

Jeremiah as the First Teacher of the Torah

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The first teacher of the Torah according to the rabbinic sages was Moses Our Teacher, or *moshe rabeynu*. This traditional view was well established when the Judaeen exiles returned from Babylon under the leadership of Ezra the Scribe a few decades after the time of Jeremiah. Once in Jerusalem, they institutionalized the teaching of the Torah, a sacred text they had preserved in exile, and that they attributed to Moses the Man of God, *moshe ish ha-elohim*.¹ To this day, Judaism is founded upon *talmud torah*, or the teaching of Torah, as first initiated by those Judaeen exiles. What has never been fully explored is why those exiles, who were given permission by King Cyrus of Persia to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple and, by implication, reinstate the sacrificial cult,² decided to put the text rather than the cult at the center of the Jewish faith, thus effecting the most profound change in the evolution of Judaism. Moreover, the model they established would in time result in two other text-based religions, namely, Christianity and Islam.

The attribution of the teaching of the Torah to one person who lived long before the Hebrews ever began to record their history was something the Judaeen exiles took on faith, as believing Jews do to this day. History, however, has yet to yield any evidence of the historical Moses.³ But history and archaeology, particularly in recent years, have yielded some concrete evidence regarding the historicity of key personalities in the book of Jeremiah.⁴ More importantly, recent biblical scholarship has identified the prophet Jeremiah and his scribe, Baruch ben Neriyah, as the possible authors/editors of the recorded version of the book of Deuteronomy as we know it (as well as the six following books of the Bible: Joshua,

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Judges, I and II Samuel, I and II Kings).⁵ The purpose of this study is to explore the possibility that Jeremiah played a pivotal role in the evolution of Judaism by initiating the process of transitioning the Jewish faith from Temple-cult-centered to Torah-centered Judaism, which would make him the first teacher of Torah, indeed, *yirmiyahu rabeynu*.

The first problem one faces in making such a claim is the historicity of Jeremiah himself, and the extent to which Jeremiah is indeed the author of the book bearing his name. We do have archaeological evidence of the existence of Jeremiah's scribe as well as some of the other personalities associated with the prophet.⁶ We also have the name Jeremiah in the Lachish Letters dating to his time,⁷ but not necessarily "Jeremiah the Prophet." Scholarly opinions on these issues have ranged widely. William L. Holladay has made a case for Jeremiah as the author of his own book, including both the poetry and the prose. Robert P. Carroll, on the other hand, "tends to discount what we may know or recover of the prophet himself."⁸ What remains clear, however, once the various opinions have been considered, is that (a) the time of Jeremiah and the people and events surrounding his life are well rooted in history; and (b) something of profound historical consequences took place during his lifetime, namely, the emergence of monotheistic, text-based Judaism; and there are more than a few indications in his book and in subsequent biblical texts that Jeremiah—a very distinctive voice whose biography is the most extensive of any prophet except for Moses—is indeed the key personality without whom neither Judaism nor monotheism as we know them may have come into being.

Until the time of Jeremiah, the Torah (either in its initial oral format or as text) was the domain of the priestly class. Torah study does not become a central tenet of Judaism until the return from the Babylonian exile. Jeremiah is the first person in biblical history to recognize the need to make the learning of Torah common to all Jews (in his words, to write the words of the covenant on people's hearts, rather than keep them in the Holy Ark). He is very critical of his fellow priests, whom he finds to be lax in teaching the Torah and, worse yet, in adhering to its laws. He refers to the priests as *tofsei hatorah*, a term that appears in the Bible only once. In examining various Jewish classical commentators' understanding of this term, as well as varying English translations, one begins to realize two things: first, the difficulty in understanding some of Jeremiah's key terms; and second, the linguistic complexity of his book, which may

well be one of the reasons why Jeremiah is one of the most misunderstood prophets in the Bible.

