A REFERENCE TO THE COVENANT CODE IN 2 KINGS 17:24–41?

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Second Kings 17 is now famous as a chapter heavily influenced by the Deuteronomistic tradition, more precisely by a theological interpretation of the fall of the kingdom of Israel in 2 Kgs 17:7–41. However, most commentators have also emphasized the composite character of this chapter, over against the hypothesis of Martin Noth of a single Deuteronomistic composition during the exile, around 560 BCE. We do not intend to discuss here all the details of the composite character of this chapter, but will try to show that the end of the chapter may contain an early reference to the first corpus of Israelite laws. To this end, we shall, first, analyze the composition of 2 Kgs 17:24–41, trying to distinguish early and later levels; and, second, compare the indications of the early level with the earliest Israelite corpus in the Pentateuch.

I. COMPOSITION OF 2 KINGS 17:24–41

As already clearly stated by C. F. Burney about 17:24–41: “The narrative is certainly composite.” Actually there is an obvious contradiction between vv. 32, 33, 41 which say that the new immigrants “feared Yahweh” and v. 34 which emphasizes that “they feared not Yahweh”! Clearly, we have,
at least, two levels: an earlier one that was rather positive about the issue of the story of sending an Israelite priest to Bethel, and a later one that was very negative about the issue of this story.

Now, let us look more carefully at the detailed verses. According to Burney, “Verses 24–34... form, in part at least, an ancient narrative embodied by R1.” The beginning of this narrative is clearly indicated in v. 24: “The king of Assyria brought people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim...”. Although the precise original location of these immigrants and the precise dating of their arrival in the ancient territory of Israel during Sargon’s reign (721–705 BCE) is somewhat debated, a similar transference of population is also indicated in royal Neo-Assyrian texts and supposed by a few Neo-Assyrian tablets found in Gezer, Hadid, and Samaria: its historicity is now generally recognized.

In the general context of this transference of population by Sargon II, vv. 25–28 tell a more specific story about Bethel, apparently to be dated at the beginning of this immigration (25a). The new immigrants were confronted by a plague (lions attacking men) and it was interpreted as the indication of the wrath of the local god. The phrase אלהי הארץ (vv. 26–27), clearly means here “god of the country” and not “god of the world.” This means that YHWH was viewed as a god tied to the country of Israel, at the most as a national god but not yet as a universal god. As in the Khirbet Beit Lei inscription dating from around 701 BCE, we are still in the context of monolatry not of monotheism.

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8 For lions used as instruments of the divine wrath, see 1 Kings 13:24; 20:36; see also Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB ii; Garden City, N.Y.; Doubleday, 1988), 210: “All the incidents involving lions in Kings are staged in northern Israel, and so it would seem that local northern tradition underlies them.”

9 See recently André Lemaire, “Le ‘Dieu de Jérusalem’ à la lumière de l’épigraphie,” in *Jérusalem antique et médiévale. Mêlanges en l’honneur d’Ernest-Marie Laperrousaz*