

Session 6: The Deuteronomic History

D4. Making sense of difference

How are we to make sense of these differences and discrepancies?

Essentially, we need to recognise that for the prophets and the Old Testament writers, their grasp of the word of the Lord was LIMITED. They were men (and perhaps women) with particular personalities and temperament and each lived in a particular historical situation.

The characteristics which were their greatest strengths were in some cases also their greatest weaknesses:

- The prophet Elijah was a loner with not much time for the prophetic groups. In the drought he went off on his own, depending on Yahweh for provision, which enabled him to escape from detection by Ahab and Jezebel. It was this that gave him the strength to stand up to Jezebel and to stand out from the prevailing current of syncretism.
- Hosea's grasp of Yahweh's nature and purpose came through the experience of his unhappy marriage, his love for Gomer which persisted despite disappointment. He was thus given an insight no one had had before into the love and faithfulness of Yahweh.
- The Deuteronomists saw the problem of unfaithfulness and syncretistic worship at local shrines and 'high places' all over the country, where the priests were untaught and failing to pass on the knowledge of Yahweh. Their solution was to stamp out the local shrines and to bring all worship to Jerusalem, where people would learn the true knowledge of Yahweh.

Each had a partial grasp of the truth. But in the Old Testament as a whole there is often a larger pattern. That is why different traditions and in some cases plain contradictions are allowed to stand. The compilers of the prophetic books, the histories and other literature recognised that the texts they inherited had been words of the Lord for their own time, even where they believed that something different needed to be said in their particular situation.

A scientist often encounters anomalies: a set of results that appears to contradict the accepted theory. When that happens, he or she has a choice: reject the results, on the assumption that the experiment must have been faulty in some way; or reject the theory, on the grounds that the results disprove it. Or, he or she can hold on to both, realising that the theory is the best available at the present time, but that the anomalous results, if they are not a mistake, may point towards a better one. The Old Testament writers acted like good scientists. They recognised and respected the word of the Lord in each particular situation, even when these appeared to contradict one another, believing that the God with whom we have to do is bigger than we can discern from our own limited points of view.

In the next section, I will suggest an example of a bigger pattern which may point beyond even contradictory sources.