

## CHAPTER NINE

### The Deuteronomists

As noted in Chapter Eight, a number of ‘Schools’ were responsible for the composing and establishing of the Torah. In this chapter we reflect on the work of the so-called Deuteronomists who were responsible for the Book of Deuteronomy, and the Former Prophets: Judges, Samuel and Kings. They also had input into other books, especially Genesis, Exodus, Joshua, and some of the prophetic scrolls.

The Deuteronomists were not priests. This becomes clear when we compare their treatment of matters concerning the cult with the treatment of the Priestly School (see the following chapter). Most scholars today think that Deuteronomy comes from the scribes of the royal court and the school that continued the tradition during and after the exile. They focus on the importance of social ethics. They are also interested in proper worship, but they leave ceremonial detail to those whose special responsibility lies in organising the cult.

The name ‘Deuteronomy’ comes from the Septuagint translation of the text that states: ‘When the king has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the levitical priests’ (Deuteronomy 17:18). ‘Copy of the law’ (*mišneh ha tôrâ*) is translated by the Greek word ‘*deuteronomion*’. The name suits the book for its authors consciously present it as an interpretation, a second look at the tradition that they inherited. The setting for Deuteronomy is Moab, ‘beyond the Jordan’ (Deuteronomy 1:1), not Sinai, the mountain on which God revealed himself to Moses, the mountain which the Deuteronomists call ‘Horeb’ (the wilderness mountain). They portray Moses as looking back to Horeb and presenting the revelation to a new generation. Presenting the essence of God’s revelation to new generations is what the Deuteronomic School sees as its aim.

#### **Origins of the Deuteronomic School in the northern kingdom**

The Deuteronomists may have begun in the northern kingdom as a resistance movement against the compromises allowed and sometimes encouraged by the political leadership in Israel. This came to a head in the eighth century with increasing Assyrian influence. The Deuteronomists would have welcomed the critique offered by the prophets Amos and Hosea in the years leading up to the catastrophic collapse of Samaria (721BC), for the Deuteronomic School and the prophets shared the same zealous opposition to the syncretism, idolatry and injustice which they recognised as a betrayal of all that it means to be YHWH’s chosen people.

#### **The Deuteronomists in Judah 721-587BC**

When the Assyrian army overran Israel and destroyed Samaria, members of the School joined the other refugees who fled to Judah. There they found an ally in King Hezekiah who inherited the throne c. 727BC and who reigned in his own right from c. 715 to 699BC. It may have been they who helped persuade him that the reason for Israel’s collapse was its infidelity to the covenant, and that the only way to save Judah was to return to loyalty to YHWH. In any case this is what Hezekiah attempted to do.

The situation Hezekiah inherited from his father, Ahaz, was no better than what was happening north of the border. Recognising Assyria as the growing power in the region, Ahaz had tried to win its support against the plotting of both Aram and Israel to take control of Judah. The people of Judah reacted to the regional insecurity by indulging their superstitions and worshipping any deity they thought might help them. Ahaz led them in turning to the ancient gods of Canaan (see 2Kings 16).

What happened in Israel persuaded Hezekiah that Assyria could not be trusted, and, encouraged perhaps by the members of the Deuteronomic School, he attempted to bring Judah back to the faithful following of YHWH. It was the covenant with YHWH that mattered, not cultivating relations to Assyria. Part of his strategy in his war against idolatry and superstition was to centralise the cult in Jerusalem. This involved destroying the other sanctuaries in Judah. When writing a summary of Hezekiah's reign, the Deuteronomists reveal their admiration for what he tried to do:

He did what was right in the sight of YHWH just as his ancestor David had done. He removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole ... He trusted in YHWH the God of Israel; so that there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah after him, or among those who were before him. For he held fast to YHWH; he did not depart from following him but kept the commandments that YHWH commanded Moses. YHWH was with him; wherever he went, he prospered. He rebelled against the king of Assyria and would not serve him.

– 2Kings 18:3-7

Hezekiah's rebellion against Assyria, occasioned by the death of Sargon in 705BC, was short lived. The authors of 2Kings go on to tell of the siege of Jerusalem in 701BC and its 'miraculous' escape. However Judah was completely ravaged and the price of Jerusalem's survival was an enormous tribute paid to Assyria. The collapse of Judah meant the collapse, too, of Hezekiah's attempt at religious reform. Hezekiah's son, Manasseh, inherited his father's failed revolt and had no choice but to submit to being a vassal of the Assyrian king, Sennacherib. There would have been those in Judah, including probably priests from the smaller sanctuaries, who blamed Hezekiah for the way things turned out, and many welcomed Manasseh's long reign (698-643). Things fell apart religiously (see chapter fourteen for the Deuteronomic judgment on Manasseh in 2Kings 21), but because he was a loyal vassal of the powerful Assyrian king there was peace in Judah and growing economic prosperity.

