Deuteronomy as Identity Formation Project

1 Introduction

The preceding has established the social, political and economic atmosphere of the long seventh century as likely to have provoked acute identity issues among the population of the southern Levant, including Judah. In this third chapter the objective is to conduct an experiment in the implications of those conclusions for the reading of a specific text. Because of the tendency to classify the book’s identity concerns as indicators of part or all of its origins in the exilic period or later, the text chosen for this experiment is Deuteronomy and, more specifically, its deuteronomic core, as it is the pre- or post-exilic date of this material which is primarily at stake in such discussions.

As is well known by even the novice student of Deuteronomy, the book’s origins in the seventh century have been variously argued and asserted for much of the last two centuries, especially since de Wette associated the book with the law book purportedly discovered in the temple during renovations ordered by Josiah.1 Much of the scholarship in the interim has assumed that Deuteronomy, in one form or another, may be traced to the seventh century. Most recently, however, the reliability and motives of the material in 2 Kings which gave rise to this historical-critical lynchpin have been called into question, with the consequence that its relevance to discussions of Deuteronomy’s origins and purpose must be heavily discounted.2 With this in mind the present investigation has endeavoured to proceed, insofar as possible, without

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regard to the 2 Kings account, though this must bear in mind that the assumptions of other secondary literature are not always explicit.

Untethered from 2 Kings, the origins and purpose of a deuteronomic text must seek out other reference points for chronological anchor.\(^3\) The intention in what follows is to attempt a reading of a number of passages in the book against the long seventh century’s social, economic and political background, as described in Chapter One, and according to the anthropological possibilities raised by Chapter Two. If such a reading is successful, it will challenge the dating arguments which insist that the book’s interest in Israelite identity is a reason to locate either the deuteronomic text as a whole or the parts of the book which deal with identity to the exilic period or later.\(^4\)

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\(^4\) It goes nearly without saying that the book was adopted and adapted by a number of subsequent generations; redactional and editorial fault lines are evident on even a superficial reading of the text, with its repetitive introductions and multiple appendices. Raising the possibility of deuteronomic identity issues as deriving from the long seventh century’s social and economic context should not be interpreted as implying either that the entirety of the book or that every instance of its identity concerns must be pre-exilic. Following on from the historical and anthropological argument in Chapters One and Two, the objective is rather to emphasise that the text’s interest in Israelite identity cannot, without further analysis and without additional support, be taken as a diagnostic indicator of its origins in the exile or thereafter. The possibility of Israelite identity issues in the pre-exilic period must be recognised and taken into account in the analysis of individual texts.