

The Deuteronomistic History and Historiography

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The deuteronomistic (or deuteronomistic) history is a shorthand designation of fairly recent vintage for the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, with Deuteronomy often recognized as the introduction to them. It has been common to refer to these books as “The Former Prophets” because of the important role the prophetic word plays in the narrative. Perhaps most commonly, however, the generally label of “Historical Books has been given to them, because of their obvious concern to relate the history of Israel from the entrance into the land to the time of the Babylonian exile. A few observations regarding composition, authorship, date, structure, and general character are important for the subsequent discussion.

Composition, authorship, and date. Traditionally, the individual books of the corpus have been treated in isolation from one another, with single, unknown authors reporting on recent events. Over the last two hundred years, however, two major theories regarding the composition of these books has [sic] emerged in biblical scholarship.

First, there has been the attempt to tie them closely to the Pentateuch, and thus to see Genesis through Kings as one comprehensive history. That is, it has been thought that the major sources of the Pentateuch (JEDP) [see [JEDP: Sources of the Pentateuch](#)] originally continued through these materials. This was thought to be particularly clear in the case of Joshua, where the fulfillment of the promises to the Patriarchs regarding the land is reported. (Hence all six were designated as the Hexateuch.) Yet, this hypothesis has not maintained wide acceptance, largely because no consensus has emerged regarding the scope of the individual sources, and because insufficient account was given thereby for the pervasiveness of the deuteronomistic style and outlook in these books. It is this latter observation which has led to a second proposal, to which most scholars today subscribe in one form or another.

Taking their cue from the prominent deuteronomistic imprint on these books, scholars have come to see Joshua-Kings as an independent historical work, with Deuteronomy as an introduction. (This reduces the Pentateuch to a Tetrateuch, Genesis-Numbers.) This perspective not only helps explain the literary and theological connections to Deuteronomy, but also the virtual absence of deuteronomistic material in Genesis-Numbers, as well as the double introduction to the book of Deuteronomy (1:1-4:43; 4:44ff.). In the classic formulation by Martin Noth in 1943, it was thought that this work was put together by an author living in the exilic period (587-539 B.C.) who gathered together a variety of oral and written traditions and wove them into a comprehensive whole.

While this hypothesis has gained wide acceptance in its general form, certain problems have occasioned refinements in its formulation. Foremost among these difficulties is the change in approach which may be observed at the end of 2 Kings: there is an absence of the typical theological reflection upon important events, in this case, upon the destruction of Jerusalem. Thus, a hypothesis has emerged which speaks of two stages of editing (a “dual redaction”) of the historical work: a major one by an apologist for the reform of Josiah (around 620 B.C.) and a minor one during the exile which stresses the just judgment of God and brings the work up to date (the last verses report an event of 561 B.C.).

We cannot be certain whether the editors were country preachers (Levites), a prophetic school, or leaders standing within the Jerusalemite tradition but influenced by northern materials. (The last seems most likely.) Whether the final redactor lived in Palestine or Babylon is uncertain.

It is important to note that, even if the dual redaction hypothesis proves to be the most convincing, it is necessary to understand how the *entire* history may have functioned in the exilic context. That will be our concern in this volume. Because it is the exilic redactor through whose hands the material was finally passed, we have to reckon with how the material would have functioned in that situation. While the exilic redactor may have added to an

earlier work, that is not the only editing technique that was available for use. He/they may also have omitted or rearranged traditions to reflect the concerns of that era. Finally, however, we can never be certain that the present selection and arrangement of materials is anything other than a single exilic one, though certain materials within the collection may be discerned by their content as preexilic in origin.

It is clear that the redactor(s) of this work did not create a history of Israel out of whole cloth. They inherited a variety of types of literature from the past, and such materials make up the bulk of the history. Some of these sources are explicitly referred to in the narrative (cf. Josh 10:13; 1 Kgs 11:41; 2 Kgs 16:19). Some materials appear to be self-contained and isolatable from their context, and hence may well have come to the redactor's hand in a form much like we now have them (e.g., the ark narrative in 1 Samuel 4-6; the tribal allotment list in Joshua 13-21; cf. pp. 122-48).