During the reign of Manasseh the members of the Deuteronomic School went underground, and it was probably in these years that they continued their spiritual reflection on the covenant with YHWH that gave Israel its identity. They saw themselves as preparing a blueprint for a loyal king whom they trusted God would send them: one who would no longer swear allegiance as a vassal of a foreign king, but who would lead his people to be loyal vassals the great lord, YHWH, faithfully adhering to the covenant.

Manasseh's son, Amon, succeeded his father on the throne but was assassinated after only two years and in 641BC Amon's eight-year old son, Josiah, inherited the throne. There is no record of who was responsible for Amon's assassination, or who acted as regent while Josiah was still a boy, but Josiah developed into just the kind of king the Deuteronomists had been praying for.

Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria, died in 628, and Josiah, now twenty and able to take control in his own name, picked up where his great-grandfather, Hezekiah, had left off. Assyria was preoccupied with the rising power of Babylon and Josiah took the opportunity to throw off the vassalage that had kept Judah subject to Assyria for the previous sixty years. He was determined to win back for Judah the kingdom reigned over by David, and he brooked no opposition to reforming the religious life of his people. Summarising his reign, the Deuteronomists wrote:

Before him there was no king like him, who turned to YHWH with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him.

– 2Kings 23:25

This was the opportunity the Deuteronomists had been waiting for. They had a champion ready to carry out with rigorous efficiency the reform for which they had been preparing. According to the account written by them (but absent from the account given by the Chronicler, see 2Chronicles 34-35), on Josiah's orders the temple was being cleared of Assyrian altars with a view to being re-consecrated, when a document, called 'the book of the law', was 'discovered'. This was 622BC. We are told that when Josiah heard 'the words of the book of the law'

he made a covenant before YHWH, to follow YHWH, keeping his commandments, his decrees, and his statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. All the people joined in the covenant.

– 2Kings 23:3

According to the account in the Book of Kings, the document expressed YHWH's anger against his people and threatened punishment for just the kind of behaviour that had brought about the collapse of Israel and that had flourished in Judah under Josiah's grandfather, Manasseh. According to the Deuteronomists' account this 'discovery' reinforced Josiah's determination to purify Judah and the re-conquered territories of all signs of cult of any other deity but YHWH. Josiah insisted that all cult had to take place in the Jerusalem Temple, and nowhere else. This centralising of the cult was the single most influential change brought about by Josiah's reform. It is backed up again and again in Deuteronomy, and accounts for many changes that dramatically affected the way worship was carried out in Judah. Things would never be the same again. Did the document said to have been 'discovered' in the temple contain the blueprint of the reform that the Deuteronomists had been sedulously preparing? There is not enough evidence to draw a certain conclusion, but what is certain is the close parallel between the reforms that Josiah put in place and the material found in Deuteronomy.

It is likely that it was at this time that the scribes, including members of the Deuteronomic School and members of the Priestly School, produced the first draft of what would become Exodus 1-24, and the Book of Joshua. The story of Egypt reflected what had been happening under Assyria. Mount Sinai reflected the importance of Mount Sion. The story of Joshua supported Josiah's attempt to expand the kingdom to the west and north, with a view to re-establishing the Promised Land. Josiah went from success to success. He cleared Judah and the re-conquered territories of cult sites.

However, tragedy struck in 609BC when the Egyptian Pharaoh, Neco, on his way to support Assyria in its war with Babylon, had Josiah assassinated at Megiddo. The young king (he was only thirty-nine) who carried with him the ideals of the Deuteronomic School was dead. In 597BC Jerusalem surrendered to the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, and Josiah's grandson, Jeconiah (his throne name was Jehoiachin), and the leading citizens were taken into exile. Ten years later an ill-conceived revolt led to the destruction of the city and the temple and a second group of exiles.

### **The Deuteronomists and the Babylonian Exile**

What manuscripts did the fleeing exiles take with them into exile? There were some prophetic scrolls as well as writings of the Deuteronomic School. There were fragments, and perhaps more than fragments, of patriarchal stories from the north and from Judah. There were individual texts covering aspects of social organisation from Samaria and Jerusalem. The priests would have put in writing some regulations covering key aspects of the cult, perhaps from Shiloh or other local sanctuaries, as well as from the Jerusalem temple. There were individual stories about Moses and about the journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, as well as struggles the different tribal groups had in Canaan and in Transjordan.

There would have been records from Samaria and Jerusalem of kings, battles and treaties. But if we think in terms of a continuous organised account that includes primeval history, the patriarchal narratives, the epic of the Exodus, the giving of the law on Mount Sinai, the sojourn of Israel in the wilderness, and the conquest of Canaan, the evidence available favours the conclusion that at the beginning of the exile (early sixth century BC) no such document yet existed. If this is true, it points to a most significant conclusion. The Torah as we have it was composed against the background of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, the end of the monarchy, and the exile in Babylon. We should expect to find these calamitous events casting a huge shadow over the text, as well as supplying the key questions that the authors were desperate to answer as they pieced their story together.

