What do scholars mean when they refer to a "Deuteronomistic History"? To what extent does the hypothesis of a Deuteronomistic History help us understand the books from Deuteronomy to Kings?

G Rumney, May 2007
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This essay sets out to clarify what scholars mean by the term Deuteronomistic History. Running parallel to this is a discussion of the implications of this hypothesis for understanding the books commonly known as the Early Prophets. The discussion will raise questions which include: was the Deuteronomistic History primarily written as a national epic? Did it draw mainly on folklore? Should it be dated from the seventh century BCE or later? Among the several purposes it served how important was the political agenda of the Davidide monarchy?

The term Deuteronomistic History (DH) was first coined by Martin Noth in 1943.[1] It refers to those historical writings (often called the Early Prophets) that share an ideology in common with the Book of Deuteronomy, which has been described as "the theological preface to the Former Prophets."[2] The term Deuteronomic usually refers specifically to the fifth book of the Pentateuch/Torah, while the term Deuteronomistic usually refers to the work of editors influenced by this perspective,[3] athough Hermann Spieckermann, among others, maintains that a strict distinction is no longer meaningful.[4] The DH, around one fourth of the Tanakh/Old Testament, includes the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings. The book of Jeremiah also shows evidence

1. John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2004), 183.

2. Bernhard W. Anderson, *Contours of Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 1999), 165.

3. Anderson, *Contours of Old Testament Theology*, 165.

4. Hermann Spieckermann, "Former Prophets: The Deuteronomistic History," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Hebrew Bible*, trans. and ed. L. G. Perdue (Oxford, Blackwell, 2001), 337-352 (338).

of Deuteronomistic influence,[5] and has been described as an epilogue to the DH.[6]

The Deuteronomistic writers drew on disparate sources, oral and written, linking them with their concern over the question of theodicy.[7] The question these historians raise, most likely in the context of national defeat and exile, is what the history of Israel's failure means in light of the promises embodied in its covenant theology (Mosaic and Davidic). The paradox is captured in 1 Kings 9:8b:[8] "Why has the LORD done such a thing to this land and to this house?"

> It was put together to show that the terrible fate of the people *can* be understood. The exile was not meaningless... In one sense, then, the whole history was organized to explain why the nation had failed and why their punishment had been deserved.[9]

Strands of conflicting tradition can still be isolated in the text as we now have it. For example, the tensions and duplications in 1 Samuel where differing accounts are given of Saul's ascension to kingship,[10] and David's introduction to the royal court.[11] At times the narrative, as in 1 Samuel 7-8, seems sympathetic to Saul,[12] and at other times deeply antagonistic. Cheryl Exum proposes that the Saul stories have been fashioned into a tragedy, with Saul as the scapegoat for the sin of demanding a king.[13]

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5. Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction* (New York, Paulist Press, 1984), 362.

6. Gershon Galil, "The Chronological Framework of the Deuteronomistic History," *Biblica* 85 (2004), 413 – 421 (413) <http://www.bsw.org/project/biblica/bibl85/Bib85Ani14.pdf> (25 April 2007)

7. Harding, Study Guide, 106.

8. Terence E. Fretheim, *Deuteronomic History* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1983), 21.

9. Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament*, 375.

10. James Harding, BIBS/X 112 Study Guide (Dunedin, University of Otago, 2007), 120.

11. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 217.

12. Harding, Study Guide, 106-107.

13. J. Cheryl Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative: Arrows of the Almighty* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992), 38.