There was considerable diversity in perspective in these inherited traditions, which the editors chose to retain, and they worked them over in different ways. That is why certain periods were virtually ignored (e.g., the reign of Omri), while others were described at length (e.g., those of Elijah and Elisha). Certain materials were edited in recognizable regularity (e.g., the reigns of the kings), while others were given little editorial attention (e.g., 1 Samuel 13-31). This may suggest that a variety of editors (a school) were at work on the material, having a common perspective overall, but working with different editorial principles. In this light, it is my view that the dual redaction hypothesis is too simple, as if there were two theoretically discoverable dates on which the editions of the total history were published. It seems to me more likely, especially in view of this diversity, that there was a school at work on these traditions over a number of generations, perhaps from the time of King Hezekiah (715-687 B.C.) onward. Thus, the concerns of a number of eras are reflected in the completed work, and yet the final stamp is decisively exilic. (The latter is the only redactional stage of which we can be absolutely certain.) . . .

Some sorting out of key thematic elements might be helpful. It is striking to note the utterly pessimistic outlook that M. Noth (1943) perceived in the work. For him, the corpus was designed only to show that God's actions leading to the destruction of Israel and Judah were justified. Thus, the past was used only in order to explain the present, and no hope was articulated for the future. Such a bleak picture is seldom maintained today, although the dark elements in the narrative cannot be dismissed.

A more balanced picture emerged with the work of Gerhard von Rad (1953, 1962). He understood the materials not fundamentally to be a history of Israel, but to be an account of the word of God as it functioned within the ongoing life of Israel. Thus, "Yahweh's word is active in the history of Judah, creating that history, and that in a double capacity: (1) as law, judging and destroying; (2) as gospel, i.e., in the David prophecy, which was constantly being fulfilled-saving and forgiving" (1953, p. 89). The former is largely the word of God, which derived from Moses and the prophets; their warnings were clear and unmistakable, and because they were ignored this led to the death of both the southern and the northern kingdoms. But, interwoven with this word of judgment is the promise to David (articulated esp. in 2 Samuel 7) which provided hope, indeed a "messianic hope," for the people in all times of difficulty, even in the death of exile. Thus, there is a fusion of the Mosaic and Davidic traditions, and the result is a relatively simple message for the people of God: Repent, and trust God's promise, which will not fail. The instructional and hortatory language make sense only if there is hope for the future. In terms of an overarching perspective, von Rad's remains the most satisfactory today. . . .

Historiography: Did It Happen?

The books of the deuteronomistic history are commonly referred to as the historical books. This traditional designation arose because the narratives give the appearance of being a straightforward account of the history of Israel from the conquest of the land to the fall of Jerusalem some 700 years later. Upon closer inspection, however, one recognizes that the designation "historical narrative" is not accurate for all of these materials. For example, Judg 9:7-15 constitutes a fable, and 2 Sam 12:1-6 contains a parable. No blanket designation can be made regarding these books as a whole. Every text needs to be examined in, and of, itself in order to determine its relationship to what actually happened. Sometimes the answer is easy, as with the examples just noted; at other times the response is much more difficult. For example, to what degree does Joshua 6 portray an actual destruction of the city of Jericho? Or, did Samson really kill an army single-handedly?

It is important that we discuss this matter in detail, not least because many individuals may get uneasy over what

appears to be a hasty, or even cavalier, treatment of the problem. How do scholars go about determining the extent to which a narrative reflects something that actually happened? How important for faith is the "happenedness" of the events reported in the Bible? We shall take these questions in turn.

The historian who seeks to reconstruct the history of Israel from biblical texts is confronted with four interrelated problems:

1. The problem of the *selection of the material*, and the principles which have governed such selection. Every last detail of the known history of any period will not have been recorded. A selection will have been made. Some principles, examined or unexamined, will have determined what was thought important enough to pass on, and what could be omitted. For example, we know from extra-biblical sources that a very important battle took place at Qarqar in 853 B.C. between Israel under Ahab, and Assyria, but no reference is made to it in the Bible.