The Babylonian Exile (597-538BC) demanded an enormous religious adjustment. In spite of all the hopes built upon promises understood to have come from their God, the Promised Land had been taken from them. Despite the assurances that they had been given that Jerusalem would not be defeated by a foreign king – assurances that were reinforced when Sennacherib failed to capture the city in 701BC – despite all this, the Babylonian army had razed YHWH's city to the ground. Despite assurances that God would guarantee the dynasty of David, they had lost their king. Despite their belief that the temple was the house of their God YHWH, it had been destroyed. Any national, institutional basis for their religious identity had been swept away. If they were going to retain any sense of themselves as a people, they had to discover a firmer basis. They had to learn a new humility, and find a deeper faith in God, independent of political and economic success.

In Babylon, they found themselves living in what was, in many ways, a superior culture, but not religiously. The concept of monotheism (there is only one God), as distinct from monolatry (among the gods only YHWH is to be worshipped) began to emerge (see Isaiah 44:6-23; 45:18-25; Deuteronomy 4:35, 39).

Mixing as they were with displaced people from many nations, a sense of their missionary vocation also began to emerge (see Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:6).

Instead of identifying themselves in relation to the Davidic dynasty, they began to see themselves as a community defined by worship. In the absence of the temple they began to come together to remember and to pray. This was the beginning of the institution of the synagogue, which has remained central to Judaism ever since. They had to ask themselves how the loss of the land, the temple and the monarchy could have happened. It was impossible for them to contemplate the possibility that their God, YHWH, was weaker than the gods of the Babylonians. So they concluded that it must have been their God who brought about the catastrophe that they were experiencing. Since God is just, the problem had to be their infidelity to their part of the covenant, and they interpreted their loss and suffering as God's punishment for their sin, as God's way of purifying them.

Where had they gone wrong? What must they do to bring about the purification without which they could not enjoy God's blessing? These are some of the questions that were being asked by a number of different 'Schools' during the long years of exile, including the Deuteronomic School, the Priestly School (about which more in the following chapter) and the Isaiah School. We are left to imagine the dialogue, debate and discussion that went on between them, and with other concerned groups, struggling to make sense of what had happened to them.

The Deuteronomists composed a 'history' from the beginnings of Israel's presence in the land through to the Exile. Their work developed into the Books of Judges, Samuel and Kings. The word 'history' is put in quotation marks, for the aim was not to create an accurate record of historical facts, though such facts can be found in what they wrote. The aim, rather, was to focus on what God had done and was doing among them, and on their obedience or disobedience to God. The aim was to inspire fidelity to the essential elements of the covenant that they believed their ancestors had entered into with God, a covenant that identified them as a people. They were convinced that only obedience would ensure blessing and so success.

Besides composing a 'history', the Deuteronomists continued to work on the Book of Deuteronomy, which, like the other books of the Torah, is the fruit of a long editorial process. In his *Deuteronomy: issues and interpretation* (T&T Clark, 2002, page 9), Alexander Rofé writes:

It seems that Deuteronomy incorporates some four centuries of legal, historical and meditative work, from the tenth century to the sixth. This legacy came from the prophetic, priestly and court-wisdom circles, all of which contributed to the special literary form of the book: the admonitory and persuasive oration.

Not all scholars would go back as far as the tenth century, and some would see the process continuing beyond the sixth century into post-exilic Judah. Like members of the other Schools, the Deuteronomic scribes treated the traditions that they inherited with the greatest reverence and care. They believed that YHWH was guiding their history and they pored over the scrolls, searching for YHWH's will for them as a people.

In Rofé's words: 'they wrote under the burden of inheritance' (page 226). However, they wrote, necessarily, from their own perspective, and it is wonderful that, right at the heart of the Torah, we have their view to supplement, enrich and provide a balance to that of the Priestly School that had a dominant role in the production of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers (see Chapter Ten). Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic 'History' has been called the Bible's first great theological synthesis.

### **Back in Judah after the Return from Exile**

As their work developed, the various 'Schools' that were responsible for the compiling of the Pentateuch (including the Deuteronomists on whom we are focusing in this chapter) had not only the experience of the fall of Jerusalem and the Exile to ponder over, they also experienced the 'miracle' of the fall of Babylon to Cyrus of Persia, and his edict allowing the exiles to return home to the Promised Land. In his *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch* (Eisenbrauns 2006) Jean Louis Ska SJ writes:

The legislative texts and the narratives have been re-read, corrected, reinterpreted and updated several times in accordance with new situations and the need to answer new questions.

