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NOTES FOR THEOLOGICAL STUDENTS DEUTERONOMY

Reason to become a Baptist minister: you get to preach and explain your favourite books of the Bible to people who are genuinely interested in the subject. And it gets no better than the book of Deuteronomy. Behind my enthusiasm you will find, first, the powerful content of the book itself and, second, my view of Scripture. For those of you who are new to Penrallt let me explain that I am a strident, stubborn and vocal exponent of Canonical Theology. Put simply this is the belief that the Bible was inspired and written down consciously as Scripture for future generations. The correct way, then, to approach any book of the Bible is to ask how does it work as part of the Canon of Scripture? How has it been shaped to fit its purpose and what is its message to us? This approach acknowledges that many different sources have been used and adapted to form the Bible as we know it today, but the focus should not be where those sources came from, but how they now work as part of Scripture. This is one of the best books of the Bible for demonstrating this approach.

Importance of the Book:

Deuteronomy is of vital importance to understanding the Old Testament. In his excellent commentary (which I recommend to you for your personal library) Raymond Brown states: “No Old Testament book has exerted a greater influence on the formation and development of both Jewish and Christian thought and practice than Deuteronomy. Its doctrine is foundational within the Old Testament itself.”ⁱ It is referred to over eighty times in the New Testament, in seventeen of the books. Only Genesis, Isaiah and the Psalms are quoted more often. This should be no surprise because, as I will argue here, the authors of Deuteronomy set out to write just such an influential book. It is considered to have been a powerful incentive to Josiah’s reformation of the nation’s religious life at the end of the seventh century and is strongly linked to the historical books which follow it in the canon.

It is a unique book with its own style. J. A Thompson has a good section in his commentary about the features of Deuteronomyⁱⁱ and among them we can note:

- # many sections verbs and pronouns are in the second person singular form when referring to Israel (which may well identify them as all from one source);
- # introductory phrases such as “these are the words of . . .” (1:1-5) occur throughout the books, perhaps suggesting different sources or maybe just highlighting a change of speaker;
- # an expository format comprising a law and then an application;ⁱⁱⁱ
- # a large amount of legal material (often referred to as “apodictic laws”);
- # a strong emphasis on the covenant relationship (which could be seen as tying it in to the Book of the Covenant found at the start of Josiah’s reform in 2 Kings 22);^{iv}
- # A distinctive style and vocabulary (see table on p.30 of Thompson).

Add to that Deuteronomy’s stress on the Covenant Relationship, the centralization of worship, its powerful theology of God’s character and elective power, its uncompromising preaching of spiritual purity and one concludes: “both the style and distinctive vocabulary of Deuteronomy constitute the most easily recognizable of all the distinct theological traditions that are to be found in the Old Testament.”^v

Who were the authors of Deuteronomy?

I guess that most people in our churches would just assume that Moses wrote Deuteronomy because Jesus refers to passages from Deuteronomy as “Moses said” (Mk7:10; 10:3; Jn 7:19). Nevertheless to extrapolate from Moses’ words being recorded in Deuteronomy to his being the author of the whole book is a strange viewpoint because it not only results in Moses referring to himself in the third person but it also makes him the author of the account of his own death. Just because Deuteronomy traces its origins back to Moses does not imply that he wrote it in its final form. I cannot see how the authority and trustworthiness of the Bible is strengthened by holding views which the Bible itself does not teach. Moses appears as the central human character of this book, not as its author.

Inevitably, the question of who wrote any Biblical book is tied in with the question of when it was written down in its final form. One criticism aimed at Canonical Theology is that by attributing the inspiration of the sacred text to the final stages of its compilation you are opening yourself up to accepting extreme viewpoints in which, say, virtually the entire Old Testament gets written at some late post-exilic date. I think I would accept that as a fair cautionary comment, but point out that all truth is God’s truth, and however the Bible came to be written it is still His word. Furthermore, just because the Deuteronomists were inspired by the Holy Spirit does not mean that Moses was not equally inspired when he wrote down and deposited documents which they would later use (31:9, 24-26). I believe that, generally speaking, the evidence for an early redaction of the Old Testament books is strong, and that is the view I hold.