2. The problem of *meaning*. One's understanding of history is not exhausted by a statement that something has occurred; in fact, one has not really said very much about an event by merely saying that it happened. It is only when one introduces the question of the meaning of an event that one introduces the possibility of relationship among events; otherwise, they will remain a series of unconnected occurrences. In fact, meaning is implied immediately when one speaks of such relationships. The historian seeks to discover and interpret meaning, and because the meaning of an event has to do with its relationship not only with events that are proximate but also with all subsequent events that follow in some way from it, the full meaning of an event is never finally available. The meaning of any event is always living, always being expanded upon, as one discovers new ways in which the event has had an impact upon subsequent history. Thus, for example, what is the meaning of the conquest of Canaan by the Israelites? The meaning of the event for the participants is one thing; the meaning of the event for subsequent interpreters (e.g., the deuteronomic historian) may be another; the meaning for us may be still another. But, in all cases, there should be basic continuities in meaning.

3. The problem of *point of view*. The texts and material artifacts which are available for the reconstruction of Israel's history have to be interpreted; their meaning is not immediately apparent. All who seek to interpret them will do so from their own particular perspective. The result is that there is no such thing as uninterpreted history. A member of the people of God (whether in ancient Israel or today) will interpret Israel's history differently from one who is not a member. One's own situation in history (e.g., theological perspectives, cultural traditions, etc.) will inevitably play a role in one's historical assessments. Thus, there will inevitably be a diversity of opinion regarding such matters, and no historian's perspective can ever stand without need of correction. Thus, historians should be as explicit as they possibly can with regard to the perspectives which have governed their interpretation, and be open to the possibility that their understanding might be enhanced, or corrected, by someone who approaches the texts from another perspective.

4. The problem of *fact*. Did the events of which the text speaks really happen as stated, or are they only said to have happened? How is "fact" to be related to the interpretation of an event? While, as we have indicated, history is never facts alone, but facts plus supplied meaning plus the person involved in interpretation, it is important for historians to sort through these components in such a way as to suggest, as best they can, what actually occurred in the course of Israel's history.

Given these problems, what particular issues should the historian address? Nine items may be mentioned.

1. The purpose of the biblical narratives. Were they, e.g., written to reconstruct the history of Israel in a fashion similar to a modern historian writing a history, of, say, the Civil War? It is clear that the biblical narrator did not have modern historiographical methods with which to work (e.g., the concern for tracking down and sorting out apparent differences in accounts of the same event). Hence, one ought not fault them from that angle for failing to meet modern standards. Yet, it is clear that there was some concern for recovering Israel's past, and with some chronological coherence. This is evident from the fact that the deuteronomic history is written in such a way that there is a movement from an earlier period to a later one, in addition to having chronological references (e.g., 1 Kgs 11:42; 2 Kgs 17:1).

However, it would appear that their fundamental purpose was not historiographical, i.e., writing history for the

sake of writing history; rather, their concerns were religious. It might be said that the biblical narrators used the materials at their disposal for theological (or kerygmatic-didactic) purposes. Their goal is to tell the story of the interaction between God and Israel in order to elicit a response from their audience. (See below for further comments on this matter.) This purpose is perhaps best seen in 2 Kgs 17:8ff., "And this was so, because. . ." The theological perspectives of the narrator are here acknowledged and seen to be the angle of vision from which the story has been told.

One result of this particular approach is that an event of considerable significance for a historiographer may be passed over with little or no notice (e.g., the battle of Qarqar). On the other hand, that which is important for theological reasons may be lifted up for special attention (e.g., the relationship between Elijah and Jezebel). Thus, if the purpose of a biblical writer was not historiographical, we ought not interpret the resultant narrative as if it were. If the authors were not interested in historical questions per se, then we, with our (legitimate) interest in historiographical matters, should recognize that as historians we are using these materials in a way in which they were not intended to be used. It should also be clear that we have no business introducing the category of "error" or "inaccuracy" in our assessment of the biblical narratives. That would be like accusing authors of Bible story books of "error" because they had used some imagination in the retelling of the biblical story for children. On the contrary, we should realize that their purposes were not historiographical from the start. It may be that the biblical narrators have, indeed, transmitted matters that do not correspond to the facts of a situation, but this ought to be evaluated in terms of the purpose of the narrator.

