

Chapter 1

News from Israel

September, 622 BC – the 18th year of King Josiah

I was twenty-one years old when the letter arrived. It was the most exciting letter I ever received. Written in my father's untidy scrawl, it had obviously been sent in the joy of discovery and his happiness showed in every word.

The Book of the Law of God had been found!

Perhaps the scroll had been hidden in the temple by a devoted priest during the dark and dangerous days of King Manasseh, or maybe it had rested unseen from earlier times. Whatever secrecy may have veiled its original concealment, its discovery will become a thing of legend that can never be forgotten.

In fact, it could be the most important thing ever found in Israel – and my father himself found it. Here is how it happened.

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Having pursued the worship of God tirelessly from the age of sixteen, Josiah has finally turned his attention to the temple of Yahweh. You see, in response to Josiah's dedication to Yahweh, more and more people had begun to make offerings and donations for the temple and for the Levites, and at some stage, the idea of refurbishing the temple had taken hold of the nation. The worn and damaged stones were to be replaced, the tarnished and corroded metalwork attended to and the rotting timbers renewed. Bags of money and other offerings were being left in pots and cups in many places around the temple. Josiah had directed that the gatekeepers should collect all the money and valuable gifts together and deliver them to his administrators for safekeeping until the work could be organised, but nobody knew quite what to do. Such an overflowing generosity for the work of the temple had not been seen in the lifetime of any of the priests or Levites. Everyone agreed that the money should be collected in a more organised way, but how?

Some of the old priests had heard stories of the events in the time of King Joash, more than 200 years before, when the temple was last refurbished in any significant way. At that time, a hole had been bored in the top of a wooden chest so that the offerings of worshippers could be easily dropped in¹. As the priests described the wooden chest, my father suddenly remembered seeing such a chest in one of the crowded storerooms of the temple many years before, during a short-lived attempt to free up some extra space in the temple. Storerooms always fill up, and the side rooms of the temple were no exception.

My father took a torch and made his way with some Levites to the storeroom in which he had seen the chest.

¹ 2 Kings 12:9-15

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Opening the heavy wooden door, they could see, in the flickering light of the torch, items stacked from floor to ceiling. Packed tightly together, they barely left room to open the door. Obviously, there had initially been narrow spaces between ordered stacks, but over time these too had filled up. It took quite a while to find the chest, hidden as it was several cubits away from the door against the left wall. Clearly, it was very strong, since it had a pile more than four cubits² high of unwanted (but much too useful to throw out!) articles sitting on top of it. During the process of discovery, the storeroom disgorged a steady stream of items, and by the time the chest had been safely retrieved, the corridor outside was littered with thousands of artefacts, most of which would not have been actually used in worship for more than a century.

Finally, the chest was dragged from the room and the process of re-stacking all of the displaced articles began.

My father, however, began to examine his newly discovered prize. On the top, the chest had a board across the back, and the lid had projections which hooked under this board so that it could not be removed if a single fastener was in place at the front of the chest. This fastener held down the front of the lid, and the projections hooked under the board at the rear so that less honest visitors could not easily help themselves to the contents of the chest. A slot in the lid had allowed the generous to contribute as they desired, and, no doubt, a satisfying jingle rewarded the contributors. Once the fastener was removed, the lid could easily be lifted and completely removed to give easy access to the contents of the chest.

² 2 metres/6 feet

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This ancient chest was just what was needed for collecting the money given by worshippers in the temple, so my father opened the chest and removed the lid. The chest was empty, except for a cloth lying at the bottom. For some reason, he ran his hand under the top board at the back of the chest, the board which normally held the lid in place, and felt something unexpected. It seemed to be a large piece of wood with a square cross-section attached to the underside of the top board. Running his fingers from one end to the other, however, he found that there was a small gap between the square piece of wood and the side of the chest at one end. Not only that, but when he put his finger into the gap, he could feel a hole inside that square section – a hole to which he could feel no end.

His interest had been aroused, so he picked up one of the scattered items on the floor – it was a metal lamp-stand – and started to gently tap the puzzling piece of wood. Sure enough, it sounded slightly hollow. And sometimes when he tapped it, the fascinating lump of wood seemed almost to move a little.

By this time, the flicker of interest had become a fire of fascination for my father, and he had the chest carried outside so that he could examine it more carefully in the daylight.