– page 94

He goes on to say:

The reconstruction of the temple and the restoration of a faith-community within the Persian Empire created a new situation that undoubtedly called for the revision and reinterpretation of the "data" presented by the sources and the most ancient traditions.

– page 141

The various Schools, including the Deuteronomists, dialogued with these traditions, corrected and reinterpreted them, and proposed a new vision of Israel's history. Throughout all of this they developed their own theology, which is both independent of and related to the ancient tradition (see Ska page 147).

We are on solid ground if we think of the final work of composition of the Torah as reflecting the concerns of the post-exilic period. Determined not to repeat the mistakes of the past, the post-exilic authors wanted to form again the people of Israel, worshipping God faithfully in the restored temple and faithful to the covenant made with them long ago by God. If we place ourselves among these returned exiles we are giving ourselves the best opportunity to read the Torah as it was composed to be read.

Those who produced the Torah in the period after the exile saw their experience as in many ways a reliving of the experience of Moses and their ancestors, who, like them, had lived in exile and had been led across the desert to the Promised Land. They wanted to tell again the story of Moses, to recall the wonders of God's power, mercy and faithfulness. They wanted to tell the story again in a way that their contemporaries could identify their own experiences as like those of their ancestors, and so learn from the past what it means to live as God's chosen people. They faithfully included the material that had come down to them from Israel and Judah.

They did not want to experience again the terrible years of abandonment and exile, so they wanted to warn their contemporaries not to repeat the sins of their forebears, but to live pure lives in accordance with God's will as that will had come down to them from their ancestors.

We cannot always be clear about the origin of the various pieces that they weaved into their final work. Each fragment or narrative cycle will carry its own wealth of meaning. But we can, to some degree, discover why the post-exilic writers, who included the Deuteronomists, placed them where we now find them in the text, how they introduced them and linked them, and how they understood them in the light of their exilic and post-exilic experiences. To the extent that we can do this we can be confident that we are in touch with the inspired text, and we can be protected against reading meanings into it that are at variance with the inspired intention of those responsible for the text as we have it.

Those who were attempting to build a community in Judah that was faithful to the religion of Israel wanted to write the story of Israel in a way that was faithful to tradition and was expressed in ways that would connect with the experiences of their day. One of the stories in the Jacob Narrative captures an essential element of their experience. To enter the Promised Land Jacob had to struggle with his demons (Genesis 32:24-32). He carried the scars of that encounter for the rest of his life, but he did enter the land. So it was with those who composed this story and the book of which it is part. They had gone through their struggle – the exile in Babylon –but, against all the odds, and in a way that they could think of only as miraculous, they were back in the Promised Land – ‘the land that I swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to them and to their descendants after them’ (Deuteronomy 1:8). The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Israel, had proved faithful to them, and they wanted to express in writing – and so in a way that would never be forgotten – the story of God's dealings with them.

They had experienced a terrible disaster, but also an amazing resurrection. Faced with the need to re-establish themselves as a people in the very different circumstances of a reduced Judah ruled from Persia, it was all the more important to assert that their God, YHWH, is the God who created the universe and the nations. If Judah was under Persian control, it must be God's will and so it must have a good purpose. Their return was itself a proof of the power and fidelity of YHWH to the promises made to their ancestors. The people must continue to put their faith in this God and to trust that they were still God's chosen people.

Hence the insistence of the text that the God who revealed Himself to Moses, the God of Israel, the God of the patriarchs, is the same God who brought them back to their land. The best way to read the Torah is to put ourselves among the returned exiles and hear it as they would have heard it, keeping in mind that the texts witness to different ways of understanding that history. We, too, need to hold in tension the material from the Deuteronomic School, and the other ‘Schools’, as they searched for the right way to be faithful to YHWH's choice and mission.

Let us reflect briefly on the books composed by the Deuteronomists.

## Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy is a text that was composed to be preached. Its aim is clear: to educate the listener as to the essence of the revelation given to Moses by YHWH. It takes the form of a testament given by Moses to the people as they are preparing to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land. Before he dies and hands over the leadership to Joshua, Moses takes the people of Israel to the heart of what it is that identifies them as a special people, chosen and set apart by YHWH. He instructs them on how they must live if they are to welcome and enjoy the fruits of this special relationship. The reader who wishes to explore this book (or any other book of the Older Testament) may wish to access my Introductory Commentaries published by Chevalier Press, Kensington NSW (+61 2 9662-7894).

