Römer, Thomas

*The So-Called Deuteronomistic History: A Sociological, Historical and Literary Introduction*


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For some time now there has been a need for an up-to-date, comprehensive treatment of the Deuteronomistic History that both deals with the confusion of recent views in the debate over this corpus of texts from Deuteronomy to 2 Kings and offers a clearly articulated and balanced presentation of its critical analysis as a whole. This little introduction fulfills all of those expectations very well. Thomas Römer has been actively engaged in research and publication in this field for over two decades, and this particular work, which has been in the making for some time, has finally appeared.

After a short introduction for the uninitiated reader or student, followed by a brief survey of the content of the biblical corpus under examination, Römer gives us a concise review of past scholarship on the Deuteronomistic History down to the present state of the discussion, with special focus on the seminal work of Martin Noth and the subsequent reactions and modifications to his work, and in some cases its outright rejection. In his review he examines the key issues of what it means to label this corpus “Deuteronomistic” and whether or not it is appropriate to call it a “history.”

With these preliminaries addressed, Römer sets forth his thesis of a Deuteronomistic “school” or “scribal guild” whose work extended from the time of Josiah, through the Babylonian exile, to the restoration in the early Persian period, producing in stages the
literary corpus that now makes up the texts of Deuteronomy to 2 Kings in three successive “editions.” While the Deuteronomic ideology originated in the cultic reform of Josiah, each new historical set of circumstances led to modifications in viewpoint that are now reflected in the additional “redactional layers.” Römer finds these three successive editorial layers already evident within the centralization law in Deut 12 and sets out to apply this observation to the rest of the Deuteronomic corpus in the following chapters.

In chapter 4 Römer lays out the social and historical context of the Neo-Assyrian period, which scholars find so strongly reflected in cultural and ideological imitation in parts of Deuteronomy and Joshua, but not in Judges, and in parts of the stories of David and Solomon, as well as the history of the monarchies down to the time of Josiah. From these clues Römer reconstructs a small Deuteronomic library collection consisting of a first edition of Deuteronomy, a story of the conquest by Joshua found primarily in Josh 6–12, and a first history of the monarchy from David to Josiah. The function of these works was primarily as propaganda to offer “ideological support for the politics of centralization and for the claim that the kingdom of Judah was the ‘real Israel’” after the demise of the northern kingdom.

Likewise, in chapter 5 Römer describes the social and historical conditions of the Neo-Babylonian period and the exile as the context in which he sees the next edition of the Deuteronomic History. This edition reflects a “mandarin” scribal group of former royal bureaucrats who created an ideology of exile (in contrast to the perspectives of priest and prophet) and who constructed a comprehensive history of Israel and Judah from Moses to the end of the monarchy with an attempt to account for the great disaster as divine punishment. This led not only to extensive supplementation of Deuteronomy and Joshua, making them part of the larger history, but also to the creation of the period of the judges out of old northern hero tales to bridge the gap to the time of the monarchy. Key ideological passages were added at appropriate points of the history but most extensively in Deuteronomy, which were specially made for the audience of the Golah. It is apparently only at this time that the royal edict of Josiah inaugurating cultic reform became the law of Moses against which the whole history of the people was judged. By far the largest bulk of texts that are considered as Deuteronomic belong to this “edition,” with the result that Römer spends much more time in his treatment of texts in this layer.

This leaves a rather brief discussion of the final phase of Deuteronomic editing in the Persian period, in which the main concerns became separation from “the nations” as ideological segregation from those who did not adhere to the law of Moses, a shift to monotheism in which Israel’s God is the only true deity, and the book of the law that became the central focus of religious concern, especially for the Diaspora. This is
highlighted in the story of the discovery of the book in 2 Kgs 22 and 23, added to the account of the reform by this late edition. Beyond these Deuteronomistic editions there were other non-Deuteronomistic additions made to the corpus that tended to obscure its role as a history of the people and yield to a wide range of ideological and didactic concerns.

