



Römer, Thomas

The So-Called Deuteronomistic History: A Sociological, Historical and Literary Introduction

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This is a fresh approach to a problem hotly debated but, in fact, not very old. The “Deuteronomistic style” of various passages in Joshua through Kings has been observed since the beginnings of critical biblical scholarship, and partially even before (b. Baba Batra 15a: “Jeremiah wrote his book and Kings”; cf. p. 14). As early as 1843, the great Heinrich Ewald postulated two “Deuteronomistic redactions” of Judges through Kings, one still preexilic and the other exilic (18). His greater pupil, Julius Wellhausen, found a range of Deuteronomistic redactors (20). Although Martin Noth tried to turn the various editors into one single author, to whom he attributed the basic narrative from the beginning of Deuteronomy to the end of Kings, the subsequent discussion reverted to his predecessors. Ewald’s case was reopened by F. M. Cross, whereas Göttingen remained the home of some kind of Wellhausianism. In the past two decades, the voices have become more numerous that deny the usefulness of the whole concept of a “Deuteronomistic History,” regardless of whether it is conceived as an auctorial or redactional entity. To these three positions Römer now adds his fourth.

Chapter 1, “The Content of the So-called Deuteronomistic History (Deuteronomy–2 Kings)” (3–11), summarizes the biblical books in question. Teachers of ancient Near

Eastern history or religious studies will be able to use this volume as a textbook for students less acquainted with the biblical tradition.

With chapter 2, “What Does ‘Deuteronomistic History’ Mean? A Survey of Past Research” (13–43), Römer deserves the attention of teachers and researchers alike and offers much more than the chapter’s title promises. I am especially pleased to learn that, as early as 1574, Andreas Masius held Ezra responsible for the final version of the Former Prophets (15). But these precursors to modern biblical scholarship cannot yet be credited with the creation of the “Deuteronomistic school”; this was first discovered by de Wette in 1805 (16–17; the credit would go to Spinoza’s *Tractatus*, but contra p. 15 I am not convinced that Spinoza refers by the phrase “words and laws of Moses” to Deuteronomy alone). Römer offers a nice personal background for Noth’s single exilic editor-author: “One may wonder whether Noth’s Deuteronomist does not reflect, at least to some extent, Noth’s own social situation [in 1942/43]: a solitary intellectual facing the possible end of his nation’s history” (25). Then come the critics and the modifiers (Eissfeldt, Cross, and Smend), the “Neo-Nothians” McKenzie and Van Seters, and, finally, those who prefer to study the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings individually, without the assumption of collections other than Torah and Prophets. In conclusion, Römer finds valuable points made by all positions reviewed and sets out to conceive a compromise.

Chapter 3, “The Deuteronomistic History from the Assyrian to the Persian Period” (45–65) broadens the chronological issue considerably beyond “Josianic versus exilic” and takes into account that Esarhaddon was the first Deuteronomist, both in terms of his theology and his writing style. This name is missing in the chapters’ first section (but cf. 76–77), “Who Were the ‘Deuteronomists?’” but the leading question is convincingly answered by “A group of scribes at Jerusalem.” The crucial text for the Deuteronomistic problem is addressed in the next section, “The Foundation Myth of the Deuteronomistic School in 2 Kgs 22–23: Book-Finding and Cultic Reform.” According to Römer, there are three layers in this report: an Assyrian, or Josianic, kernel covering the removal of Assyrian (I would prefer “astral”) cult symbols and cultic centralization at Jerusalem; an exilic addition, including the renovation of the temple, the consultation of the prophetess, and the divine judgment; and, finally, the book discovery, added in the Persian period. Here Römer introduces the three stages in which he sees DtrH unfold and their dating. These are further elaborated in the third section, “The Three Different Viewpoints about Centralization in Deut 12 as an Example of the Threefold Edition of the Deuteronomistic History.” Only 12:13–18 is regarded as Josianic; 12:8–12 is an exilic reinterpretation, 12:2–7 a polemic against “illegitimate” cults from the Persian period. (Note, however, that

the Assyrian form of “Gilead” was *Gal’ad[d]a*, which was not a province except in one of A. Alt’s flights of imagination.¹)