It is likely that the Book of Deuteronomy as we have it is the culmination of over three centuries of scribal activity. Its beginnings take us back to the last decades of the northern kingdom. The Deuteronomists continued their reflections during the reigns of Hezekiah, Manasseh and Josiah in seventh century Judah. They had to redo their work in the light of the catastrophe of the destruction of Jerusalem, and again after the 'miraculous' return to Judah from exile in Babylon. It was in the final decades of the fifth century that Deuteronomy was separated from Joshua and placed as the concluding book in the Torah. The final verses of Deuteronomy make a fine conclusion to the Torah:

Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom YHWH knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that YHWH sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

– Deuteronomy 34:10-12

## Joshua

The name of the book comes from a significant figure in the tribal area of Ephraim (see Joshua 24:30) and its sanctuary at Shechem. His name describes his role. He is the one through whom YHWH saves (*yehôšuaʿ*). As the story is told Joshua plays a key role in the establishment of Israel, not only in Ephraim but throughout Canaan. How much of this records historical fact we have no way of knowing. It is probably a literary device for holding the story together.

Joshua is also mentioned in the Moses stories. Is this a way of securing a link between what Joshua achieved and the stories attached to Moses that encompass the central convictions of Yahwism? Joshua appears in only two scenes in Exodus. The first fits nicely with his role in the Book of Joshua: he successfully defends the people against an attack from the Amalekites at Rephidim just before they reach Mount Sinai (see Exodus 17:8-16). In the second he is described as Moses' assistant (Exodus 24:13; see Joshua 1:1) and sets out with Moses as Moses climbs Mount Sinai. He is mentioned as being with Moses also when Moses comes down from the mountain (Exodus 32:17), and as 'not leaving the tent' (Exodus 33:11). Joshua is not mentioned at all in Leviticus. In Numbers Joshua is mentioned as trying to get Moses to stop Eldad and Medad from prophesying in the camp (Numbers 11:28).



He is also mentioned among the spies that were sent into Canaan – though here there are obvious signs that his name has been inserted into an older story (see Numbers 13:16; 14:6, 30, 38; 26:65). Because of the role he is portrayed as playing in the spy scene, he and Caleb are the only ones of the Exodus generation who will enter the Promised Land, ‘for they have unreservedly followed YHWH’(Numbers 32:12). Moses is instructed by YHWH:

Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay your hand upon him ...  
So Moses did as YHWH commanded him. He took Joshua and had him stand before Eleazar the priest and the whole congregation; he laid his hands on him and commissioned him—as YHWH had directed through Moses.

– Numbers 27:18; 27:22-23

Finally Joshua and the priest Eleazar are instructed by Moses in regard to the arrangement for the Transjordan tribes (Numbers 32:28), and they are named as the ones who will apportion the land to the tribes when they cross into the Promised Land (Numbers 34:17).

Every time Joshua is mentioned in the Book of Deuteronomy it is as the one who will lead Israel in taking possession of the Promised Land. The closer one looks at the references to Joshua in the Moses stories, the more likely it appears that Joshua has been read back into the story, or, perhaps better, that in composing the Moses’ story the authors wanted to illustrate that the understanding of God and the values of the nascent people of Israel (including the men such as Joshua, who were remembered as playing a leading role in their emergence in Canaan as a special people), are the understandings and the values revealed by God to Moses. As mentioned earlier, Joshua the man is portrayed as the ideal leader. In the opening verses of the book he is introduced as Moses’ assistant and his success comes from the fact that he was faithful to the teaching of Moses, that is, to the revelation given by God to Moses (and contained in the Book of Deuteronomy). All successive leaders are judged by this criterion in the Deuteronomistic History. YHWH promises to be with Joshua as he was with Moses. This is the God, and these are the values to which the prophets kept referring in their critique of the sins, especially of the monarchy, but also of the people. Joshua adhered faithfully to the new understanding of God that he received from the ‘Moses-group’ who brought their message of liberation into the hill country of Canaan.

The first draft of the book of Joshua was probably composed by court scribes to support the desire of King Josiah to reclaim the Promised Land. They drew on some old traditions, but these have been reworked in an attempt to create a ‘heroic past’. They focus on what YHWH has done in the unfolding story of Israel. They speak of the kinds of infidelity that continue to cripple the nation, while, at the same time, insisting on the fidelity and compassion of YHWH. This fidelity and compassion of YHWH is the source of their hope. There is always the possibility of repentance, because YHWH is faithful, even if the people are not. The fundamental values of wonder, of awe, of gratitude, of listening, of obedience, of worship, of covenant love, of justice, of heeding the cry of the poor, these are the fundamental values of Israel. They identify Israel and make it special. When these values are lived, Israel is the people it is called to be with its own blessed life. When they are not lived Israel loses all meaning.

They are telling their contemporaries that Israel had experienced many defeats, but it was not always like that. In the beginning, when the ideal leader, Joshua, faithfully listened to YHWH, YHWH gave them victory over their enemies. It could be the same again, if only Judah learned to be faithful. Joshua is the story of the emergence of Israel in the hill country of Canaan and it is based on legends that developed in the sanctuaries of Gilgal, a border sanctuary near Jericho, Shechem, another border sanctuary in the hill country, and perhaps other sanctuaries as well, that told of the campaigns and alliances that were part of the struggle against the city states that had dominated the whole region, and that continued to control the plain of Esdraelon and the coastal corridor to Egypt.

