

Session 6: The Deuteronomic History

C. The techniques of the compilers

How do the compilers put their view of history across? There are three main techniques:

C1. Summaries of the reigns of the kings

Activity 6.3

Read the following passages summarising the reigns of particular kings:

Abijam of Judah: 1 Kings 15:1-8

Asa of Judah: 1 Kings 15:9-24

Baasha of Israel: 1 Kings 15:33 – 16:8

What actions are identified as good or evil in the lives of these kings?

What are the consequences for each?

What is the compiler's explanation for why disaster does not befall the bad king Abijam despite his unfaithfulness?

We will be looking more closely at the answer to the last question in a future section of this session.

C2. Editorial passages

One of these is the one we examined in 2 Kings 17. Another comes at the start of the record of the judges in Judges 2:6 – 3:6. However, if we compare the overview of the judges given in this passage with the actual records that follow and what we know of the history of the time, we notice some discrepancies. For example:

- The impression is given that each of the judges ruled the whole of Israel. The periods of rule given for the judges total over 400 years and according to 1 Kings 6:1 the Temple was built 480 years after the exodus. This dating confused many scholars in previous generations. In fact, the most likely date for the exodus is in the 13th century B.C. which means that there are only about 200 years for the judges to fit between the conquest of the land and the reign of Saul (see the time chart). Most of the judges seem to have been local rulers, each of whom led a group of tribes rather than the whole of Israel, and this means that some of them may have ruled different portions of Israel concurrently.
- The passage also gives the impression of unity between the tribes for the whole of this period, whereas the records in the rest of the book include accounts of inter-tribal rivalry and even warfare (for example in chapters 9 and 12).
- Although the passages says that God sent the judges in answer to Israel's prayers for deliverance, in the case of Samson, no one asks for deliverance. In fact, the rest of his tribe prefer peaceful co-existence with the Philistines and even hand him over to them (Judges 15:9-13).

We will look more closely at the significance of these discrepancies and others like them in the next section of this session.

C3. Speeches in the mouths of principal characters

Activity 6.4

Read the most important of these speeches and note how each of them conveys and elaborates the compilers' point of view:

Samuel on kingship: 1 Samuel 8:10-18 and 12:6-18

Solomon's dedication prayer for the Temple: 1 Kings 8:14-53

Ahijah's warning to Jeroboam: 1 Kings 11:29-39

Yahweh himself to Joshua: Joshua 1:1-9

The last of these examples forms the introduction not only to the book of Joshua but to the whole history and foreshadows its overall theological approach:

- The land belongs to Israel because Yahweh promised it to their ancestors
- Yahweh commissions Joshua as the man through whom this land is to be given to them
- Joshua is to have faith: he is to be 'strong and courageous'
- He is to know the law, study it constantly and keep it
- 'This book of the law' is Deuteronomy, which forms the preface to the history
- As long as Joshua keeps the law, there will be 'good success'

Nowadays we would see it as 'unhistorical' for an historian to make up a speech like this. Our idea of history is that the historian should give us an account as close as possible to what actually happened. Making up a speech and putting it into the mouth of a principal character is seen as falsifying history. Because we think like this about history, passages like this present us with a problem. We can either decide that if the passage says Yahweh said something it must be true: the compilers' point of view, so clearly enunciated here, must also be Yahweh's and derived directly from him. Or we could decide that since it is clear that this speech is an invention of the compilers rather than a genuine speech of Yahweh, it has little authority.

But that is not the way ancient history writers worked. For the ancients, to put a speech into the mouth of a character was a standard technique. There are plenty of examples in writers like Thucydides, the Greek historian. By putting into the mouth of a principal character what he or she 'should' have said in a given situation, they help their reader to understand what was at stake and what the issues were. It is their way of conveying an interpretation of the past, which is what history is. The compilers of the Deuteronomistic history had an insight into how Israel's history should be understood, which they believed to come from God. They were using the accepted techniques of ancient history writing to convey this to their audience.

Unlike the words of the prophets, this part of the Old Testament was a written word from the start. But it obeys the same rules as compiled prophecy: Yahweh must bring it alive for each new generation. The act of bringing together the historical records of the nation, selecting and compiling was a way of bringing God's word to his people in exile, helping them to understand their situation. In the same way these words have come alive in the present for generations of

Christians. Many, facing a difficult task in God's service, have taken heart from his words to Joshua. And this is the way the Bible is intended to speak. The word may have been given to particular people at a particular time – in this case to God's people in exile – but it contains an enduring message, in this case the need for obedience and trust in God if we are to serve him faithfully and successfully.