Once outside, he continued his quest for understanding and found that if he grasped the hollow-seeming piece of wood and tried to wobble it, he could indeed move it very slightly, but none of his efforts seemed to achieve any greater freedom of movement. He tried tapping with the candlestick at the same time as trying to move the piece of wood backwards and forwards. Suddenly, there was a gentle thud as a small piece of wood dropped to the bottom of the chest, and the intriguing section of timber was able to move

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significantly. It still could not be removed, but it would move backwards and forwards, and even a little sideways at times.

It took my father a few minutes of methodical testing before suddenly the entire piece of wood came off in his hand and he felt its full weight, which was surprisingly heavy. Easing it out of the chest, he immediately looked at the open end and saw a cloth-wrapped object filling a circular hole in the wood. Tipping the object into his hand, he put down the heavy square section and began to unwrap the cloth. It was a linen cloth which seemed very old and a little stiff and dry, so my father unwrapped it very slowly and gently until the last layer came away, leaving a large scroll resting in his hand.

The skin of the scroll was darkened on the outside and had a look of great age, and the leather thong which held it closed also showed evidence of great age and frequent use at some time in the past. Clearly, however, it was many years since the thong had last been untied, and now it resisted any attempts to untie it. Finally, my father managed to loosen it enough to slide it gingerly off the end of the scroll, but these effects of age were a warning to be very careful with the scroll itself. Eagerly, but ever so gently, my father started to unroll the outer layers. By this time, there were a few Levites and priests watching, and the excitement was almost tangible as the treasure was uncovered. The first words were revealed, written in an old-fashioned script which my father read out, slowly and carefully to the listeners:

“These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel
beyond the Jordan in the wilderness,
in the Arabah opposite Suph,
between Paran and Tophel, Laban,
Hazereth, and Dizahab.
It is eleven days' journey from Horeb

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by the way of Mount Seir to Kadesh-barnea.
In the fortieth year,
on the first day of the eleventh month,
Moses spoke to the people of Israel according to all
that the Lord had given him
in commandment to them.”³

The words of Moses! Was this genuine? None of his audience had heard these words before, yet they were all thoroughly familiar with the words in the scrolls of scripture which were available to us. So what were these words? My father continued to read, despite the difficult script, going on with the story of Israel’s departure from Sinai, the travel through the wilderness to the promised land and Israel’s refusal to enter at the first opportunity. God’s punishment and the people’s response held my father’s audience spellbound. This detail and the quick summary of the wilderness wanderings were all new to them. We now know of all these historical details from this record in the Book of the Law and some other discoveries made since,, but only vague outlines had been known for many years before this wonderful discovery. Manasseh had torn the heart out of his nation’s history. He had closed the eyes and ears of the people and then cut off the warning voice of God. What remained of the relationship? Only a distant memory of godliness that had lost its focus; a twisted presentation of God that lacked any edge. No wonder God was angry with us.

King Joash’s wooden chest was taken out and placed at the entrance to the temple, and generous worshippers were encouraged to drop their donations into it. All of the earlier donations were in the possession of the gatekeepers of the temple, and Josiah sent some leading

³ Deuteronomy 1:1-3

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men to collect the money and count it with my father so that the refurbishment could begin straight away.

So it was that Shaphan and Maaseiah met with my father, the gatekeepers and other Levites to get the project going. Some of these men were organisers and administrators, while others were artisans who were eager to start work on the temple as soon as possible. The collected money was all counted, and experienced Levites were given the duty of estimating times and costs for the project. Overseers were appointed, and some of the artisans were given authority to begin work that very day – with money to buy urgently needed materials. Money was also given to the overseers who would find more craftsmen and others to fetch and carry. These men all had a mind to work and also felt the pressure of the king's expectations.

After the meeting, my father showed Shaphan the newly discovered scroll. Together they read it over, and to Shaphan's great credit, he was eager to take the scroll to King Josiah. What a change this was from the officious and over-cautious attitude that had led him, in the thirteenth year of King Josiah, to try to hide from King Josiah God's message through me – which had got him into trouble with his king⁴.