Renditions of the term *Tofsei hatorah* (Jer 2:8):

RaDaK: The sages who study the Torah

Rashi: The Sanhedrin

King James Bible: They that handle the law

JPS New Translation: The guardians of the Teaching

The Jerusalem Bible: Those who administer the law

The Anchor Bible: Those skilled in the law

The word *tofsei* seems to cause confusion. Literally, it means those who seize or grasp. It is used in the Bible mostly as a military term (hence the JPS may be the closest). In modern Hebrew it also means to understand, to “get it.” In any case, it is a strong term employed by Jeremiah, who seems to be saying, “They don’t get it.” They fail to understand what the Torah is all about, and they certainly fail to make the law a living reality.

While Jeremiah is best known to us as the prophet who rages against the idolatry and immorality of his people, and predicts the destruction and the exile, he is also the prophet who lays the groundwork for the future of his people by taking upon himself the preservation and the teaching of the Torah.

To understand why Jeremiah reaches the decision to preserve, record, and teach the Torah—most specifically the book of Deuteronomy—one might consider the historical background of his prophetic career.

The young Jeremiah lived during the reign of King Josiah, when a scroll of the Torah was found in the Temple, most likely an early version of the book of Deuteronomy. King Josiah was deeply affected by the contents of the scroll, and proceeded to launch a major religious reform. Having cleansed his realm of all manner of idolatry, he assembled all the people in Jerusalem and had the scroll read to the multitude, whereupon the covenant between God and Israel was renewed.⁹ What Jeremiah makes clear is that despite this great show of public religious reaffirmation, the precepts of the Torah did not make a lasting impression on the listeners. As soon as the ensuing public celebration of Passover was over, people returned to their pagan practices and their immoral ways. Jeremiah became completely disenchanted with the Temple priests and the court prophets (2:8). It was clear to him that they could not be trusted

with the task of preserving the Jewish faith and its laws. With the help of his scribe Baruch, he made it his life's mission to ensure the continuity of the sacred text by recording it and by using every opportunity he had to teach it directly to the people of Judah and Jerusalem.

A careful reading of the book of Jeremiah reveals a subtext that runs through the entire book. It consists of material either derived from or inspired by Deuteronomy as well as the book of Psalms. Yehezkel Kaufmann makes the following observation:

The work of only two prophets is linked organically, thematically, and stylistically to the books of the Torah: Jeremiah and Ezekiel...these two prophets are priests. They belong to the circle of the *tofsei hatorah*, the tribe that preserved the Torah literature, for whom the Torah is their "wisdom" which they use to educate their sons...The influence of the Torah is also seen in the prophesies of the latter prophets, but this phenomenon is revealed to us *in the most striking and wondrous way in the book of Jeremiah* [my emphasis].¹⁰

According to Kaufmann's counting, Jeremiah quotes Deuteronomy more than 200 times, which Kaufmann calls a "monumental phenomenon," the meaning of which has not yet been fully explored.¹¹ Seen against the historical background of the aftermath of the Josian reform, and in light of the prophet's other activities as we shall see below, one is compelled to conclude that the Deuteronomic quotes are not simply declaratory but rather didactic. Jeremiah sets in motion something that would determine the character of Judaism to this day. He teaches Torah, and his teaching, while rejected by his own generation, will be heeded by the Babylonian exiles who will return to Jerusalem and put the Torah rather than the Temple at the center of Judaism.

A remarkable example of how Jeremiah weaves the precepts of the Torah into his prophetic pronouncements is the way he interprets the Ten Commandments and applies them to the lives of his contemporaries. The Ten Commandments are known in Hebrew as the Ten Spoken Statements (*aseret hadibrot*). When the Torah is given at Mount Sinai, we are told that God speaks to the children of Israel and pronounces the Ten Commandments, beginning with "I am Adonai your God." Moses is then given two stone tablets upon which the Ten Commandments are engraved "by the finger of

God."¹² Thus, the Ten Commandments are the only part of the law spoken by God and heard by the entire people (the only time this ever happens), and the only one handed down in writing. The tablets upon which the commandments are written are called the Tablets of the Covenant, whereby the observance of these ten statements represents the compliance with the covenant.