There appear to have been at least two stages in the development of the DH, identified by Frank Moore Cross as Dtr[1] (dated to the reign of Josiah in the seventh century BCE), and Dtr[2] (following the destruction of 587 BCE.)[14] Most subsequent commentators have accepted the idea of one or more preexilic editions of the DH, and at least one exilic edition.[15] Terence Fretheim argues that there was "a school at work on these traditions over a number of generations, perhaps from the time of King Hezekiah... yet the final stamp is decisively exilic."[16] Robert Alter, however, has a much more conservative assessment of the Deuteronomist's role, suggesting that the original narrative dates from "quite close to David's own time," was edited during Josiah's reign, with a further editing in the period of the exile.[17] Regardless of reconstruction, the audience which the Deuteronomist addresses in the final redaction seems to be the community of exiles in Babylon; the authors "did not write for everybody in general or nobody in particular."[18]

The Deuteronomist's agenda included transforming the faith of Israel into one that rejected images (aniconism),[19] emphasised the covenant relationship between Israel and Yahweh, demanded exclusive devotion to Yahweh, centralised worship at the Jerusalem temple and reshaped the festivals of Passover and Tabernacles into national observances.[20] The result is a theological account rather than something that could be measured by modern standards as historiography. The DH could then be said to resemble a Shakespeare play or a Walter Scott novel more than a historical account, and

14. Richard Elliot Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1987), 107.

15. Gary N. Knoppers, "Deuteronomistic History," in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2000), 341-342.

16. Fretheim, *Deuteronomic History*, 18.

17. Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York, Norton, 1999), xii.

18. Fretheim, *Deuteronomic History*, 44.

19. Harding, Study Guide, 100.

20. Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of its Sacred Texts* (New York, Free Press, 2001), 276.

this has implications for how we read it. Fretheim notes that "anyone who studied Shakespeare's *Hamlet* with a view only to reconstructing the history of Denmark would be doing violence to that literary classic."[21]

> [W]e have no business introducing the category of "error" or "inadequacy" in our assessment of the biblical narratives. That would be like accusing authors of Bible story books of "error" because they have used some imagination in the retelling of the biblical story for children[22]

The DH seems to reflect not only the interests of the southern kingdom of Judah (e.g. its concern to promote the Davidide monarchy), but also the defeated northern kingdom of Samaria (e.g. the significance given to the figure of Moses.) Other Northern connections include the use of "Horeb" for Sinai and Elijah-like polemic directed against the baals. Southern connections include the emphasis on Jerusalem as God's chosen city and the language of election. The Northern influence may have reflected the presence in Judah of a large refugee population.[23]

Archaeological research indicates that the Deuteronomist was anachronistic in his portrayal of both the extent of David's kingdom and the wealth of Solomon's.[24] There is no solid archaeological evidence for either the temple of Solomon or the other building projects mentioned by the Deuteronomist.[25]

> In fact, it is highly unlikely that this sparsely inhabited region of Judah and the small village of Jerusalem could have become the center of a great empire stretching from the Red Sea in the south to Syria in the north.[26]

Other textual events fail to match with evidence, such as the description of Philistine armour in the Goliath story,[27] and the dating of the destruction of

21. Fretheim, *Deuteronomic History*, 35.

22. Ibid., 30.

23. Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament*, 354-356.

24. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 248.

25. Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed*, 128.

26. Ibid., 134.

27. Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *David and Solomon: In Search of the Bible's Sacred Kings and the Roots of the Western Tradition* (New York, Free Press, 2006), 196-198.

Jericho in Joshua.

Can truth then be conveyed through fiction? Gerd Lüdemann suggests that while Deuteronomy can be likened to the *Book of Mormon*, it nonetheless constitutes "authentic religious pseudepigraphy" despite being essentially a fabrication, because the author believed "he had acted merely as the instrument of his God."[28] The touchstone, he argues, lies in the author's intentions, and authentic religion always offers artificial historical constructions. Lüdemann's scepticism meshes with the likelihood that few archival records, assuming they existed, would have survived in original form for the Deuteronomist to consult. Three centuries separate Josiah's reign from that of David, and while oral traditions persevere down generations in recognisable form, "continued use and interpretation inevitably leads to expansion and contraction of the material."[29]

How does the DH hypothesis help in understanding these documents? Just as the ideology and theology of the Deuteronomist was projected onto earlier times, creating the history the Early Prophets relate, impact on later customs and beliefs was immense; transforming Judaism into a book-based faith, yet not succeeding in creating an "orthodoxy" accepted by all (something that is apparent in documents like 1 Enoch and the Dead Sea Scrolls.)

