

Session 7: The Wisdom Tradition

A. Sources in the Deuteronomistic History

The Deuteronomistic history imposes a particular overall viewpoint on the history of God's people. It does this through the techniques of editorial passages, summaries of the reigns of the kings and speeches given to major characters such as Solomon's dedication prayer for the Temple, Samuel's warnings on the dangers of monarchy and Yahweh's commissioning speech to Joshua. The history was compiled during the exile to teach Israel the lessons of her history: loyalty to Yahweh is rewarded and disobedience punished. Loyalty is focused on faithful worship, with Jerusalem as the central place of worship; compromise with the indigenous religions of Canaan is seen as disobedience.

But within this overall plan, the history preserve a variety of sources, each of which has its own outlook, and some of which diverge from the rather neat point of view of the Deuteronomistic compilers. Not all of these see worship at the local shrines as wrong. And most interesting of all, they often give us a glimpse of the mentality and beliefs of the time. In this section we will look at just two of these.

A1. David and Saul

1 Samuel 26:17-19

Saul recognized David's voice, and said, 'Is that your voice, my son David?' David said, 'It is my voice, my lord, O king.' And he added, 'Why does my lord pursue his servant? For what have I done? What guilt is on my hands? Now therefore let my lord the king hear the words of his servant. If it is the Lord who has stirred you up against me, may he accept an offering; but if it is mortals, may they be cursed before the Lord, for they have driven me out today from my share in the heritage of the Lord, saying, "Go, serve other gods."

This passage is part of the story of David's flight from Saul. Saul is jealous of David, afraid that he will try to take the kingdom, and is trying to kill him. David is fleeing, along with a band of outlaws, but refuses to take Saul's life because he recognises the mystique of kingship, which he hopes to inherit. His aim is to shame Saul into abandoning his pursuit. This speech of David to Saul offers two fascinating insights into the beliefs and mentality of the time:

- the possibility that it is Yahweh who has stirred Saul up against David and that, if so, he may be pacified with a sacrifice
- the belief that each god is the lord of a particular piece of territory: if David is forced outside the borders of Israel he will be forced to worship the god of the territory in which he is exiled

These beliefs are very different from the theology with which we are familiar, which is that of the later editors and compilers of the Old Testament. In this theology, Yahweh is the God of the whole earth and can be worshipped anywhere. Nor is he an unpredictable, fickle God who might stir up enmity between people without cause. But this source, probably written much closer to the time of David and Saul, may give an indication of the kind of thing the historical David actually believed.

A2. Wrath comes on Israel

Activity 7.1

Read 2 Kings 3

How do you explain the enigmatic words in verse 27?

Here we have the account of a joint expedition on the part of three kings – Jehoram of Israel, Jehoshaphat of Judah (who seems to have been keen on joint action: see 1 Kings 22) and the king of Edom – against the king of Moab.

At least two features of this story stand out as puzzling. First, although a prophet of Yahweh, Elisha seems to require the techniques of the pagan and ecstatic prophets before he receives a message from the Lord. He calls for a musician and only when a trance is induced is he able to convey a message.

The second puzzling feature is the effect of the king of Moab's child sacrifice. According to the theology with which we are familiar, this was an abomination. It was moreover, made in the name of a false pagan god, whom we are used to thinking of as non-existent. But this source takes the power of such a sacrifice at face value. Its result is that 'wrath' came upon Israel, whose army had to withdraw. Was this because they were violating the land by ruining it with stones, as is forbidden in Israelite law (verse 25; see Deuteronomy 20:19-20, although this may be a much later law)? Was it because the Israelite troops who witnessed this were appalled at what they saw? Or was it, as the language of the source suggests, because the human sacrifice, awful as it was, really had power?