Jeremiah weaves the Ten Commandments into his prophetic messages, starting with his early prophecies, when the young Jeremiah makes an impassioned plea about the oneness of God and the exodus from Egypt, echoing the first commandment, "I am Adonai your God who took you out of the land of Egypt."¹³ As for the second commandment, "You shall not have other gods besides Me," this will be his lifelong message, indeed, the centerpiece of his prophetic teachings. The third commandment, "You shall not swear falsely by the name of Adonai your God," is echoed in his admonitions against the priests and the prophets who pay lip service to their task of teaching the Torah to the people, and thereby compromise themselves.

The fourth commandment, "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy," appears in an episode in which God commands Jeremiah to speak to the people who enter Jerusalem through its various gates, and admonish them regarding carrying merchandise or produce into the city on the Sabbath, or doing any manner of work on that day:

Thus said Adonai: "Guard yourselves for your own sake against carrying burdens on the Sabbath day, and bringing these through the gates of Jerusalem. Nor shall you carry out burdens from your houses on the Sabbath day, as I commanded your ancestors... If you obey me, declares Adonai, and do not bring in burdens through the gates of this city on the Sabbath day, but hallow the Sabbath day and do not work on it, then through the gates of this city shall enter kings who will sit upon the throne of David..." (17:19ff.)

Here Jeremiah extols the observance of the Sabbath as central to the survival and welfare of Judaism, which indeed has been the case throughout post-biblical history (in the famous words of the modern Hebrew philosopher Ahad Ha'am, "More than the Jews kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath kept the Jews"). It is clear from this

episode that at the end of the monarchic period the observance of the Sabbath was lax, and the prohibition of working on the Sabbath was loosely interpreted by the farmers and the merchants, who brought their goods to Jerusalem from the countryside on the Sabbath. The priests and the official prophets of the day looked the other way, and it was left to Jeremiah to remind the people that the prohibition of work on the Sabbath is absolute.

It should be pointed out that the centrality of the Sabbath as the sign of the covenant between God and Israel becomes well established after the time of Jeremiah, when the exiles begin to return to Jerusalem from Babylonia. It seems that this episode in the book of Jeremiah plays a major part in this. The question, however, has been raised as to whether the episode is authentic, or was added later on. In the overall context of the book, there is no doubt that Jeremiah put great emphasis on the observance of the Sabbath, and most likely did show up at the gates of Jerusalem to chastise the people for violating the Sabbath, whether or not this story was later rewritten in the spirit of post-exilic religion.

The fifth commandment refers to honoring one's parents. Here the story of the Rechabites (35:1ff.) comes to mind. During Nebuchadnezzar's siege on Jerusalem, a tribe known as the Rechabites seeks shelter in the besieged city. Its members are known to lead an ascetic life. Jeremiah invites them to the Temple and offers them wine. They respond by saying that their ancestor had forbidden them to drink wine. Jeremiah upholds their filial loyalty as an example of obedience and respect for parents, contrasting it to the people's lack of respect for God's commandments.

This commandment is followed by the five "you shall not" commandments. The first four—murder, adultery, theft and lying—appear in a statement made by Jeremiah while he addresses people entering the newly refurbished Temple in Jerusalem, known as the Temple Sermon.¹⁴ It is clear to Jeremiah that the throng entering the renovated Temple includes more than a few people who are guilty of one or more of those transgressions, yet they all seem to feel that by coming to the Temple and making an offering all their sins are forgiven. Jeremiah mocks them by saying:

Do not trust in this false reassurance, saying,
Adonai's Temple, Adonai's Temple,
Adonai's Temple it is. (7:4)

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No, the Temple and the sacrificial offerings do not automatically grant forgiveness. One must first change one's ways and pursue righteousness. He goes on to say:

Will you steal, and commit murder,
and commit adultery,
and swear falsely,
and burn incense to the Baal,
and pursue other gods whom you know not?
And then you would come and stand before
this house that bears My name and you say,
We were saved so that we can commit all these abominations.
(7:9-10)

It is interesting to note that in this capsule recital of the Decalogue Jeremiah reverses the order of the commandments and puts those dealing with the sins against other people before that dealing with the sins against God. Was he implying that immorality was more serious than idolatry? Was immorality more prevalent at that time? Clearly, there is an important message in this passage.