Since W. M. C. Wette suggested in 1895 that Deuteronomy was the Book of the Covenant found in 2 Kings 22 theologians have grappled with how it related to Josiah’s reform. Very few today would hold to the view that it was written especially to “be found” and brought to the king’s attention and I doubt if many believe that Deuteronomy as we have it today was the book in question. How much of its demands relate to Josiah is strongly debated. One of his main aims was to centralize worship in Jerusalem, but Jerusalem is never mentioned by name in Deuteronomy. The book assumes the existence of several altars (16:21), also of worship centres at Shechem, Ebal and Gerizim (27:1-13). The provisions for country priests and Levites (18:6-8) were ignored by Josiah’s religious leaders (2 Ki 23:9). Importantly, Josiah had a huge struggle to do away with the high places (*bamoth*) and ultimately failed. However, they are not mentioned in Deuteronomy. This all suggests strongly to me that the book pre-dates Josiah. Most would see Deuteronomy belonging to a reform movement that had its climax in Josiah’s reign. Deciding exactly how and when the book achieved its completed form is very much an open question, and I find myself unable to decide.

I can see no special reason why the bulk of Deuteronomy may not have been written relatively early in Israel’s life in Canaan. It has been pointed out that it is so closely modeled on ancient covenant treaties that it must be directly borrowed from them.^{vi} As there is a strong pattern of second Millennium-style covenants in the book, some have seen this as confirmation of its second Millennium origin even though some of the patterns were still alive in the seventh century. I do think that the evidence points towards a second Millennium origin for the material in the book. Ernest Lucas weighs the evidence and concludes:

“There can be little doubt, then, that the covenant form reflected in Deuteronomy is that of the second millennium BC, and not that of the first millennium. This does not necessarily prove that Deuteronomy itself dates from the second millennium, but does indicate that the covenant form was known and used for the Sinai covenant from the time of Moses onwards.”^{vii}

So if the bulk of the book dates back to the Second Millennium, when did it settle into this final form? Brevard Childs wrote “.. most scholars would contend that much of the material of Deuteronomy was far older than the seventh century, and many would insist on a level of redactional reworking of the book far later than the seventh century.”^{viii} However, in my opinion there are strong elements in the book which point to its main re-working earlier than that. The demand in 17:18-20 that the king is obliged to read and study this book points to a pressure group who felt that their authority was higher than the king’s. Throughout the book, the importance of Moses is stressed as if some would question his traditional authority. The kingship was the only institution where such a rival authority could be found.^{ix} Deuteronomy underwent its final redaction

during the monarchy. Of course, it was a very different Israel from that of Moses' time, more prosperous, more settled, more urban-based, more self-satisfied, more organized. For that reason alone the Torah needed to be taken out of the Ark and reapplied in the days of the monarchy, and if the king and his court needed a sharp rap across their knuckles, so be it.

It is worth considering von Rad's suggestion that the book had its origins in country Levites (18:6-8) who were refugees in Judah from the Northern Kingdom.^x Many of them would have fled south after the disaster of 722 BC. This view is endorsed by Clements^{xi}. Deuteronomy does not overtly endorse the Davidic kingship, Mount Zion is not specifically a symbol of God's land, the Ark is the resting place for the Mosaic Law rather than the dwelling place of God. All these factors would point to a Northern Kingdom bias. I think that the idea has merit, but it is hard to argue against this theory because we know so little of the religious life of the Northern Kingdom. The book of Isaiah suggests to me that the theology of the Davidic line and Mount Zion as a national symbol was very much alive in the South post-722 and I wonder if a Northern anti-Zionist approach would have been acceptable. It would make more sense to me if Deuteronomy predates 722 by a long way, perhaps soon after the separation of the two kingdoms in the tenth century.

