INTRODUCTION

A HISTORY OF THE HISTORY:
THE THEORY OF THE DEUTERONOMISTIC HISTORY AND THE
PROBLEM OF THE BOOK OF KINGS

The story of the theory of the Deuteronomistic History (DH)¹ is itself a
telling review (cf. Radjawane 1973; Weippert 1985). It begins with the
great biblical scholar, Martin Noth, who established the theory of the DH in
the field in the first half of a monograph published in 1943. That mono­
graph, with its inimitably German title, Überlieferungsgeschichtliche
Studien, has since become a classic in the study of the Hebrew Bible because
it forever changed the way that scholars regard the "historical books" of the
Bible.

NOTH'S THEORY

Noth proffered a new model in critical scholarship for the composition of
biblical literature. Previously, scholars had tended to treat the Former
Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings) either as the continued compila­
tion of the literary sources in the Pentateuch or as independent units which
had passed through one or more Deuteronomistic redactions. This was par­
ticularly true of the book of Kings. Before the appearance of Noth's ground­
breaking monograph, the most widely held view of Kings was that it was
compiled first before the exile of 586 B.C.E. and then revised during the

Noth posited that the Former Prophets, with the book of Deuteronomy at
their head, were originally a unified history of Israel written by a single, ex­
ilic author/compiler whom Noth named the Deuteronomist (Dtr). Besides
the similarity of language throughout the Former Prophets, Noth pointed to
the common chronology and ideology of these books as evidence of an
individual hand. He also showed that Dtr's primary structuring device
involved the use of programmatic, reflective summaries in common
Deuteronomistic style which he inserted at key junctures in the History,

¹The term "Deuteronomic" has been used as a synonym for "Deuteronomistic." For
clarity I prefer to use "Deuteronomic" only for matters regarding the book of
Deuteronomy and "Deuteronomistic" for matters regarding the DH as a whole. The latter
is also a better translation of Noth's adjective, deuteronomistische.
mostly in the form of speeches attributed to major characters. Noth dated the DH to the middle of the sixth century B. C. E. and proposed that its purpose was to show that the Babylonian exiles were suffering for centuries of decline in Israel's loyalty to its God, Yahweh.

The novelty of Noth's model was neither in the perception of the continuity of these books nor in the observation of their Deuteronomistic editing. The Deuteronomistic stratum within these books had been recognized long before Noth, but it was understood as editorial overlay(s) on top of the separate books.\(^2\) Noth, in contrast, held it to be the basic level of a work that was only later divided into books.

The originality of the thesis lies in his combination of these two views for the first time, that is, in his claim that the continuity between the historical books derives solely from Dtr, cannot be explained on any other basis, and is of quite a different nature to that found in the Tetrateuch (Provan 1988:5).

It should be stressed that Noth perceived the Deuteronomistic History to be an original unit beneath the present books of Deuteronomy and the Former Prophets. Noth found plenty of passages in Deuteronomy through Kings which he took to be later additions to the original work of Dtr. Some were quite extensive (e.g., Joshua 13-22). But Noth made no attempt to relate the numerous additions to each other or to contend that they had a common origin. He found no indication, therefore, that Dtr's History had been systematically revised by a later editor. It was fundamentally the work of one person in the middle of the exile who had gathered traditions about Israel's history from a wide variety of sources and organized them into an extended account. Noth summarized the compositional model which he envisioned for Dtr in the following way (Noth 1981:10-11).

Dtr. was not merely an editor ["nicht nur 'Redaktor'"] but the author of a history which brought together material from highly varied traditions and arranged it according to a carefully conceived plan. In general Dtr. simply reproduced the literary sources available to him and merely provided a connecting narrative for isolated passages. We can prove, however, that in places he made a deliberate selection from the material at his disposal. As far as facts were concerned, the elements were

\(^2\) For lists of Deuteronomistic idioms see Weinfeld (1972:320-365) and Cross (1973:252-254). However, the features of Deuteronomistic language and style in these and other books were well defined long before Noth, and his 1943 study assumed them. While such features continue to be widely recognized as Deuteronomistic, they are not a foolproof indication of Dtr's hand. Even Noth recognized that later additions to the DH imitated Dtr's language and style. Hence, other criteria, particularly theme and ideology, are important indicators of Dtr's presence, as Cross observed (see below).