The historical emergence of Israel in Canaan in the closing years of the thirteenth century BC has been embellished by folklore and at times is formulated in the language of cultic celebration. There is history in the Book of Joshua, the history of the adhesion to YHWH of scattered clans in the hill country of Canaan, but it is history always at the service of theology. The book of Joshua, like the works of the Torah, is before all else the story of God's self-revelation in the story of the people of Israel.

The contribution of the Deuteronomists to the Book of Joshua is clearest in the account of the passing of leadership from Moses to Joshua, in the speeches, in the insistence on exclusive worship of YHWH and the observance of the Torah, in the covenant blessings and curses and in seeing the achievements under Joshua as the fulfilment of the promises made to the patriarchs. The contribution of the Priests is seen in the cultic shape of the crossing of the Jordan and the fall of Jericho, in the naming of the priest Eleazar before that of Joshua (see 14:1; 19:512) and in the section on the Levites (chapter 21).

The story of YHWH's gift of the land to Joshua had to be re-thought when Jerusalem was conquered and destroyed, and again after the return. It was originally closely linked with the Patriarchal stories. In Joshua YHWH fulfilled the promises made to Abraham. When Persia sent Nehemiah to Judah as governor in the middle of the fifth century, and also the priest, Ezra, attention was focussed on producing the Torah, the basic constitution of Judah. The Book of Joshua was separated from the Books of Moses, and placed at the head of the Former Prophets: Judges, Samuel and Kings.

In an article 'Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomists' published in *Old Testament Interpretation: past, present and future* (edited by Mays, Petersen and Richards, and published by T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1995, pages 61-79), Douglas Knight writes (page 61) in reference to the Deuteronomic History:

There is overwhelming evidence that the text was reworked by an editor or editors employing distinctive styles, language, perspectives, themes and intentions. These redactors did not passively collect and reproduce the old traditions that came down to them, but often recast them substantially by inserting editorial comments and organising them according to a schematic plan.

The fact that there are many substantial differences between the Massoretic Hebrew text and the Septuagint Greek text supports the view of those scholars who conclude that Joshua kept being edited after it was translated into Greek – that is, into the second century BC.

## **Judges**

The Book of Judges is a compilation by the Deuteronomists in exile in Babylon of epic stories of people who were significant in one or other of the tribal areas during the twelfth and eleventh centuries BC, from the death of Joshua to the emergence of the monarchy. These were, for the most part, difficult years during which those who espoused the worship of YHWH had to struggle with the tension of resisting old Canaanite habits which they continued to find attractive, as well as having to fight for their survival against the city-states of the plain of Esdraelon, the Philistines in the coastal districts, and Bedouin invaders from the south and east. The stories of local 'heroes' are told to entertain, but more importantly to encourage people to continue the struggle. Folklore, rather than history, would be a better way of characterising these stories, though there is an historical background to them.

The term 'Judges' is not a very helpful category for the motley group of leaders that feature in the scroll. When they are first introduced it is as people raised up by YHWH to save the people who cry out to God in their distress (see Judges 2:8). YHWH is described as 'one who judges' (Judges 11:27). Perhaps this is the point. These historical romances are primarily about YHWH, and YHWH's judgment as revealed in history (a point reinforced by the Book being included among the 'Former Prophets'). Only secondarily are they about the way in which the people of Israel, including the 'judges' whom God raised up to reveal his judgment, are faithful or unfaithful to the covenant.

As with the stories of Moses and Joshua, these stories do not set out to give accurate information about the past. Their aim is to form people's consciousness. Israel's liberty was threatened because the people did not come to each other's assistance. Israel was threatened when the people failed to live in obedience to YHWH's will. YHWH, however, is portrayed as always ready to hear their cry and come to their help. The stories portray the past in ways that will encourage fidelity to YHWH in the present. In this context it is interesting that the so-called 'judges' are not idealised but portrayed in all their human frailty. Like the Book of Joshua, this is above and beyond anything else the story of YHWH's presence and action in the life of his people.

## **The Books of Samuel**

The Books of Samuel are the work of the Deuteronomists, composed during the period of the Babylonian Exile, from already existing narrative blocks: the story of Saul, the story of the Ark, the story of David's becoming king, the stories about the conflict between David's sons, and the story of Bathsheba and her son Solomon. The influence of the Deuteronomists is obvious throughout. The fact that the Deuteronomists were collating and editing the material in exile helps explain the element of criticism of the institution of kingship. This is softened by the hope that YHWH's promise to David would mean that the punishment of exile would not be YHWH's last word. The Book is named after the great judge and prophet raised up by God in the second half of the eleventh century BC. Before the age of printing (15th century AD), the Hebrew Bible had only a single book named after Samuel. It covered the story of Samuel, and the first two kings of Israel: Saul and David.