Richard D. Nelson offers the gentle warning that "the book's language and theology are so unified that attempts to distinguish such layers and organize them chronologically have proved unrewarding and unpersuasive."^{xii} He is correct. We must take the book as we find it. The Deuteronomists were a hard-line pressure group within Israel and must go down in history as being very successful. They had a clear vision of what they wanted and were able to insert it into the life of the nation through their canonical work. Clements' judgement is that they "... show themselves to have been the most influential of all such groups within the Old Testament. Anonymous as they must remain, they contribute extensively and in a fundamental way to the compilation of the Old Testament as a sacred literature."^{xiii}

How does Deuteronomy function as scripture?

Let us begin by looking at the function of the first three chapters. You cannot read Deuteronomy without a strong impression of despair as God's plans and hopes for the new nation are repeatedly failed by the people's refusal to obey. While an examination of the book shows it to contain a prominent, central teaching/law code in chapters 12-26,^{xiv} the first three chapters relive Israel's history, leading Mayes to conclude that "Deuteronomy 1-3, therefore, do not on their own account belong with the law; they do not lead up to it, or introduce it. Rather they lead up to and introduce the history of Israel which as a whole stands under the law."^{xv} In other words, they function not just as an introduction to Deuteronomy but to the subsequent history books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings.^{xvi} There is a sense in which that is true, because the Deuteronomists appear to have wielded influence over the historical books. The remembrance of Israel's history is a rehearsal of God's powerful grace and the nation's own failure to live up to it. Similarly, the later curses and blessings of chapters 28 to 30 are written retrospectively into the canon because we all know what happened through the subsequent years. They are not "alternative possibilities, but successive events in history."^{xvii} Various generations all find their own way to disregard what God has told them to do: the old "evil generation" (1:35), the generation of their children who would possess the land, (1:39), and the future generation who would become corrupt in the land, (4:25ff).

However, Deuteronomy begins and ends with Moses himself, so I think we might do better to treat the first three chapters' account of Israel's constant failure to live up to the law as an underlying sub-theme of the book rather than an introduction to the subsequent history books. Deuteronomy self-consciously places Moses authority at the heart of the book so that "the whole book functions canonically as his last will and testimony."^{xviii} The strong homiletic nature of the book allows the Deuteronomists not just to select and list the Mosaic laws and teachings but to expound them. Just as Moses reinterprets the law for a new situation (transition from wilderness to Canaan), so by inference future generations have to learn the bitter/sweet cycle of curse/blessing. Chapter 1 verse 5 makes it clear that the purpose of Moses' sermons are to explain the Torah to a new generation who are about to enter the promised land. This is a new application of the Sinai covenant. It is actualizing the past, and as such it seeks "to reshape its material for use by future

generations.”^{xix} I look upon Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in the same light: “You have heard said to you . . . but I say to you” The Deuteronomists have reflected on Israel’s elect status and patchy history, and given us a series of sermons on what it means to be the people of a great God. Maybe these were stock-in-trade patterns of preaching by the Levites at the great festivals, but the canonical shape of the book, placing it historically at the major transition point of the nation, lifts the teaching into a timeless reflection on what it is to live in covenant with God in a changing world. “The Deuteronomic authors were certainly not mere collectors, nor were they traditionalists in any narrowly conceived sense. What they have given us in their book is a highly original and fresh composition.”^{xx}

Moses ends his sermon, writes it down (Dt 31:9), commissions Joshua, deposits the law beside the Ark and dies. Job done. Clements says: “The whole aura of the book shows that it was concerned to preserve a tradition that was old and seen by its authors as a wholly authentic testimony to what Moses had bequeathed to Israel as his legacy.”^{xxi} It is a story about one God, one people, one revelation at Sinai. There is a powerful consciousness of being canonical. The Deuteronomists see their work as the hermeneutic key for understanding Moses. No doubt they have altered his emphases and found new meanings as they apply the Torah to a very different Israel. But His law still demands a response from our heart. Above all these laws is the command to love God with all our heart, soul and mind. The authors are inviting us to listen and decide what it means for us in our day. Just as Josiah embarked on a major religious Reformation on the basis of this law, just as Jesus sat on the mountains or by the lakes of Galilee and re-interpreted Moses’ teaching, so modern day believers are forced to ask what these principles, moral imperatives and commands mean for us as God’s servants in the twenty-first century. That is the whole point of Deuteronomy.