This proposal of a three-stage development of the Deuteronomistic History is presented as a compromise among the various theories, in which the first edition reflects the Cross/Harvard school, which advocates a preexilic first edition, while the major exilic second edition corresponds largely to the original thesis of Noth, and the final postexilic edition emphasizes the DtrN edition of the Smend/Göttingen school. Yet the problem remains as to whether or not one can convincingly correlate the various strata of the text with the appropriate criteria that are thought to distinguish the different editions. This may be illustrated with a few examples. The first case is the correlation of the first edition of Deuteronomy, reflecting strong Assyrian influence on its use of the covenant/treaty form, with the account of the cultic reform in 2 Kgs 22–23. Römer assigns to this edition 2 Kgs 22:1–7*, 9, 13α; 23:1, 3-15*, 25αα. This reconstructed account by itself is quite incoherent. It begins, after the introductory formula for Josiah’s reign, with the inauguration of a renovation of the temple (vv. 3-7, 9), which is then abruptly interrupted by an assembly of the people to announce a covenant between king and deity that included the people, based on the content of a book (23:1, 3). This presumably correlates with the covenant/treaty language of Deut 13 and 28 that is part of Römer’s first edition. The “words of the covenant that were written in this book” (23:3) have reference to “the words of the book of the covenant that were found in the house of Yahweh” that were read out to all the people as a necessary part of the covenant ceremony (v. 2), but Römer relegates the discovery of the book to the third edition, so this verse must not be included in this stage. Römer adds to the exilic edition the account of the consultation of Hulda the prophetess in 22:14–20 but eliminates from it all references to the book as belonging to the third edition; however, this eliminates the motivation for the consultation in the first place. This seems to me a case of special pleading.

The description of the cultic reform in 2 Kgs 23:4–14 seems to be directed primarily at the elimination of all foreign cults and the purification of the worship of Yahweh (see also 22:17), but it does not seem to be specifically concerned with centralization, which may be only a by-product of such activity. What is striking is that the specific language referring to centralization of worship in Deut 12 is not found in this unit, although it certainly occurs elsewhere in Kings. Instead, we have the language of Deut 12:2–3, which is regarded by Römer as belonging to the latest edition. The negative remarks about Solomon in 2 Kgs 23:13 also fit with Römer’s second edition of Kings, not his first (see Römer, 151). One could go through the unit and eliminate all of these interconnections as...
“redactional” additions, but this would make the report of the reform less and less Deuteronomistic. The fracturing of the account in 2 Kgs 22–23 into three strata seems to rest entirely on the need to reflect three editions in this text.

Furthermore, the motivation for the consultation of Hulda, the covenant making, and the reform that follows is a complete enigma without the discovery of the book with its dire threats in the curses of Deut 28 as reflected in 2 Kgs 22:13, but this is attributed to the third edition. Now, Römer is aware of the fact that there are Near Eastern parallels to this feature in the story of finding ancient documents in temples, which are then used to justify royal activity, and he cites some examples of these, although none from the Persian period, which is his date for this episode in Kings. However, he does not cite the best example, the Shabaka Stone, which contains the so-called “Memphite Theology.” King Shabaka of the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty (ca. 710 B.C.E.) claims to have found this document in worm-eaten condition, which he then restored and inscribed in stone. It purports to be a very ancient text, “a work of the ancestors,” written in very archaic language that scholars for a long time thought was dated to the Old Kingdom but was actually composed in Shabaka’s own time. This king clearly intended it to serve his own ideological and propagandist purposes: “in order that his name might endure and his monument last in the House of his father Ptah-South-of-his-Wall throughout eternity” (see M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975-80], 1:51–57; 3:5). Based on this and other parallels, it makes the best sense to see this “discovery” of the book as belonging to the time of Josiah and used for similar political and religious purposes of his own day. If this is the case, it would largely dissolve all the arguments for a third DtrN edition.

The application of the criteria of Assyriological parallels for dating purposes can be used rather selectively, applied when it is useful or ignored when it is not. Thus Römer advocates an early preexilic version of Joshua in Josh 6–12 because it so nicely corresponds with Assyriological conventions. This also allows him to view this early version of the conquest as quite separate from Deuteronomy, in which Joshua is the successor to Moses. The commissioning of Joshua would then be seen in the account in Josh 5:13–15, a scene that also has its Assyrian parallels. However, in Assyrian texts it does not have the function of investiture but rather serves as a divine revelation given to the king before an important battle, and that is clearly the function in Joshua. On the other hand, Josh 3–4, which deals with the crossing of the Jordan before the beginning of the campaign against Jericho, is a vital component in the whole conquest narrative. As I indicated in my earlier study of the parallels in Assyrian royal inscriptions, which Römer cites (“Joshua’s Campaign of Canaan and Near Eastern Historiography,” *SJOT* 2 [1990]: 1–12), an account of the crossing of a river at flood stage before the beginning of a campaign is a very frequent component of Assyrian inscriptions. And the crossing of the
Jordan in chapters 3–4 is preceded by the mustering of the troops in chapter 1, which takes us back to the actual investiture of Joshua in Deut 31:7–8 as Moses’ successor. The parallel Assyrian texts make quite clear that there is no version of the conquest earlier than the one that makes the connection with Deuteronomy and that Römer identifies as the exilic Deuteronomist.