In the second century BC those responsible for the Greek Version divided this material into two books: the First and Second Books of the Kingdoms. The division was basically a matter of the convenient size for a scroll. Naming both books after Samuel, as the Hebrew Bible does (even though Samuel's death occurs as early as 1Samuel 25:1), is an important reminder that the focus is on what YHWH is doing. The First Book of Samuel is about the prophet Samuel and Saul, the first king of Israel. The Second Book of Samuel covers the reign of David, who was chosen as king by YHWH and consecrated by the prophet Samuel.

### **The Books of Kings**

The First Book of Kings covers the reign of Solomon (c.970 to 931BC). The Deuteronomists refer to 'The Acts of Solomon'(see 1Kings 11:41), which unfortunately is not extant. In their presentation of the reigns of David and Solomon, as well as using court and temple records, and some written narrative material, the Deuteronomists drew on legends that had come down through centuries of oral tradition, and they painted a picture of a glorious Golden Age during which the ancient promises made to Abraham were realised. The kingdom of David and Solomon, as portrayed in the writings of the Deuteronomists, was the Holy Land promised by God.

The findings of recent archaeology reveal Judah at the time of David and Solomon as sparsely populated with no major urban centres. Jerusalem itself was a typical, small, hill country village, and Judah had about 20 small villages, with a few thousand inhabitants, many of whom were pastoralists moving around with their flocks. This reinforces the awareness that the stories of David and Solomon's 'empire' are, like the ancient 'history' of many other ancient empires, an idealisation of the past with a view to building up the pride of those to whom the writings were addressed by getting them to honour their past and live up to the values enshrined in their 'glorious history'.

### **Kings of Judah**

As already noted, the Deuteronomists' focus is on YHWH's presence and action, and on the kings only to praise or blame them for the way they carried out their duties. They refer the reader interested in history to the 'Annals of the Kings of Judah'. This is no help to us as the Annals is not extant.

The Deuteronomists regularly relate the beginning of a king's reign to the reign of the contemporary king of Israel. If we disregard this for the moment and focus only on the sequence of kings and on the number of years each king of Judah is said to have reigned the following chart offers approximate dates. Following Gershon Galil, it is based on the assumption that Rehoboam's reign in Judah and Jeroboam's reign in Israel began in 931BC. It also assumes that from the tenth to the eighth centuries Judah followed the Egyptian practice of counting the time (however short) before the New Year as the first year of a king's reign. The New Year after his accession is calculated as the beginning of his second year. In the seventh century under Assyrian influence, they appear to have counted the first year from the New Year after the beginning of a king's reign.

Rehoboam (931-915) 1Kings 11:43 - 14:31  
Abijam (915-913) 1Kings 14:31 - 15:2  
Asa (912-871) 1Kings 15:8-24  
Jehoshaphat (870-846) 1Kings 15:24 - 22:50  
Jehoram (848-841) 1Kings 22:50 - 2Kings 9:24  
Ahaziah (841) 2Kings 8:25-29  
Athaliah (841-835) 2Kings 11:3-20  
Joash (835-796) 2Kings 11:21 - 13:13  
Amaziah (798-770) 2Kings 14:1-18

[It seems that from 798-796 Amaziah was co-regent with his father]

Azariah [Uzziah] (785-734) 2Kings 15:1-6

[Azariah was co-regent from 785-770; see 2Kings 14:13]

Jotham (749-734) 2Kings 15:32-38

[Jotham was co-regent from 749-734; see 2Kings 15:5]

Ahaz (734-727) 2Kings 16:1-20

Hezekiah (727-699) 2Kings 18:1 - 20:21

[Hezekiah reigned in his own right from 715; see 2Kings 18:10,13]

Manasseh (698-643) 2Kings 22:1-18

Amon (642-641) 2Kings 21:18-25

Josiah (640-609) 2Kings 21:26 - 23:30

Jehoahaz (609) 2Kings 23:30-34

Jehoiakim (609-598) 2Kings 23:34 - 24:6

Jehoiachin (597) 2Kings 24:6 - 25:29

### **Kings of Israel**

If we limit ourselves to the sequence of kings and the duration of their reigns (recorded in the *Annals of the Kings of Israel*) once again a consistent picture emerges (except for the length of the reign of Pekah, 2Kings 15:27).