Conclusion

The Deuteronomists loved the written word (Dt 31:9-13). Even the king was obliged to read it (Dt 17:18,20). It was a love, they believed, that they had inherited from Moses himself because he had spoken it, written it down and locked it away for safety in the Ark, from where it would exercise a central role in the life of the nation. The Deuteronomic authors have unlocked the Ark and released the word to act in the life of the nation. The book of Deuteronomy would find its way into the ministry of the prophets Elijah, Amos, Hosea, and Micah and into the lives of national leaders such as Josiah and Nehemiah. It is echoed in psalms and wisdom passages. If that were not enough, this book finds its way into the heart of Jesus’ life and ministry at crucial moments. It is used by Paul in Romans, Galatians and Corinthians. It was meant to do just that. It was written and shaped for that purpose. It was written to elicit a response from us, its readers. “To say yes is to act out one’s choice in religious loyalty, in the practice of social justice, and in one’s public and personal life. To say yes is to affirm one’s allegiance to one, incomparable, loving God and to control the vision that religious fidelity, personal morality, social responsibility and trustworthy government hold together as a single aspiration for the human race.”^{xxii} To preach from Deuteronomy demands that the preacher re-enacts the liberation of the Word by asking what does this mean for us in today’s social and religious climate? Moses, the preacher, should step into our pulpit wearing modern clothes, asking hard questions. We have to decide whether we have the single-minded conviction to choose life. Or not. Do we love God that much?

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ⁱ Raymond Brown, *The Message of Deuteronomy, Not by Bread Alone* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993) p.13

ⁱⁱ J.A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1974) pp.21-30

ⁱⁱⁱ Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966) pp.105-107

^{iv} “the book of the covenant which was found in the house of the LORD.” 2 Kings 23:2

^v R. E Clements, *Deuteronomy*. Old Testament Guides (Sheffield: JSOT, 1989) p.9. There are several copies of this excellent introduction to Deuteronomy in the UWB library.

^{vi} The main works usually referred to are:

G. Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh, 1955)

M.G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King, The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy* (Grand rapids; Eerdmans, 1963)

P.C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*. NITCOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976)

J.G. McConville, *Law and Theology in Deuteronomy*. JSOT Sup 33 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1984)

^{vii} E. C. Lucas "Covenant, Treaty, and Prophecy," *Themelios* 8.1 (September 1982): 19-23.

[Reproduced on line at http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_covenant_lucas.html This is a good "freebie" which I commend to you. Indeed, I commend anything Ernest writes]

^{viii} Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1979), p.205

^{ix} Clements (1989), p.38

^x Gerhard von Rad, *Studies in Deuteronomy*, trans. David Stacker (Chicago: H. Regnery, 1953) pp 60ff

^{xi} R.E. Clements 'Deuteronomy and the Jerusalem Cult \tradition,' *VT*, XV, 1965, pp.300-312

^{xii} Richard D. Nelson, *Deuteronomy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002) p.5

^{xiii} Clements (1989) p.10

^{xiv} " . . . the original kernel of the book is in the law code, which has been expanded by the addition of an extended introduction and conclusion."Clements (1989) pp. 7,8

^{xv} A.D.H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy*. New Century Bible Commentaries (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1979) p.42

^{xvi} This is the suggestion of M. Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History*, ET JSOT Supp 15 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1981)

^{xvii} *idem*, p.70

^{xviii} Childs, p.211

^{xix} *Idem* p.212

^{xx} Clements (1989) p.16

^{xxi} *idem* p. 69

^{xxii} Nelson p.12