> The temple traditions preserved in the Enoch books, however, regard the builders of the second temple as impure apostates, and tell the history of their people without mentioning Moses and the Exodus. The Damascus Document, a key text among the Dead Sea Scrolls, describes the whole of the second temple period as 'the age of wrath'.[30]

How is this relevant? Margaret Barker suggests that much of this diversity can be dated to resistance toward the Deuteronomistic reforms during Josiah's reign. While the Temple enshrined the new understandings and ideology, many people remained loyal to pre-reform beliefs and customs. It has been suggested

28. Gerd Lüdemann, *The Unholy in Holy Scripture: The Dark Side of the Bible* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1997), 69.

29. Fretheim, *Deuteronomic History*, 31.

30. Margaret Barker, *Temple Theology: An Introduction* (London, SPCK, 2004), 37.

that the writings of First Isaiah present a rare window on the pre-Deuteronomic faith of Israel, and that the figure of Moses is absent from all genuinely preexilic texts.[31] From the perspective of such traditionalists, the purges would be "a disaster, the time when Israel's true faith had been destroyed."[32] The early church, Barker suggests, drank deeply from this alternate tradition.[33]

Whether or not such traditions did survive in this parallel fashion, the Deuteronomic reform "entailed a purge of Judean religion that brought it much closer to monotheism than it had previously been."[34] Was Israel a separate people, ethnically distinct from the culture and history of Canaan? The DH asserts that it is, with conquest stories and prohibitions on intermarriage, yet preexilic archaeology has difficulty distinguishing between Canaanite and Israelite cultures,[35] there was "no abrupt disjunction.[36] Was the religion of Yahweh unique and unrelated to the religions of the surrounding peoples? The hypothesis allows the reader to make sense of the many common features. El is the name of the Canaanite deity, Yahweh is portrayed in language reminiscent of Baal.[37] There are even indications that Yahweh was believed to have a wife or consort, Asherah,[38] in the same way Baal is linked with Ashtart in Canaanite religion.[39]

The Deuteronomist creates a new future for the faith of Israel, however, by re-imagining or reinventing its past. The goal is not to relate history, but to elicit a

31. Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1992), 13.

32. Margaret Barker, *The Hidden Tradition of the Kingdom of God* (London, SPCK, 2007), 4.

33. Barker, *Temple Theology*, 9.

34. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 167.

35. John J. Collins, *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2005), 126.

36. Harding, Study Guide, 110.

37. Mark S. Smith, ed. *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle*, vol.1., *Vetus Testamentum Supplementum* 55 (Leiden, Brill, 1994), xxvi

38. Collins, *The Bible after Babel*, 110-111.

39. Ibid., 117.

response from their audience.[40] The rapid spread of literacy beginning in seventh-century Judah makes this possible, the production of significant biblical texts before this time is problematic.[41] "It was probably the Deuteronomic movement... that first made something like a "Scripture" central to Israel's religious life."[42] Now, the Israelite faith emerges with a new literary centre, detached from the temple cult.

> Henceforth Judaism would be to a great degree a religion of the book. Study of the law would take the place of sacrifice. The synagogue would gradually emerge as the place of worship ... These changes took place gradually, over centuries, but they had their origin in the Deuteronomic reform, which put a book at the center of religious observance for the first time.[43]

King Josiah is a key figure for the Deuteronomist, and the hypothesis of the DH helps the reader recognise that the prior histories of Judah and Israel are viewed and interpreted in the light of his reign. Josiah is the ideal king (2 Kings 23:25), the patron of a radical reformation that redefines what it means to be an Israelite and produces the core documents around which the Bible/Tanakh will develop.[44] The DH is a new national epic, and its leading characters are mirror images of Josiah, both positive and negative.[45] His reign coincides with the collapse of Assyrian hegemony over Judah, making expansion possible, along with the need to reposition the national cult.[46] Josiah's stature is enhanced by comparison to Moses, and he is modelled after Joshua, David and Solomon.[47]

Minimalist scholars take this further, suggesting Josiah is not only modelled

40. Fretheim, *Deuteronomic History*, 30.

41. Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed*, 281.