2. Contemporaneity of the records, i. e., the closeness of the writing to the events about which it purports to speak. On the one hand, the closer the report is to the event, the more reliable it will be, generally speaking. On the other hand, closeness is not *necessarily* more trustworthy, since a true perspective on an event may not be available until some time has passed. But, the generally acknowledged fact that no portion of the records that speak of the pre-Davidic period can be shown to be older than David in their present form, indicates something of the care with which one must approach these materials for historiographical usage. Much of it has been filtered through the minds of individuals who were not directly involved in the events. Moreover, there is the general problem of what happens to traditions when they are passed down by word of mouth for generations, as was certainly the case with a significant portion of this material. While there is ample witness to the tenacity of the shapes taken by "oral literature," continued use and interpretation inevitably leads to expansion and contraction of the material. This makes access to the original time and place of reported events more difficult than is commonly imagined.

3. The criterion of dissimilarity, i.e., the degree to which a narrative speaks of matters that differ from those of any subsequent period. Thus the fact that the office of judge is unlike anything we know from later Israelite history, indicates that it was probably not read back into the narrative from the experience of a later period, and can be relied upon in a general way.

4. Intrinsic probability. This is tied to the question of the congruence of what is reported with what we know about the specific or general course of history from other sources. Does a report sound reasonable or not, recognizing that our understanding of "reasonableness" is determined largely by our own historical experience? Was Naaman cured of his leprosy (2 Kings 5)? Did the axe float on the water (2 Kgs 6:1-7)? The goal here is not to be too gullible or too skeptical, to allow for the unique and the miraculous, while being wary of a predisposition to resort too quickly to such categories.

5. The implications of the type of literature in which the narrative is cast. While the fable of Judges 9, and the parable of 2 Samuel 12 are readily identifiable, a problem arises when literary form is not so easily recognized, or the canons for identification and interpretation are not commonly agreed upon. Thus, e.g., the stories of Samson (Judges 13-16) are notoriously difficult for the historian to assess, even though the category of "legend" is commonly given to them. Even more complex is the so-called Succession Narrative (2 Samuel 9-1 Kings 2), for years recognized as the most "historical" of the narratives in the deuteronomic history; recent studies have suggested that scholars may have been more sanguine with regard to its historicity than they ought to have been.

6. The etiological factor (concern for the origins of some name, practice, or institution). For example, to what degree was the story of the crossing of the Jordan in Joshua 3-4 shaped by (or even composed to explain the origins

of) the later use of twelve stones in a liturgical celebration of that event (4:21-24)? Or, did the story of Achan originate out of a concern to explain the origins of "the great heap of stones" in the Valley of "Achor" (Josh 7:26)? The degree to which such etiologies were a creative factor in the formation of traditions is much discussed among scholars. But, most would now say that the etiological factor was not a controlling element in most of these narratives, but was secondarily attached to already existent traditions (e.g., the last sentence of Josh 7:26 was added to the story at a late date). Hence, the presence of etiological material is not commonly a reason for making a negative judgment regarding the historicity of the entire story to which it is attached.

7. Multiple attestation, i.e., the existence of more than one version of a story (doublets). Whenever such occur, it is very helpful to compare them with one another in order to try to get at the most original form of the story. Thus, e.g., Judg 1:1-2:5 contains an account of the settlement of Canaan parallel to, but briefer than, the one found in Joshua. The major difficulty is the incompleteness of the results in the former account (see Judg 1:19, 21, 27-29) compared to the latter (see Josh 21:43). Most scholars would contend that the Judges account is less idealized than the one in Joshua (cf. p. 52).

8. The point of view of the author, i.e., is there evidence of a bent or a bias which might affect the way in which the author tells the story of the past? In writing a history of the American Civil War, there may be a sympathy toward either northern or southern interests, which will affect historical judgments to some degree. The fact that there were many tensions between North and South in Israel (in fact, a civil war for many decades in the period 921-722 B.C.) suggests that we should be alert for such differences as may manifest themselves in the literature for this reason. Thus, when the Chronicler, after the Exile, retold the story of 2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings, he gave very little attention to the place of the North in the history of the period. One might also see such regional differences reflected in the story about the establishment of the kingship in 1 Samuel 8-12, where pro-monarchical (southern?), and anti-monarchical (northern?) traditions may be interwoven with one another.

