



Bible-study: 2020/02/16 (St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, McMinnville) – Deuteronomy 30:15-20

[Ask for volunteer to read passage.]

Having been with the prophet Isaiah in the seventh century B. C., the Lectionary now *whisks* us back in time about – roughly – a *thousand* years! – to the lifetime of Moses. We don't know exactly when, of course, because there is no *concrete* record of him *personally* in the archaeological record, and the Bible does not furnish us with any dates. Scholars, therefore, are forced to extrapolate from a number of other external sources, and this involves a great deal of speculation.

Sceptics, of course, “seize” on the lack of evidence contemporaneous with the great man, attesting to his existence, as indicative of him being a fiction; *legendary*. A myth like Theseus and the flying-horse, Pegasus. Or King Arthur of Camelot. The argument is that he was fabricated by the author of *Deuteronomy* – known in the literature as, “the Deuteronomist,” who lived ‘during the Babylonian Exile’ – so, the fifth or sixth century B. C., to explain, *in neat and tidy fashion*, the origin of ‘the basics of Judaism’, in order ‘to provide direction’; *reinvigorate* the ‘cultural identity’ of the captives, who were becoming deeply disillusioned with their ancestral tradition in the face of that appalling national disaster.¹

In other words, the Deuteronomist's purpose, so it goes, was to convince his countrymen to *remain Jewish* – *to inspire them* with uplifting tales of *forgotten* glory, and so help them to resist enculturation by the technologically and militaristically superior empire that had effortlessly humiliated them. Alternatively, he wrote at King Josiah's direction to provide a propagandistic rationale for that ruler's godly reforms, at a time of rampant – *normative* – idolatry.²

To be clear, the prevailing suggestion *isn't* that he just “plucked” *Deuteronomy* “from thin air.” No, rather, along with ‘Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings’,³ it was ‘cobbled together’⁴ by ‘an editor/writer with antiquarian intent, who compiled and selectively rewrote a vast collection of source material into a historical work characterized by a singular deuteronomic theology’.⁵ This posited “source material” doesn't exist now, but, it is conjectured, consisted of ‘fragments’ (of parchment – of papyrus and vellum), ‘considered to be occasionally contradictory texts that circulated for the most part independently

¹ Baxter, James W. (2013), *The Book of Deuteronomy and Post-modern Christianity*, Eugene, O. R.: Resource Publications (Wipf and Stock Publishers), 11-12.

² See, for example: Miller, Patrick D. (1990), *Deuteronomy (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Volume V)*, Louisville, K. Y.: John Knox Press, 3.

³ Harris, R. Laird (1967), ‘Factors Promoting the Formation of the Old Testament Canon’, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Volume 10, No. 1, pp. 21-27, 22.

⁴ Baxter, (2013), 11.

⁵ Richter, Sandra L. (2002), *The Deuteronomistic History and the Name Theology*, Berlin; New York, N. Y.: Walter De Gruyter, 1-2.

of one another [up to that point].⁶

Similarly, this is how, in fact, the Qur'ān came together – the religious book of Islam. Although, literally, the name means “recitation,” implying it is a singular, cohesive verbatim delivered by one man, “Muhammad,” as one expert puts it: ‘most [of its verses] conceal a pre-canonical history of enunciation, declamation and reiteration *by a variety of voices*, no longer recoverable.’⁷ This multiplicity of contributors recorded their *primeval* “revelations” on various mediums, including bones and the wide, flat ends of date-palm fronds; material that, being dispersed and diffuse, was generated into multiple, competing “Qur’āns,” all but one of which were then eliminated to establish what Aziz al-Azmeh calls ‘the Uthmanic vulgate’⁸ – Caliph Uthman being the early Muslim ruler responsible for the purge.

Now, we know this is how the *definitive* Qur’ān was produced, because there is some extant proof: in 1972, contractors renovating the Great Mosque of Sana'a in Yemen came across large quantities of what the German Arabist, Gerd Puin, who examined them, calls, ‘a kind of cocktail of texts...[m]any of them may even be a hundred years older than Islam itself. ...including a *significant* Christian substrate’.⁹ – a “Christian substrate” which is undeniable: the late atheist Christopher Hitchens called Islam ‘not much more than a rather obvious and ill-arranged set of plagiarisms’.¹⁰

If the Deuteronomist, however, put together *his* history-collection together from underlying – “plagiarized” – “scraps” too, where are those? Have we really just not found them? This seems one of the most obvious flaws in the sceptic’s position: she or he’s had to suppose a primitive “strata” of writings about Israel’s earliest history that have *completely* disappeared – and one liberal embraces this, readily conceding: ‘the materials in *Deuteronomy* are lost in the mists of time. Most likely, they come from all around the Mediterranean region over several centuries.’¹¹ Additionally, a minority, of course, retreat to the more extreme claim that the Deuteronomist simply conjured them from an oral tradition, *entirely* uncommitted to “hardcopy” up to his own day; *or*, that the *whole* work emerged pristine from his imagination.