Jeroboam (931-910) 1Kings 12:20 - 14:20

Nadab (910-909) 1Kings 14:20 - 15:31

Baasha (909-886) 1Kings 15:16 - 16:6

Elah (886-885) 1Kings 16:6-14

Zimri (885) 1Kings 16:19-20

Omri (885-874) 1Kings 16:16-21

Ahab (874-853) 1Kings 16:28 - 22:40

Ahaziah (853-852) 1Kings 22:20 - 2Kings 1:17

Jehoram (852-841) 2Kings 1:17 - 3:1

Jehu (841-814) 2Kings 9:13 - 10:36  
Jehoahaz (813-797) 2Kings 10:35 - 13:9  
Jehoash (799-784) 2Kings 13:10 - 14:16  
Jeroboam II (788-748) 2Kings 14:16-29  
Zechariah (748) 2Kings 15:8-11  
Shallum (747) 2Kings 15:10-15  
Menahem (747-737) 2Kings 15:14-22  
Pekahiah (736-735) 2Kings 15:22-26  
Pekah (734-730) 2Kings 15:25 - 16:5  
Hoshea (730-722) 2Kings 15:30 - 18:10.

### **Synchronising the reigns of the kings of Judah and Israel**

A lot is made of the impossibility of synchronising all the information given by the Deuteronomists concerning the dates of the kings of Judah and Israel. For the reader interested in examining this issue, I recommend *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* by E. R. Thiele (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan-Academie, 3rd edition 1983), *The Chronology of the kings of Israel and Judah* by Gershon Galil (Leider, 1996), and the article on 'Chronology' by Mordecai Cogan in the Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary.

It is in the attempt by the Deuteronomists to relate the year of the beginning of a king's reign to the reign of the king in the neighbouring kingdom that inconsistencies arise. This may have been because of a lack of clarity in the archives that arrived south from Israel. Furthermore, the dates of a king's reign were based on the New Year. One complication is that while Judah began the New Year in Spring, Israel, at least in the early years, appears to have had the New Year in Autumn. Also some texts include the period of co-regency, others do not. These two factors may help explain many of the minor inconsistencies. The mistake in 2Kings 15:27 in regard to Pekah accounts for the mistake in 2Kings 16:1 in regard to Ahaz. The most obvious inconsistency is in relation to the beginning of the reign of Hoshea. 2Kings 15:30 says it was 'in the twentieth year of Jotham'. 2Kings 17:1 says it was 'in the twelfth year of King Ahaz.' No doubt the Deuteronomists were aware of these inconsistencies, and were doing their best to faithfully collate different pieces of information from a very confusing period in the final years of the northern kingdom.

### **The Deuteronomic 'History'**

Composing their narrative in the light of the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile in Babylon, the Deuteronomists are critical of the failure of political leadership, but they are not in principle against having a monarch so long as he is faithful to the covenant. One of the lessons of the Book of Judges is the anarchy that prevailed in the pre-monarchy period. If the exiles repent, and if God responds to their repentance by trusting them, once again, with the Promised Land, they will need leaders, but these leaders must be faithful to YHWH.

The aim of the Deuteronomists was to inspire fidelity to the essential elements of the covenant that they believed their ancestors had entered into with God, a covenant that identified them as a people. They were convinced that only obedience would ensure blessing and so success. They treated the traditions that they inherited with the greatest reverence and care. They believed that YHWH was guiding them and they reflected on their history, searching for YHWH's will for them as a people. However, they wrote, necessarily, from their own perspective.

The Deuteronomists' work during the period of the Exile was composed against the background of the terrible events of 587BC when they lost their land, their temple and their king. Their focus is on the Torah. Their judgment is that the fall of Jerusalem was God's punishment for a long history of failure to be faithful to the covenant, especially on the part of the rulers (with the notable exceptions of David, Hezekiah and Josiah). The way the kings are portrayed may in some way resemble the historical figures who bore their names, for legends tend to have a basis in historical memory, but they are portrayed in the often gripping stories of the Deuteronomists so as to represent the qualities that are expected of leaders, and the character flaws that aroused YHWH's anger and led to the catastrophe of 587BC. The Deuteronomists saw the monarchy as the main culprit for the loss of the Promised Land. YHWH's abandoning of his people as seen in the loss of Jerusalem and the temple provided the key questions that the authors were desperate to answer as they pored over the court records of Israel and Judah.

Three things stand out in the Deuteronomists' presentation of the history of the kings of Israel and Judah. The first is that King David, with all his undeniable faults, is portrayed as having the essential qualities required of a king. Subsequent kings of Judah are judged by how they measure up to his standard of fidelity to YHWH. His dynasty continued even when kings were unfaithful because of YHWH's commitment to David. The second is that Jeroboam, who is portrayed as being responsible for the northern kingdom breaking away from Judah, is judged as guilty of apostasy, and every king of Israel after him is condemned for carrying on the apostasy. The third is that it is YHWH who is determining events, and who expresses his will through his prophets. Whatever the kings think they are doing, it is YHWH who is pulling the strings.