

The Good News

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We are All Monotheists

Editor: The following article is adapted from a sermon on the Book of Deuteronomy delivered at St. Mary's on January 8 by Rabbi Ronald Weiss:

Deuteronomy is really quite a remarkable book. The legend that surrounds the book is that it was the final address of Moses to his people as they advanced up the east side of the Jordan River, prior to crossing over the river and conquering much of what we know as the Land of Israel. Moses died on the east side of the Jordan and was never permitted to enter the Promised Land. For 80 years he had led the Jewish people and in Jewish tradition he was known as Moshe Rabbenu, or Moses, our teacher. At the end of the Book of Deuteronomy, it says that Moses died at 120 years of age, and there never again arose a prophet in Israel like unto Moses, who spoke with God face to face.

I can tell you that to this very day, there is no one in Jewish history like unto Moses, our teacher *par excellence*.

At any rate Moses was born about the year 1391 B.C.E. and if he lived 120 years, then he died about the year 1271 B.C.E. But according to the legend of this book, the Book of Deuteronomy, it was not discovered until the year 621, or 650 years after Moses died. Most scholars are fairly certain that Moses did not write much of the book, and who did write it remains a mystery. The legend states that King Josiah, king of Judah, long after the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians, had the book brought to him from the Jerusalem temple, where it was found during some needed repairs; and King Josiah saw that the book commanded practices that were not taking place in the temple.

For example, throughout Judah there were many places of worship—beautiful trees, hilltops, sacred places—but Deuteronomy commanded that only in Jerusalem was God to be worshipped. Throughout the country there were priests, but Deuteronomy commanded that only if these priests came to Jerusalem, to the temple there (which by the way, didn't exist in the days of Moses) were they to be accorded the role and title of priests. Deuteronomy was unremittingly monotheistic, while God was considered only one of many gods in Judah. Deuteronomy is passionately ethical, while ethics were as lax in the days of Josiah as they are today.

So most scholars today assume that Josiah had in mind effecting a number of substantial changes in Jewish practice and used the Book of Deuteronomy as his excuse for doing so; and since there is no more prominent figure in Judaism than Moses, the book was posthumously ascribed to Moses much as the Book of Job was ascribed to a character named Job. Job, by the way, is not only one of the most profound books of the Bible; Job is also not thought to be Jewish, and so not unusually, one of the great heroes of the Hebrew Bible is not Jewish. There are a number of such people: Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, Balaam, the greatest of the non-Jewish prophets, spoken of in the Book of Numbers, and Cyrus, the king of Persia, who permitted the Jews who were in Babylonian exile, to return to their homeland.

So much about the book in general. I want to focus with you on a passage, early in the book, where Moses is recounting for the people the experience of Mt. Sinai or as it is referred to in this book, Horeb. It was not one of the more courageous moments in the life of Jewish people. As Moses recalls it, God descended to the mountain (Continued on page 2)

Please plan to attend the Annual Meeting of St. Mary's at 11:00 a.m. this Sunday in the parish hall. Key finance and governance issues will be discussed following a brunch hosted by the Vestry. All are invited.

top in a pillar of fire. The people, frightened of what was happening, stayed off of the mountain. What they experienced, Moses reminds them from the midst of the fire, was the voice of God; they heard the voice addressing them, but they saw no representation of God. Moses, in Deuteronomy, is quite emphatic that the people saw nothing that would indicate what God looked like; they only heard a voice addressing them. You know that one of the Ten Commandments commands that no representation of God be made by Jews, and that is one of the reasons why church art through the centuries is so much richer and advanced than Jewish art. In fact there is a rather extensive discussion in Judaism, extending over many centuries, about whether or not a Jew is permitted to create a representation of the human form. There are those who argue that only does the prohibition apply if the intention is to represent God, but not if the intention is to depict a human being. But there remains a controversy to this day.

One of the great Jewish teachers of the 19th century, a German named Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, suggested in his commentary to the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, that a result of this emphasis on *not seeing any form of God*, which is an emphasis of Deuteronomy, is that of an enhanced spirituality. The text reads: "Take good care that you guard your souls, for you saw no likeness at all on that day in Horeb, out of the midst of the fire." Hirsch writes: "Do not let yourselves be withdrawn by anything from the guiding and deciding influence of your true spiritual self."

In other words, the Jewish people have understood, both from personal experience and from teaching, that God does not ever partake of any form; for God is pure spirit. And even the statement in the Book of Genesis, that human beings are made *betzelem elohim*, in the image of God, does not mean that people look like God, or that God looks like people, but rather that people are capable of aspiring to God-like qualities, or that God hopes that people will choose to become better, more God-like, than we presently are.

When I think about Christianity, which I fully realize is in many ways different from Judaism, I think that Jesus, is intended only as God; that Jesus is God. When a Christian prays in the name of Jesus, I understand that that Christian is addressing God, the only God that is, and the only one to whom any of us can address prayer. So if I ask myself, can a Trinitarian be a monotheist? The answer is very clear to me; Christians address the same God that I attempt to, and Christians are certainly monotheists.

As all of us seek to become better than we are, we are searching ourselves for God; the God who is without form or substance, the God who stands as the ideal toward which we aspire. May this New Year be for us and for those who are dear to us, a year of great aspirations, of frequent aspirations, a year wherein we may look back with pride on what we have achieved.

Volunteerism

St. Mary's is looking for volunteers to serve as ushers and greeters for the 10:00 a.m. service. This is a great way to get to know other parishioners and to provide a much needed contribution. We want the hand of St. Mary's to always be extended to newcomers, guests and, of course, our regular members. In the same vein, we continue to seek hosts for our Coffee Hour. Several dates remain open for the spring semester. If you are interested, please contact Tim Green at TDMDGreen@verizon.net or 781-237-9973.

The "Ask-It" Basket

Q: What are the "Suffrages"?

A: They are short, intercessory (offered for the benefit of others) prayers, usually in a series. They appear in the Daily Offices, offices being acts of worship in prescribed form.

Editor: Tim Green