The consequence, though, either way, has been to cast doubt on Moses and on the events he supposedly drove forward: that of the Exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt, and, following, their conquest of Canaan. Thus, for example, Norman Gottwald: ‘I would not deny that there are historical data in the traditions about Moses. In my view some of these historical traces stand out rather clearly. Moses is recalled as an actual person who was of Levitical kinship, who intermarried with Midianite “semi-nomads,” who led a slave revolt, who is reportedly buried in Transjordan, [etcetera; but, a]s I see it, the historical situation which can be calculated on the basis of the mosaic traditions is such

⁶ Ausloos, Hans (2015), *The Deuteronomist's History*, Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 5.

⁷ al-Azmeh, Aziz (2014), *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allah and His People*, Cambridge, U. K.: Cambridge University Press, 449.

⁸ *Supra*.

⁹ See: Lester, Toby (January 1999), ‘What Is the Koran?’, *The Atlantic*, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1999/01/what-is-the-koran/304024/>, (accessed February 12, 2020). (My emphasis.)

¹⁰ ‘Was Muhammad epileptic?’ (26th of April, 2007), *Slate Magazine*, available at <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2007/04/was-muhammad-epileptic.html>, (accessed February 12, 2020).

¹¹ Baxter, (2013), 11.

that we can have more confidence about the experience and religious belief and practice of a proto-Israelite “Moses *group*” than we can have about [a] *specific* person[, “[Moses.]” ... Bluntly put, we are not in a position to calculate the part that [an] historical Moses actually played in introducing Yahweh, in explicating him as a deliverer from oppression, as one with whom to covenant, and as a law-giver. This is another way of saying that we do not know precisely how those notions...actually arose and functioned...’ Most likely, he concludes, Moses was a mere ‘sacred cipher’.¹²

That is to say, a *symbol*. An invention of *stupendous* authority: consider his unparalleled access to God on the smoky summit of Sinai, for instance. This man had actually – *almost* – seen the creator of the universe with his very eyes; so close that if he had reached out his hand he could have *touched* Him! “An invention” that could be used, exploited and wielded to lend legitimacy to whatever the politico-religious elites wanted: “*Do this!*” “Why?” “[We say] *Moses says so!* (And he was practically “BFFs” with the Lord, so be quick about it.)”

The traditional teaching of the Church, of course, disputes this. For the longest time across every denomination, Moses was assumed to be a *genuine* hero of our distant past, *and* the most obvious person responsible for *Deuteronomy*. After all, it consists, essentially, of three sermons that he gave, placed back-to-back, and these are described as ‘the words that Moses spoke to all of Israel beyond the Jordan in the wilderness, on the plain opposite Suph...’: [1:1]; where, after forty years of wandering and whining, the Hebrews camped – in what is today the Arab Hashemite Kingdom, preparing to make war against the Canaanites. In this trio of sermons, Moses is portrayed as challenging the twelve tribes ‘to a total unshared allegiance to Yahweh who had wrought mighty acts of deliverance on [their] behalf.’¹³ By ‘a re-presentation of [T]he [L]aw’,¹⁴ that he then ‘gave...to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the Ark’: [31:9].

The snag, however, has always been the events of chapter thirty-four; the *final* chapter in the book: Moses’ death; described from a dispassionate, third-party perspective. How could Moses have written this about himself and *after-the-fact*? That at least must have been appended by an unnamed sympathizer, making the preceding material – which ‘is marked throughout by a spirit of urgency’¹⁵ – as Gerhard von Rad suggests: a farewell speech; though he doesn’t stop there – ‘we may certainly conclude that the whole has been submitted to a process of redaction’, he confidently asserts. And so, having arrived on what felt like a “slippery slope,” he, like probably many commentators, found himself, it appears, attributing more and more of *Deuteronomy* to mysterious others working in a later era, who greatly expanded some modest (now vanished) “kernel” of surviving ancient bedtime stories about Moses to expound ‘upon questions which were vital in [their] own time.’¹⁶ And that’s not nothing, by the way: That even the most sceptical critics concede, if only implicitly, that there is

¹² *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B.C.E.* (1980), London: SCM Press Ltd., 35-37.

¹³ Thompson, J. A. (2008), *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Volume 5)*, Downers Grove, I. L.: InterVarsity Press, 15.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁵ 17.

¹⁶ *Studies In Deuteronomy* (1961), translated by David Stalker, London: SCM Press Ltd., 22-23.