Shaphan was a skilled scribe and adept at reading the old-fashioned script, so he took it to Josiah himself the next morning and read it to him, with some of his advisors listening also. This is easy to say, and you may not realise the magnitude of the job Shaphan had taken on or the commitment he expected from Josiah his king. Reading this book out loud takes about two and a half hours, once you are used to the different script and the various abbreviations that were used so long ago. If only

⁴ See Volume 1 – Early Days, Chapter 13

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I could have been there to hear it and to see Josiah's response! Not only did Josiah listen to the entire scroll, but his response showed a humility not seen in any of the previous kings of Judah or Israel. Despite being accustomed to kingship and to an almost fawning adoration from all around him throughout his life, Josiah's response to hearing God's law directly was one of guilty horror. As he heard God's words of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience, he stood, tore his sumptuous robe and then sat down, not on his throne, but on the steps in front of Shaphan as he continued to read the words of Yahweh promising desolation for the nation.

After listening through to the very end of the Book of the Law, Josiah rose.

"Can there be any doubt that this is the true word of Yahweh?" he asked Shaphan.

"I don't think so, my lord," replied Shaphan. "It sounds genuine, and it looks as if it had been hidden for many years. Hilkiyah is also convinced that it is genuine."

Josiah sat down again on his throne, put his head in his hands and closed his eyes for a time. He was plainly deeply shaken by the words he had heard. There was a long silence in the throne room. Everyone there realised the importance of the message they had just heard. And everyone realised that Josiah must now provide leadership. He alone must lead his kingdom as a shepherd. But he was a shepherd for whom the rules had suddenly changed. He had just heard right and wrong defined in ways that he had never heard before, and very little of the right had been seen in the nation for almost a hundred years. Curses had been read in his ears which promised harsh punishments for the very behaviour he

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saw around him every day. What could he do? Where should he start? How would God want him to respond?

As a king, Josiah was humble, but decisive. He ordered that Hilkiah the High Priest be brought before him, along with all of his most trusted advisors, including Ahikam, Achbor and Asaiah. Once all were present and had heard a short explanation of the amazing discovery, he asked for parts of the scroll to be read again: details of God as the one and only God; special instructions for kings; Israel's annual feasts; and then particularly the short section of blessings for obedience, and the lengthier list of curses for disobedience.

“What do you think, Hilkiah?” Josiah asked, when these passages had been read again. “What should we do? What should I do as king?”

If only I could have been there for that monumental moment. It was vital for the kingdom and vital for my father as well. But I was in Rabbah of the Ammonites and all I could do was to read my father's letter and rejoice at the brief news it contained.



God's work in Ammon had already kept me busy for two months, and I had previously expected to spend another month in the areas around Rabbah before heading south into Moab. Instead, just two days later, I was on my way home to Anathoth, eager to arrive as soon as possible. God had given me permission to return, and I would be able to spend some months there, during which time I might also have an opportunity to help with the newly accelerated reforms of Josiah.

Travelling west and a little south in the cool of early morning, I climbed to the top of the watershed before

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beginning the long descent toward the Jordan River. The hazy outlines of the mountains around Jerusalem stood tall above the deep rift of the Jordan valley. I had two days of stiff walking before me, but anticipation eased the strain and the road passed quickly under my feet.

In the afternoon of the following day I was walking up the road out of the Jordan valley from Jericho, climbing eagerly towards the hill country north of Jerusalem. As the steepness of the climb eased, I took the path to Anathoth while the heat of the afternoon cooled towards sunset. Thoughts of the newly-found Book of the Law had filled my head since crossing the Jordan River early that morning. What was this “Book of the Law” and where did it come from? If it was genuine, and everything I had heard from my father suggested that it was, what might now be achieved for reform in Judah?

Thoughts of my mother’s food also claimed my attention. Despite my arrival being completely unexpected, I hoped that there would be enough of that special home-cooked food to fill a stomach used to, but not completely satisfied by, the varied food of other nations. My mother’s cooking was still my favourite fare, and none of the special foreign dishes tasted half as good. My mouth was watering as I entered Anathoth and made my way along the familiar path to our home.

My welcome was all I could have hoped for. Recognising my call of “Shalom” as I approached the door, my mother hurried out and greeted me with a happy “Shalom,” and a welcoming kiss.

My father followed more slowly, but also greeted me with a kiss. “The Lord be with you, Jeremiah,” he said.

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“The Lord bless you,” I answered.

“Well, come in, my son,” he responded, putting his arm around my shoulders. “We have much to talk about.” His voice and his smile seemed more eager and purposeful than I remembered, and my heart leapt with hope. Reformation really was possible, and maybe the Book of the Law was the trigger God had provided.

We went inside together; the familiar smell of our house and the enticing aroma of the evening meal in the last stages of preparation filled my nostrils. It was good to be home.