

Session 6: The Deuteronomic History

A. Summary of Deuteronomy

In this session we move from the book of Deuteronomy to the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, which together have been described as the 'Deuteronomic history'. What is the connection between these books and Deuteronomy and what does this mean for the way we are to understand them?

We begin with a summary of the main conclusions to emerge from our study of Deuteronomy:

- a) It was the work of a group of scholars closely related to the prophets and concerned for purity of worship. They may have been priests, prophets, scribes or all three.
- b) It was compiled over a time between the 8th century, the time of Amos and Hosea, and 621 B.C. during the reign of Josiah when it was 'discovered' in the Temple.
- c) The compilers have taken Israel's tradition of law and reinterpreted it for their time. Some things they have left almost the same: the law on slavery in 15:12-18 is almost the same as that in Exodus 21: 2-6, but there is a characteristic addition about the motive which should govern the actions of the man who sets his slave free.
- d) Some things are entirely new, in particular the insistence on one and only one place of worship. This runs clean contrary to earlier law and practice. But the compilers would have seen this as wholly in keeping with the spirit of the law, whose purpose was to ensure the faithfulness and distinctiveness of Israel. They saw the more or less unregulated worship of the local shrines as a major source of error tending to lead Israel astray and the priests of the local shrines as too ignorant to teach the people aright. The solution was to centralise all worship to one place where it could be properly regulated and the law faithfully taught.

If we reflect on Deuteronomy, it is also apparent that as well as the tradition of law, the compilers were also reinterpreting Israel's history according to a particular criterion: whether or not they had been faithful to Yahweh. In adopting Canaanite fertility cults such as the worship of Baal, and in worshipping Yahweh at high places they had been unfaithful. When the king places himself above the law he is being unfaithful and is likely to bring the whole nation to ruin. When Israel fails to listen to the prophets Yahweh sends, they are being unfaithful. Thus we have in Deuteronomy the seeds of an interpretation of Israelite history. In this session, we will look more closely at the way that reinterpretation is carried through.