The last commandment reads:

You shall not covet your neighbor's house;
You shall not covet your neighbor's wife,
Or his male or female slave,
Or his ox or his ass,
Or anything that is your neighbor's.
(Deut 5:18)

This commandment is reflected in the following statement regarding the young men of Jerusalem:

They are like well-fed horses
who neigh at their neighbor's wife. (5:8)

Other instances where Jeremiah applies Torah precepts to real life situations abound. He seems to subject everything to the Torah test, so to speak. If it deviates in the slightest way from the standards set by the Torah, he exposes it and decries it. A striking example is the story of the freeing of the Hebrew slaves during the Babylonian siege on Jerusalem (34:8ff.). The commandment of freeing a Hebrew slave in the seventh year was ignored among the rich Jerusalemites

during the siege. As the situation worsened, King Zedekiah needed more recruits, and commanded the freeing of the Hebrew slaves. During a reprieve in the siege, the owners forced their former slaves back into service. To Jeremiah, this is one of the most blatant violations of the divine law. He lets the people know that their actions have sealed their fate, and the imminent fall of Jerusalem and the ensuing exile have become inevitable.

Jeremiah also uses Torah precepts metaphorically. One of his favorite metaphors is divorce. The covenant between God and Israel is likened to a marriage (a metaphor he borrows from Hosea). When Israel betrays her “husband,” God hands his wayward wife a writ of divorce. As a good teacher, Jeremiah uses human situations to explain the relationship between the human and the divine.

Jeremiah is an innovative teacher. He introduces two new radical ideas in his teaching of Torah that his contemporaries must have thought blasphemous. The first concerns the Ark of the Covenant; the second, individual responsibility.

The Ark of the Covenant, which contained the two tablets of the law, disappears from the Temple during the fall of Jerusalem, and is never seen again. Jewish legend has it that on his way to exile in Egypt, Jeremiah took it with him and hid it at Mount Nebo.¹⁵ Jeremiah makes only one reference to the ark, which hardly confirms this story:

It shall come to pass, when you are multiplied
and increased in the land, in those days,
says Adonai, they shall say no more,
The Ark of the Covenant of God;
neither shall it come to mind;
neither shall they remember it;
neither shall they miss it;
neither shall it be made any more. (3:16)

A strong statement indeed! The prophet makes it abundantly clear that the most sacred object of his people is only that—an object. He sees it not as a vehicle to enhance faith and morality, but rather as a hindrance, a source of superstition (as the ark was believed to have magical powers), moral laxity (its presence in the Temple exempted the people from keeping the Ten Commandments it contained), in short, an object that needed to be replaced by a new way for achieving the goals of the covenant. That new way is the study of Torah.

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Jeremiah is also the first to introduce the concept of individual responsibility, a radical departure from the tribal mentality that dominated Judaeon society until his time:

In those days they shall say no more:
The fathers have eaten sour grapes,
and the children's teeth are set on edge.
But every one shall die for his own iniquity;
every man that eats the sour grapes,
his teeth shall be set on edge. (31:29–30)

Conceptually, this statement may be Jeremiah's most important contribution to Torah teaching. Better yet, here we have the seed from which Judaism not only as a communal religion but also as an individual faith will sprout, and, in turn, give rise to Christianity and Islam. Here Jeremiah is not only the transmitter of Torah, but also the innovator, the one who understands that in order for "the words of the Torah to be written on each person's heart," the Torah must evolve from a communal document to a personal one. It cannot remain the domain of the priestly class, since the priests have failed to make it a living reality. Jeremiah's spiritual successor, the prophet Ezekiel, will take this concept a step further and, rather than place it in a future time of redemption, will proclaim it to be valid in his own time, the time of the Babylonian exile.¹⁶ Curiously, this revolutionary change in the history of the Jewish faith, which in time will give birth to Pharisaic and later Rabbinic Judaism, was brought about by two priests, guardians of the status quo, albeit priests who became prophets.