42. James Barr, "The Bible and Its Communities," in *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, ed. James L. Mays (San Francisco, HarperCollins, 2000), 20-27 (21).

43. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 172.

44. Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed*, 276.

45. Ibid., 284.

46. Ibid., 283.

47. Ibid., 279.

after David, but that David is modelled after Josiah. David is then potentially no more a historical figure than King Arthur.[48] Thomas L. Thompson finds David paralleled in the earlier tales of Esarhaddon of Assyria, Idrimi of Alalakh, and Hercules.[49]

> Much of David's life story, as it is presented in biblical narrative, including the many roles he is called on to fill in both narrative and poetry, clearly belongs to a stream of myth and narrative, long antedating biblical literature.[50]

Niels Peter Lemche draws particular attention to the figure of Idrimi and notes:

> David's rise is another example of the folktale genre that concerns the life of not very heroic heroes... both unmistakably reflect the same narrative style. This indicates the availability at that time of an extensive pool of popular narrative, normally transmitted orally, but eagerly drawn upon by authors who sat down to put heroic stories in writing.[51]

While neither David nor Solomon is mentioned in Egyptian or Mesopotamian texts, some evidence, such as the Tel Dan inscription which appears to refer to "the House of David", suggests that they indeed existed.[52] However, this is not uncontested.[53]

The significance of David and Solomon as the Deuteronomist's leading characters is also suggested by the DH hypothesis. Despite having an unenviable reputation as a brigand, protection racketeer, usurper, mercenary, murderer and adulterer, David is the first of the line through which Josiah claims legitimacy. For all his faults David is portrayed as deferring (unlike Saul) to the religious authorities. This is also Josiah's virtue.

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48. Ibid., 128.

49. Thomas L. Thompson, *The Messiah Myth: The Near Eastern Roots of Jesus and David* (New York, Basic Books, 2005), 285.

50. Thompson, *The Messiah Myth*, 289.

51. Niels Peter Lemche, *Prelude to Israel's Past: Background and Beginnings of Israelite History and Identity* (Peabody, MS; Hendrickson, 1998), 165-166.

52. Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed*, 129.

53. Collins, *The Bible after Babel*, 33.

Solomon is also, at first glance, an unlikely character to be portrayed as a wise and good king. He is Bathsheba's son, not the eldest or the most obvious heir, and he has a reputation for being less than rigorous in his rejection of foreign influences. Solomon is however, like Josiah, an expansionist, and the temple which stands at the heart of the new ideology is believed to be the work of Solomon. As Josiah is the herald of a new "golden age," he reenacts both the triumphs of David and the glories of Solomon.

Walter Brueggemann draws attention to the power of the David stories even in contemporary political discourse.[54] He cites Stefan Heym's 1972 novel *The King David Report*, written as a thinly veiled critique of life in the former East Germany.

> His appeal to the Davidic material is heuristic, because his intention is to comment on the way in which his own totalitarian regime manipulates truth for the sake of the regime ... He has observed how memory is daily turned into propaganda, and he has the temerity to suggest that the same thing is happening in the Bible.[55]

While the details are widely debated, the Deuteronomistic History hypothesis has had a profound influence in challenging traditional and pre-critical assumptions about Israel's history. It is helpful to view the Deuteronomistic History as a national epic, creatively weaving together separate strands into a continuous narrative. History is in the service of theology, and many of the sources are likely to be retrieved from folklore rather than written documentation. Dating remains a complex issue, but on balance the DH seems to largely be a seventh century creation later edited for an audience in exile. Among the several purposes it served was the political agenda of the Davidide monarchy during a brief period of expansionism under Josiah. The hypothesis allows the reader to see the various possible agendas behind this narrative and to understand that the identity stories shave been crafted and shaped to serve both political and theological ends.

54. Walter Brueggemann, *David's Truth: In Israel's Imagination and Memory*, second edition (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2002), 64-66.

55. Brueggemann, *David's Truth*, 66.

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