1. Introduction

The poems incorporated into Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History of Israel constitute a well-known problem to O.T. scholarship. The best known examples of such poems are Jacob’s Blessing (Gen 49), the Song of the Sea (Ex 15), the Blessings and Curses of Deut 27-28, the Song of Moses (Deut 32), the Blessing of Moses (Deut 33), the Song of Deborah (Judg 5), the Song of Hannah (1 Sam 2), David’s Lament (2 Sam 1:17-27) and Thanksgiving (2 Sam 22). However, there are many more smaller passages in verse, like the oath of Lamech (Gen 4:23-24), various poetic fragments in Exodus, the adhortation of the ark (Num 10:35f.), the victory song of Heshbon (Num 21:27-30), Balaam’s oracles (Num 22-24), Jotham’s fable (Judg 9:7-15), the victory song for David (1 Sam 18:7), David’s testament (2 Sam 23:1-7), various passages in Kings, etcetera.

1 We agree with those who hold the Deuteronomistic School largely responsible for the composition of the historical account from Genesis to 2 Kings 25, cf. e.g. C.J. Labuschagne, Gods oude plakboek: Visie op het Oude Testament (’s-Gravenhage, 1979), 106-119; C. Houtman, Inleiding in de Pentateuch (Kampen, 1980), 247; M.A. O’Brien, The Deuteronomistic History Hypothesis: A Reassessment (OBO, 92; Freiburg, 1989), esp. 288: “The nature of DtrH as a combination of source and redaction shows that DTR was heir to a lively tradition of Israelite literary activity and thought. Nevertheless one may justifiably describe DtrH as a new and unique contribution to this tradition”.

Probably we have to assume integration of this work into a priestly composition which was subsequently further edited by later redactors, cf. E. Blum, Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch (BZAW, 189; Berlin, 1990).


The amount of verse in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History becomes even larger if we include what has been described as "narrative poetry", poetry in which external parallelism is more prominent than "normal" internal parallelism within the verse. Here the borderline between prose and poetry tends to become blurred. Perhaps this should be ascribed to a prosaic redaction of earlier epic material. But it is just as well possible to simply assume a different genre of verse which coexisted next to lyrical poetry from the beginning. For this too, parallels exist in the Ancient Near East.

The origin and function of this poetic material require an explanation. To that end we shall start with a description of a number of significant characteristics of these inset poems. These characteristics will provide us with a key to their function. Subsequently we shall formulate a hypothesis concerning the origin of the poems.

2. Characteristics

2.1 Date

Recent investigations refer to parallels from the ancient world to explain the juxtaposition of a prose narrative to a lyrical account of the same events in verse, or to narratives leading up to a poem. Mostly a

(AOAT, 42; Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1993), 31-40.


7 Usually this theory is attributed to the Albright School, but even more important were the early contributions of U. Cassuto. See especially his "The Israelite Epic", in: U. Cassuto, Biblical and Oriental Studies II, transl. I. Abrahams, (Jerusalem, 1975), 69-109, an article which appeared in Hebrew as early as 1943.


9 K.L. Younger, Jr., "Heads! Tails! Or the Whole Coin?!: Contextual Method and Intertextual Analysis: Judges 4 and 5", in: K.L. Younger, Jr.- W.W. Hallo - B.F. Batto (eds.), The Biblical Canon in Comparative Perspective (Scripture in