

Session 6: The Deuteronomic History

B. Explaining a national disaster

Activity 6.1

Read 2 Kings 17:1-23

What connections can you find with Deuteronomy in the explanation given here for the fall of Samaria?

A national disaster needed an explanation. Why had Yahweh allowed the defeat of his people, whom he had chosen? The explanation given in this chapter is clearly drawn from the same set of ideas about God and his purposes that we find in the book of Deuteronomy:

- Israel had been defeated because they were unfaithful
- They had ignored the law, which told them not to worship idols
- They had ignored the prophets, who Yahweh had sent to warn them of the consequences of unfaithfulness
- They had broken the covenant, so that it was not simply that Yahweh had removed his protection, but had allowed them to be defeated as his own judgement.

Verses 19 and 20 show us that the national disaster to be explained was not simply the defeat of Israel. Over a century later, in 587 B.C., Jerusalem met a similar fate at the hands of the Babylonians. The question God's people were asking was, Why had he allowed this? And the answer was to be found in her history.

Thus the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings present a comprehensive history of God's people from the conquest of Canaan to the fall of Jerusalem to explain why Israel, God's covenant people, had to be defeated and why, despite their defeat, God was still very much in control.

The point of view of the compilers is very straightforward: Israel is a nation under covenant; as long as they keep the covenant all will go well, when they fail things will not go well, exactly as set out in the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy 28 as well as the warnings sprinkled throughout the book. In particular, they are to worship nowhere but the place where Yahweh has 'made his name to dwell' (Deuteronomy 12:5,11; 1 Kings 8:13). Worshipping at the local shrines is not only wrong in itself but liable to lead them astray.

In keeping the nation faithful, its kings have a key role to play. If the king is obedient, things will go well; if disobedient Yahweh may punish Israel or Judah. To know how to be faithful kings must study the law (as in Deuteronomy 17:18-19) and pay heed to the prophets (as in Deuteronomy 18: 15). Throughout the historical books there is great interest in the role of the prophets and the way their words came to be fulfilled.

Activity 6.2

Read the following passages as examples of the key role of the prophets in the Deuteronomic history:

Judges 2:27-end
– 13:6

1 Kings 11:26-39

1 Kings 12:25

and recall the story of Micaiah in 1 Kings 22, which we looked at in session 3

This point of view is very similar to that of Deuteronomy, which is why these books have been called the 'Deuteronomic history'. But they are not exactly the same, so it can be seen that this group of compilers is not the same as that of Deuteronomy. In the history, the faithfulness of God's people is seen to depend almost entirely on their worship at the single sanctuary; there is very little mention of injustice, which is a major theme of Deuteronomy and of the prophets before them.