9. Congruity with reliable external evidence, i.e., with materials in written or artifactual form. This is similar to the multiple attestation category, except that the evidence is external to the biblical material and is commonly in non-written form (which also needs to be interpreted!). Does the external evidence corroborate, or stand in tension, with what is set forth in the biblical materials? For example, a number of cities are mentioned in Joshua 1-12 as having been destroyed by the invading Israelites. Archaeological excavations have shown that they were indeed destroyed in the 13th century B.C., which is an acceptable date. However, no evidence has been unearthed to show that Israel, rather than, say, the Philistines perpetrated the destruction. On the other hand, biblical reports of the destruction of the cities of Jericho and Ai (Joshua 6-7), and other sites, do not correspond very well (in some cases, not at all) with the archaeological evidence.

This indicates something of the complexity of the task faced by the historian. Keys to proceeding correctly are: (a) the balanced use of internal (i.e., literary) and external (i.e., archaeological) evidence, with one type not being allowed to predominate; and (b) to determine where the balance of probability lies. All historical judgments are judgments of probability, and so it is a matter of weighing the evidence to determine what is more or less probable. Thus, in the conquest narratives, it is generally recognized as probable that the Israelites had something to do with the destruction levels in, at least, some of the cities of Palestine, but no *details* in the biblical accounts have been corroborated, and many difficulties remain . . . All in all, it is wise to remember that archaeology does not prove the *truth* of the Bible, for while certain correspondences may be found, with respect to factual data, there can be no external corroboration of the *meaning* of that data. For example, archaeological data might indicate that Israel destroyed a given city at a given time, but it could not demonstrate whether God willed the event.

Perhaps these factors are a sufficient indication of the complexity of the task of assessing the biblical traditions for reconstructing the history of Israel. With so many possibilities for interpretation, it is inevitable that there will be a diversity of opinion on a variety of subjects, just as there will be in writing the history of any people.

We need now to return to an earlier question: How important for faith is the "happenedness" of the various events reported in the Bible? There are a few interpreters who would make no distinctions among biblical events at this point: the historicity of the Exodus and axe-head stories, e.g., carrying equal weight for faith. Yet, such an approach stands in contradiction to the approach of the biblical writers themselves. Both Old Testament and New Testament writers give us warrant to make distinctions among events: they isolate certain key events as being constitutive of

the community and hence important for faith, while other events are not given such significance. Such constitutive events (e.g., the Exodus) have been incorporated into confessional statements (e.g., Deut 26:5-9) and integrated again and again into the community's materials of faith (e.g., 1 Kgs 8:14ff.), while other events (e.g., 2 Kgs 6:1-7) are not given a central place. Hence, the pervasiveness of reference to an event, and the degree to which that event is believed to be constitutive of the community, serve to indicate whether its "happenedness" is important for faith.

The end result with respect to the deuteronomic history, without going into detail, is that it contains a very mixed set of materials from an historiographical point of view. It is clear that these materials are rooted decisively in the period from about 1200 to 561 B.C. At varying levels they reflect what happened to Israel, and in Israel, during this period. Moreover, they are reflective of what thoughtful Israelites considered the meaning(s) of those events to be at various times during this era. In such a reflective process, the authors and editors no doubt used their imagination freely (e.g., when they put forward the actual words of a private conversation).

As far as our use of these texts today is concerned, we are dealing with the story of a real people in particular times and places. The authors were not historiographers in any modern sense, however. They were fundamentally concerned about the religious meaning of events, and thus the material has value for us quite apart from the question of "happenedness." A detached analysis of historical detail can never be the only way into the text, nor ought one to wait for assured historical results before using the text for preaching and teaching purposes. Even where the historiographer's judgment may be negative in this regard, the material may still have much to say to the community of faith in any age.