Chapter 4, “Deuteronomistic Editing in the Assyrian Period and Royal Propaganda” (67–106), establishes the beginnings of DtrH firmly under Josiah, but as a “Deuteronomistic library” rather than “history.” The library comprised the first editions of Deuteronomy (6–28*), Joshua (5–12*), not Judges (though the core of the book did exist by the end of the seventh century [91]), Samuel (1 Sam 16–2 Sam 5*), and Kings (1 Kgs 3–2 Kgs 23*).

Chapter 5, “The Constitution of the Deuteronomistic History in the Neo-Babylonian Period” (107–64) clearly is the chapter where Römer puts most of its heart (and of his ink). According to him, it was during the “exile” that the Josianic Deuteronomistic library became a “history.” Following a sociological model of “crisis literature” and comparing Herodotus, Thucydides, and their time, he sees descendants of Josiah’s scribes among the dispossessed Judean elite in Babylon writing history in order to come to terms with their fate. They composed the speeches that structure the whole work (Deut 1–30*; Josh 1:1–9*; 23*; Judg 2:6–3:6*; 1 Sam 12*; 1 Kgs 8*; 2 Kgs 17*). Deuteronomy becomes “the reader’s guide to history” (123), the period of the judges was invented, and Joshua, Samuel, and Kings was considerably enlarged. Their history was about a past with no future and might even have been supported by the Babylonians (164). Contrary to page 111, there is considerable doubt that “597 and 587/586 produced a major crisis for the collective Judean identity,” if this collective identity is meant to cover also the Benjaminites, that is, the people who stayed in the land.² Nor were the Judeans the only ancient Near Eastern culture that suffered a religious crisis due to the destruction of their (main) sanctuary, and there were many established ways and means to deal with such a situation.³

Chapter 6 “Editing the Deuteronomistic History during the Persian Period” (165–83) concludes the book (indices follow). The returnees brought the “exilic edition” with them and reworked it to fit the requirements of restoration. They identified with the “conquest generation” in Deuteronomy and Joshua, regarding the indigenous, now predominantly Benjaminite, population as “inhabitants of the land” (יושבי הארץ), rather than *‘am ha-aretz*, as on 170 with n. 11). The themes of the Persian redaction were “segregational revision,” monotheism instead of monolatry, *golah* and diaspora. The “Birth of the Torah,” which swallowed Deuteronomy, was the “Death of the Deuteronomistic History”

1. See N. Na’aman, “Rezin of Damascus and the Land of Gilead,” *ZDPV* 111 (1995): 105–17.

2. See Ph. Guillaume, “Jerusalem 586 B C: Katastrophal?” *Biblische Notizen* 110 (2001): 31–32.

3. See A. Berlejung, “Notlösungen: Altorientalische Nachrichten über den Tempelkult in Nachkriegszeiten,” in *Kein Land für sich allein: Studien zum Kulturkontakt in Kanaan, Israel/Palästina und Ebir-nâri für Manfred Weippert zum 65 Geburtstag* (ed. U. Hübner and E. A. Knauf; OBO 186; 2002), 195–229.

(178), and Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, now individual books, became part of the “Prophets” by further redactions.

This is an impressive new synthesis; it also contains an abundance of fresh ideas for the exegesis of numerous chapters and verses and deserves the attention of everyone doing research on Deuteronomy, Kings, or anything in between. But am I ready to leave the camp of the anti-Deuteronomists? Not yet. In the case of Joshua and Kings, agreements as well as disagreements will be documented in my commentaries (for Zürcher Bibel-Kommentar [2008] and Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament [in preparation]). Here I will only summarize two major points already made.

