THE CREED OF DEUTERONOMY XXVI REVISITED

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It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of the "short historical creed" for the theological work of Gerhard von Rad. Discovered in 1938, it remained a creative force in his presentation of OT theology.¹ Von Rad's concern in his 1938 monograph was to pose the question of the final form or genre of the Hexateuch. Why do the hexateuchal sources treat the particular span of Israelite history that they do? In pursuing this question von Rad came across the "short historical creed" of Dt. xxvi 5b–9 with its primary parallels in Dt. vi 20–4 and Josh. xxiv 2b–13. These historical summaries recount basically the same events recounted in the Hexateuch, with two significant differences. The summaries mention neither history prior to the patriarchs nor the covenant at Sinai. From this he argued that the Exodus-Conquest tradition and the Sinai tradition were originally independent. He associated the Sinai tradition with the feast of booths and covenant renewal at Shechem and the Exodus-Conquest tradition with the feast of weeks celebrated at Gilgal. It was the Yahwist who first combined the traditions in his literary work. He also developed the patriarchal traditions in the light of the resulting combination and prefaced the primeval history. In this manner von Rad accounted for the current form of the hexateuchal sources.

In his own investigation of the Pentateuch, M. Noth accepted von Rad's basic thesis, though with one significant difference. On the basis of the parallels in J and E he argued that much of the innovation

which von Rad had attributed to the Yahwist must already have been present in a common Grundlage (G) lying behind both J and E.²

The ensuing critique of von Rad’s thesis took on two basic forms: discussion of the original independence of the Exodus-Conquest and Sinai traditions, and the age and nature of such historical creeds.³ A. Weiser argued that the differing characters of the Exodus-Conquest tradition as the revelation of the divine essence and the Sinai tradition as the revelation of the divine will were not due to their belonging to different festivals but to their being separate parts of a single festival of covenant renewal. This he deduced from Josh. xxiv where both historical recital and law form part of the covenantal ceremony.⁴ Weiser’s basic position found significant support in the discovery of the parallels between Israel’s covenant tradition and the treaty tradition of the ancient Near East.⁵ These treaties usually include a historical prologue which precedes the obligations defined in the body of the treaty. The Exodus-Conquest tradition (creed) was compared with the historical prologue and the Sinai tradition with the treaty stipulations, and on these grounds the traditions were seen to be firmly bound to one another.⁶

As for the second line of criticism, von Rad had noted the presence of Deuteronomistic phraseology in the creed of Dt. xxvi 5b–9 but chose not to determine the actual extent of this “retouching”. On this score he was duly criticized by L. Rost, who undertook such an investigation. He held that only the statement “a perishing Aramean was my father, and now behold, I bring the first fruits of the ground which you, Yahweh, have given me” was in fact old, the rest being

³ G. Wallis, “Die geschichtliche Erfahrung und das Bekenntnis zu Jahwe im Alten Testament”, ThLZ 101 (1976), cols 801–16, also lists criticism of the term “credo” or “creed” as an appropriate name for the genre (cols 808–9). The term “historical summary” is often substituted as broader and hence applicable to all the relevant texts, whereas “creed” covers primarily the situation in Dt. xxvi. Since this passage is the focus of the present study, I retain von Rad’s terminology for purposes of simplicity.
⁴ Einleitung in das Alte Testament (Göttingen, 1957), pp. 72–85.