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PART TWO

THE DEUTERONOMISTIC HISTORY



Previous page: King Jehu prostrates himself before Shalmaneser III of Assyria. Panel from the Black Obelisk, now in the British Museum, London.

Introduction

The books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings (traditionally known as the Former Prophets) are known in modern scholarship as the Deuteronomistic History.

The view that the book of Deuteronomy once constituted a literary unit with the historical books was argued by Martin Noth in 1943 and has been generally accepted since then, although some scholars have questioned it in recent years. These books contain diverse kinds of material, and evidently drew on older sources and traditions. Other scholars before Noth had noticed the influence of Deuteronomy. Kings frequently condemn northern Israel for continuing “the sin of Jeroboam,” its first king, who erected places of worship at Bethel and Dan. This criticism clearly presupposes Josiah’s prohibition of sacrificial worship outside of Jerusalem. Noth, however, argued that similar language and ideology runs through all these books. The editor is called Deuteronomistic because history is judged in the light of Deuteronomic theology.

Key points in this history are marked by speeches. A speech by Joshua in Joshua 1 marks the beginning of the conquest, and another in Joshua 23 marks its conclusion. Samuel’s speech in 1 Samuel 12 marks the transition to the time of the monarchy. Solomon’s prayer in 1 Kings 8 at the consecration of the temple also marks an important point in the history. Other Deuteronomistic passages take the form of narrative summaries: Joshua 12; Judg 2:11–22; 2 Kgs 17:7–18, 20–23. The promise to David in 2 Samuel 7 also has structural importance, and is often recalled in 1–2 Kings.

Noth argued that the entire Deuteronomistic History was composed by one editor, during the Babylonian exile. The purpose of the work would then be to explain the disaster that befell Israel and Judah as divine punishment for their failure (and especially the failure of the kings) to keep the covenant. But this is not the only theme in the history. There is also a positive view of the kingship that is reflected in the promise to David in 2 Samuel 7 and in the account of Josiah’s reform. Various alternatives to Noth’s single editor have been proposed. The most influential of these is the view of F. M. Cross that there were two editions of the history, the first in the reign of Josiah, with a positive view of the monarchy, and the second in the Babylonian exile, after the release of King Jehoiachin from prison in 562 B.C.E., the last event reported in 2 Kings. The second edition was colored by the destruction of Jerusalem, and placed greater emphasis on the failure of the monarchy. Other scholars have proposed more complex theories. A theory of three editions, one with an historical focus, one prophetic, and

one nomistic (emphasizing law), has enjoyed wide support in German scholarship. Some scholars argue that there was a pre-Josianic edition of the history that culminated in the reign of Hezekiah.

Three considerations should be borne in mind in reading these books. First, this history was put together and edited no earlier than the late seventh century B.C.E., several hundred years after the supposed time of the conquest and the judges. The final edition is no earlier than the Babylonian exile, possibly later.

Second, these books have a clear ideological character. They are heavily influenced by Deuteronomic theology, seeing a pattern of reward and punishment in history. They are written from a Judean perspective, with a strong belief in the divine election of Jerusalem and the Davidic line, and are unsympathetic to the kings of northern Israel.

Third, the history contains some diversity of editorial perspective. Some passages have a negative view of the monarchy, others are more positive. This diversity is most easily explained by supposing that there were different editions of the book. Moreover, each of the books has its own character, which is shaped by the underlying traditions on which it draws.

FOR FURTHER READING

Deuteronomistic History

Antony F. Campbell and Mark A. O'Brien, *Unfolding the Deuteronomistic History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

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Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History* (JSOTSup 15; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991).

R. F. Person, *The Deuteronomistic History and the Book of Chronicles: Scribal Works in an Oral World* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010).

T. C. Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History: A Sociological, Historical and Literary Introduction* (London: T & T Clark, 2007).