The link between Jeremiah and Ezekiel is particularly significant for understanding Jeremiah's role as teacher of Torah. Ezekiel, a younger contemporary of Jeremiah, was a member of the upper classes of Jerusalem who were carried off into Babylonian exile a few years before the fall of Jerusalem as a result of the first revolt against Nebuchadnezzar. This exile deprived the Kingdom of Judah of its best leaders and its best minds. To Jeremiah, the future of Judaism rested with those exiles. He had little hope for those left behind in Judah, and began to concentrate his efforts on the exiles. He was now facing the task of teaching people with whom he had no direct contact, and had to resort to a method similar to what we now call "distance learning." Here Jeremiah began to rely heavily on his scribe, Baruch ben Neriyah. As Max Weber put it, Jeremiah became

a pamphleteer.¹⁷ Taking advantage of court emissaries and others who were sent to Babylon on either state or unofficial business, he kept sending letters and instructional texts in which he promoted his prophecies and his teachings (29:1ff.). Indeed, there is abundant evidence in the book of Jeremiah that the prophet was a prodigious writer who had a remarkable scribe who accompanied him for many years and wrote down his flow of dictation, which, as was mentioned before, may well have included the authoring/editing of Deuteronomy and the ensuing books from Joshua to Second Kings (known as the Deuteronomic history). No wonder Jeremiah's name became a household name among the exiles in Babylon, and when they begin to return to their land the first person they mention in conjunction with this event is Jeremiah.¹⁸

Jeremiah spent a lifetime trying to teach the Torah to his people. He was rebuffed to the very end, including in Egypt, where he spent his final years. He lived to see the end of the Davidic dynasty and of his people as a sovereign nation. But his message was not lost. The miracle of the return is in great part the result of his teaching. His lifelong fight against idolatry bore no fruit in his lifetime. But when the exiles returned to Jerusalem, idolatry among them had all but disappeared. It is hard to imagine Judaism would have survived without him, or, for that matter, that Judaism's daughter religions would have come into being.

Notes

1. Ezra 3:2.
2. *Ibid.*, 1:1.
3. In modern times, the historicity of Moses has preoccupied many great minds. To Freud, Moses was an Egyptian prince (see Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* [New York: Vintage, 1955]). Ahad Ha'am in his essay on Moses makes the point that whether or not Moses was an actual person, the impact of Moses on Jewish faith and history is such that Moses in effect "exists in every generation." This view, compelling as it is, does not contribute to the quest for historicity. See Ahad Ha'am, "Moshe," in *Al parashat d'rachim* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1947).
4. Yair Hoffman, *Mikra Leyisra'el, Jeremiah, A Commentary* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved Publishers, 2001), p. 868.
5. Richard E. Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (San Francisco: Harper-San Francisco, 1989), p. 147.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 148.
7. The Lachish Letters were found in 1935 and 1938 by the British archeologist J. L. Starkey in the ruins of the coastal town of Lachish, south-

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west of Jerusalem. They consist of sixteen ostraca, or inscribed potsherds. The text on the ostraca represents communiqués between King Zedekiah's garrison in Lachish and a small outpost on the western border of Judah. It is written in the Hebrew script of the period and in the style of the book of Jeremiah, and mentions the name Jeremiah as well as Coniah (Zedekiah's other name) and other names of the period. Lachish is mentioned in the book of Jeremiah (34:7) as one of the last outposts to hold out against the Babylonians. The Lachish Letters reinforce the historical validity of the book of Jeremiah as an accurate record of the last days of the kingdom of Judah.

8. Walter Brueggemann, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 4.
9. II Kgs 22:8–23:3.
10. Yehezkel Kaufmann, *Toldot ha'emuna ha'yisreelit* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1967), Volume 3, Book 2, pp. 432–33.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 433.
12. Exod 31:19.
13. Deut 5:6.
14. Sheldon Blank, *Jeremiah, Man and Prophet* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College 1961), pp. 188–89.
15. II Maccabees 2:4–10.
16. Ezek 18:1–4.
17. Max Weber, *Ancient Israel* (New York: The Free Press, 1952), p. 272.
18. Ezra 1:1.