

Session 6: The Deuteronomic History

D. An interpretation of history

The conclusion of our previous section is that the compilers of Deuteronomic history had a particular view of Israel's history which they have imposed on the materials at their disposal. They believed that this was a message from Yahweh for the people of their own day: the people of Judah in exile.

But what we have also seen is that this viewpoint is not altogether in keeping with what actually went on. In particular, the view of the compilers is that all worship at high places is wrong. There is only one place where Yahweh should be worshipped and that is in Jerusalem. But in fact it is not difficult to discern, when we read the actual records included in the history, not only that there were many such high places but that no one saw anything wrong in this until the reign of Josiah, which is when Deuteronomy was discovered. Moreover, we do not find Hosea and Amos telling the people of Israel that they should be going to Jerusalem to worship. Even though they were passionately opposed to what was actually going on at the high places, they wanted the worship reformed rather than abolished.

As a result of the difference between the compilers' point of view and some of the original sources they have incorporated into the history, some major disagreements are thrown up. Here we will examine three of the most important discrepancies in the way in which Israel's history was understood, not simply within the Deuteronomic history but also between other sources and traditions.

D1. Jehu's rebellion

Activity 6.5

Read 2 Kings 9 and 10 and reread Hosea 1

What is the difference in viewpoint between Hosea and the way the rebellion is presented in 1 Kings?

Hosea had announced judgement on the house of Jehu because of the bloodthirstiness of his coup. But as the story is presented in 2 Kings the coup is instigated by the prophet Elisha. The death of Joram and of Ahab's sons is said to fulfil a prophecy of Elijah. the slaughter of the followers of Baal is presented with approval.

Which is right? Was Yahweh behind this coup or did he condemn it?

D2. The wilderness tradition

For Hosea Israel's time in the wilderness was a time of faithfulness, for which he uses the image of a honeymoon, an image and an understanding taken up by Jeremiah.

But this is not the case in the Psalms, which would have been a regular part of Israel's worship.

Activity 6.6

Read Psalms 78 and 106

What images are used in these psalms for Israel's attitude towards Yahweh at this time?

Psalm 78 was probably written at the time of Hezekiah or Josiah, since it celebrates the faithfulness of Judah in contrast to Israel. It compares the unfaithfulness of the northern kingdom with that of Israel in the wilderness.

Psalm 106, written at the time of the exile or after, is a liturgy of penitence reminding Israel of the grace of Yahweh and leading up to prayer for restoration. It uses Israel's period in the wilderness as a prime example of unfaithfulness.