also look to see what the archaeologists can tell me about the period I'm interested in. And I gather ancient records from the Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians and others to see what texts from these civilizations can tell me about the time and the text I've chosen to study. Often a story that is even older than the Bible can help us to understand the Bible and appreciate what was new about it.

them an explanation for all the awful things that had happened to them, such as murdered kings and terrible wars. The biblical writers believed that the Israelites' successes signaled God's approval and that disasters came when he was angry. The story of God's relationship with the Israelite people is the thread that ties the writings of the Hebrew Bible together.

The Ten Commandments are absolute laws, but the Book of Deuteronomy listed other laws, too. It describes the proper ways to worship God—exactly how to perform sacrifices and how to live to please him, including what to eat and not eat and how to behave on certain days of the week. Other laws were conditional, presenting a *particular* situation and telling how it should be handled.

Like Hammurabi's laws, many of these conditional laws say if a certain crime was done, *then* this should be the punishment. The conditional laws of Israel were concerned with the same types of things that Hammurabi's laws covered: agriculture, marriage, property rights, and so on. In both Mesopotamia and Israel, these practical laws were

"Teach me, O Lord, the way of your commands, and I will keep them to the end. Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and follow it with my whole heart."

—Book of Psalms, Hebrew Bible

designed to allow people to solve their problems in court instead of trying to get personal revenge against those who had wronged them.

Once Josiah had rediscovered the laws, people in the Israelite community began to learn about them. And gradually, they began to pattern their lives according to God's ancient laws.

The biblical laws have had a powerful influence on history in the regions where Judaism, and later Christianity,

HOLY NAMES

To English-speaking Jews and Christians his name is God or Lord. In Hebrew, his name is *Adonai*; in French, *Dieu*, and in German, *Gott*—and many other names, depending on the language of the believers.

flourished. Wise people read the laws and wrote comments about them. Others read these Commentaries, as they were called, and expanded on them. The importance of living under a set of laws became a basic principle of all Jewish and Christian societies and, later, of almost all modern countries.

We know about the Israelites' beliefs about creation, their early leaders, and the histories of their kings because they are recorded in the Hebrew Bible. These are part of the sacred writings of the Jewish people that were passed down orally from one generation to the next until they were put into written form.

Scholars think that the Hebrew Bible began to be written down around the time of King Solomon in the 10th century BCE. Then, for six hundred years more, people continued to collect and write accounts. Scholars can tell that this happened because the authors wrote in different styles. Those who wrote later often mentioned people and events from their own times. And various authors used different vocabulary. Imagine a play written by Shakespeare and then a book by J. K. Rowling. Even if bits of each one were put together in the same book and the authors' names were left out, you would still know that they were written by different people. The same is true of biblical writers.

No matter who wrote down the words, the Israelite people came to believe that there was the only one God and that he ruled over all peoples. Monotheism, belief in one God, was one of the Israelites' most important contributions to world history. Both Christians and Muslims later adopted monotheism, too. Today Jews, Christians, and Muslims all worship one God, though they call him by different names.