I see no evidence for cult centralization in the seventh century. The Bethel temple was well and alive before Josiah and after Josiah, for the whole period of Neo-Babylonian rule, and it seems now that the Samaritans (not yet Samaritans) erected their temple on the Garizim as soon as the Deuteronomistic Jerusalemites put an end to the cult of Bethel in the first half of the fifth century.⁴ “The place that Yahweh will choose in one of your tribes” (57) is only one of two possible translations of *ה[ה]מקום אשר יבחר יהוה באחד שבתיך* (Deut 12:14); the other is “A place, provided that YHWH chose it, in any of your tribes.” It is this second interpretation that enabled the Samaritans to accept the Torah after 400 B.C.E., the Garizim temple already standing.⁵ There is a seventh-century core in Deut 12, but it concerns cult legitimation rather than cult centralization.

My main objection concerns the model of “crisis literature” in the sixth century. There were intellectuals, capitalists, a class and leisure class society at Athens in the fifth century; in sixth-century Judaism, whether in the Land or in Babylon, I cannot see any of this. There were publishers, a book market, private schools and even a private university (Plato’s academy) in Athens from the fourth century onward, but not in Jerusalem (or Babylon). The scribes were not intellectuals; the production of books in ancient Israel (as in the ancient Near East) was monopolized by the “school” that, after the disappearance of the “palace” from Judean society in 586-582, survived at the temple(s). Sixth-century redactional activity can be observed mostly in those books that were most probably transmitted at Bethel (the Abraham/Jacob-cycle, Judges,⁶ Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the “Four

4. See E. A. Knauf, “Bethel: The Israelite Impact on Judean Language and Literature,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period* (ed. O. Lipschits and M. Oeming; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 291–349.

5. See E. A. Knauf, “The Glorious Days of Manasseh,” in *Good Kings and Bad Kings* (ed. L. Grabbe; Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 393 = European Seminar in Historical Methodology 5; London: T&T Clark, 2005), 164–88, esp. 184–88

6. See Ph. Guillaume, *Waiting for Josiah: The Judges* (JSOTSup 385; 2004), 144–97.

Prophets” Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Zephaniah). If there was literary activity among the exiles, then the “town of Judah” in Babylon must have had a temple, too (which is very likely indeed), to which one might attribute Ezekiel’s polemic against the cult of Bethel (Ezek 33:24–25) or even the priestly concept of the tent of meeting as model for any legitimate Judean temple, and especially a temple abroad. I can even imagine that the Deuteronomistic frame in Kings was an exilic, Babylonian addition to the House of David Story (by that time, 1 Sam 8–2 Kgs 10*, minus Elijah/Elisha and the frame).⁷ Because the Jerusalem archives had gone to Mizpah (or Bethel), they reconstructed the story of their previous kings from memory; they disposed of what they had memorized from the Annals of the Kings of Israel and Judah but no longer had these annals. This exilic “oral phase” in the transmission of Kings matches the parastrophic arrangement of the frame—even more obvious when there was not much, if anything, to be framed; and, perhaps, the curious coincidence of exactly the same number of Israelite and Judean kings between Solomon and the end of each state. Mnemotechnics might have helped to decide which pretenders were counted as kings and who was not. A minimal amount of schooling and, hence, book production in the *golah* is plausible, but nothing more than minimal. The programs for reconstruction, that is, the bulk of “exilic” controversial literature, began to be produced when return and reconstruction became an option again, after 525 B.C.E. In short, my redactional history of Joshua and Kings would have a very slim chapter for the sixth century and a huge one for the fifth and fourth centuries.

These brief remarks are, of course, only the beginning of a much more detailed discussion that I hope to have with this book and its author over the coming years. For the time being, I might say: whether one believe in the Deuteronomistic History or not, this is the best book one can read about it.

7. See E. A. Knauf, The Queens’ Story: Bathsheba, Maacah and Athaliah and the ‘Historia’ of Early Kings: *lectio difficilior* 2/2002 (www.lectio.unibe.ch).