Another significant parallel to Near Eastern texts occurs in the Solomonic account of the building of the temple, which Römer again compares with Assyrian building inscriptions, following the work of Victor Hurowitz (I Have Built You an Exalted House: Temple Building in the Bible in Light of Mesopotamian and Northwestern Semitic Writings [JSOTSup 115; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992]), who also concludes that the Assyrian building accounts represent the closest parallels. However, anyone consulting this important collection of texts will discover that it is in fact the Neo-Babylonian period that provides the closest parallels to temple building. It was the Babylonian kings who were obsessed with building temples, describing their work in great detail and giving rather scant attention to their palaces, just as in the biblical account in 1 Kgs 5–8, whereas the Assyrian were quite the reverse, with much to say about their palaces but giving little information on temple building. Hurowitz gives only one example of Assyrian temple building (ibid., 76–78), but several by Babylonian kings (ibid., 91–96). In fact, one can find very many accounts of temple restoration from the Neo-Babylonian period with many features similar to those of the Solomonic temple project. (P.-A. Beaulieu in The Reign of Nabonidus, King of Babylon 556-539 [YNER 10; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989], 42, lists seventeen inscriptions that deal with temple building in the time of Nabonidus; for numerous additional examples in the time of Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar, see S. Langdon, Die Neubabylonischen Königsinschriften [VAB 4; Leipzig: Hinrich, 1912].)

Another consideration for dating the biblical account of the temple construction to the exilic period is the fact that for Dtr the primary function of the temple is to house the ark, which Dtr regards as a repository for the two tables of the Decalogue. The temple represents the climax of the ark’s journey from the wilderness period to the special place in Jerusalem, which is synonymous with the place where the deity has set his name (2 Sam 7:1–13; 1 Kgs 8:6, 9, 15–21). The placing of the ark of the covenant in the temple with great pomp and procession is the direct equivalent of the placing of the gods of the Babylonians in their temples, and in both cases this is followed by much celebration. There is also the same emphasis on the king’s piety. It seems to me that the whole point of this elaborate temple-building narrative, in imitation of the Babylonian model, is to articulate an understanding of divine imminence in the words of the Horeb covenant, in contrast to the iconographic representations of Assyria and Babylonia. Consequently,
there appears to be little left that one can attribute to the pre-exilic Dtr in Joshua to 2 Kings.

There are still a large number of problems about which there could be endless debate. (1) What is the nature of the sources used by Dtr? Römer mentions “annals” and “chronicles,” but Assyrian annals record wars of conquest by an imperial power, which is hardly the case for Israel or Judah, and chronicles are the invention of the Babylonians in the Neo-Babylonian period. (2) What is the relationship of Deuteronomy and Dtr to the Pentateuch? to the Yahwist? to the Priestly writer? Römer briefly states at the outset where he stands on these questions, but they are still strongly contested issues, and he is very much aware of that fact. (3) Is the work of Dtr a history, and is Greek historiography an appropriate model for comparison? Römer, among others, expresses some reservations about making such comparisons, reservations that I do not share, but he has little reticence about employing what to my mind is the more dubious and highly anachronistic notion of editor or redactor in connection with his Deuteronomistic writers.

The limitations of a review such as this do not allow one to delve into any of these matters. I am merely suggesting that many issues remain on both the larger questions and the smaller details that will require extensive and sustained discussion. Given the great complexity of the biblical text’s literary history and the vast accumulation of scholarship with its widespread disagreements, it is little wonder that there is no easy and broad consensus. Nevertheless, these remarks should not detract from the excellence of Römer’s book. It remains a very thoughtful and well-informed study that may serve as a good starting point for further discussion on matters such as I have suggested above, and I warmly recommend it to students and scholars as an introduction to this field of study. Unfortunately, the price of the book is way out of line with its modest size and a serious detriment to its academic purpose.