‘at least a Mosaic core to the book of *Deuteronomy*.’¹⁷ A “core” of *astonishing* antiquity:

At the “heart” of the text under consideration this morning, is the idea of “covenant.” Of, “if you do that, in return I promise this.” And the language we see this morning, observes Kenneth Kitchen, has ‘striking parallels’ in documents of Hittite imperial discourse ‘of the fourteenth-thirteenth centuries B. C.’¹⁸ (The Hittites were an Anatolian mountain-people, that “branched” out from a capital, “Hattusa,” in what is central Turkey, to become ‘for a time the dominant power within [the Near East].’¹⁹ And they seemed to have enjoyed remarkable stability: ‘throughout the 500 years of its existence the kingdom...remained under the rule of kings who almost certainly came from a single small group of closely related families. From the beginning to the end..., there was no clearly demonstrable change of dynasty. ... Further, we cannot easily divide Hittite history into different phases on the basis of a major decline



followed by a major upsurge in the kingdom’s fortunes, or vice versa.’²⁰ Their expansion, which sent a “tentacle” right down into the “Promised Land” itself – Abraham knew, and ‘bowed’ to them: [Gen. 23:7] – was driven, quite literally, by the chariot – a swift, intimidating weapons-platform with which they seemed to have enjoyed a nascent monopoly:²¹ thus the historian,

Charles Burney – ‘Although the Hittites can hardly be credited with inventing chariotry, once it had arrived upon the scene in the ancient Near East they deployed it to excellent effect on campaign.’²² Both the classical, two-wheeled horse variant *and* a massive, ox-pulled six-wheeled type ‘used for resting and overnight stops’ – perfect for delivering refreshed, ready-to-fight troops to the frontlines.²³)

J. A. Thompson agrees: ‘It is precisely the literary form of the suzerain-

17 See: Wenham, Gordon (April 1985), ‘The Date of Deuteronomy: Linch-pin of Old Testament Criticism’, *Themelios*, Volume 10, No. 3, pp. 15-20, available at <https://themelios.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-date-of-deuteronomy-linch-pin-of-old-testament-criticism/>, (accessed February 13, 2020).

18 Kitchen, K. A. (1966), *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, London: Inter-Varsity Press, 91.

19 Bryce, Trevor (2004), *The Kingdom of the Hittites*, Oxford, U. K.: Oxford University Press, xix.

20 *Ibid.*, 5-6.

21 See: Drews, Robert (2017), *Militarism and the Indo-Europeanizing of Europe*, London; New York, N. Y.: Routledge (Taylor & Francis Group), 115-116.

22 Burney, Charles (2004), *Historical Dictionary of the Hittites*, Lanham, M. D.: Scarecrow Press (Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.), 66. (‘[B]efore ca. 1750 B. C. most of western Eurasia has no warrior class... When battles needed to be fought they were fought largely by rural youths, many of whom...were simply doing for a king what they had learned to do in order to protect their flocks and herds, and with the same weapons. ... The military use of chariots [however,]...revolutionized the way that battles were fought in the civilized world...[and precipitated] the beginning of militarism. ... The new kind of warfare was followed by improvement in weaponry and by employment of defensive armor.’ – Drews (2017), 110-111, & 115.)

23 See: Gamkrelidze, Thomas V. and Ivanov, Vjaceslav V. (1995), *Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans*, Berlin; New York, N. Y.: Mouton de Gruyter, 628.

vassal treaty particularly that of the Hittites of the second millennium B.C., that is used...[in] *Deuteronomy* as a whole or in some of its parts'.²⁴ The author has just 'adapted' it for his own purpose.²⁵ Kitchen concludes: 'This, if true, would suggest that [it] really did originate ...in the general period of Moses.'²⁶ Furthermore, Gordon Wenham brings another line of argument to bear in favour of the evangelical presumption: the prophets, who almost exclusively precede the period claimed as that in which *Deuteronomy* was composed –

'[T]here is some long-neglected evidence which suggests that...some form of the book of *Deuteronomy* itself was known in the eighth century. ...*Hosea* and *Amos*, show many traces of deuteronomic style and apparent allusions to *Deuteronomy*. [Draw timeline.] Modern commentators generally ascribe these deuteronomisms to the ubiquitous deuteronomist, an editor who rewrote everything in deuteronomic style. Commentators [have attempted to] peel away the most obvious deuteronomisms and argue that what is left is the authentic voice of ["Amos"] and ["Hosea"]. However, these commentators do not do a thorough enough job. If every trace of *Deuteronomy* were eliminated from these early prophets, there would be hardly anything left. ...

Recently, too,' Wenham continues, 'the doyen of Hebrew philology, C. Rabin, has also pressed the case for *Deuteronomy* being composed before *Hosea* and *Amos*. On the grounds of discourse analysis Rabin argues that *Deuteronomy* has the form of a prophetic sermon, yet prophetic sermons from *Amos* onwards adopt a clearly poetic style. *Deuteronomy*'s style is like that of earlier prophets such as *Samuel* and *Elijah*. Thus a late date for the book must be excluded. Rabin's article, though written with great authority, is tantalizingly brief and leaves many questions unanswered. It does though suggest new methods of approaching an old problem.

The same too could be said of [G. A.] Rendsburg's article in which he argues that the Hebrew of the Pentateuch is distinctively archaic in certain respects, [for example, in] its failure to distinguish the masculine and feminine in some words. 'The Pentateuch as a whole would by necessity be dated earlier than the composition of *Joshua*, *Judges*, etc.'²⁷

Lastly, Josef Schubert adds what I think is the coup de grâce – you might call it a "slam dunk" – to the sceptics' cynical view about a late *Deuteronomy* written by one unnamed in the Bible: it is 'virtually identical', he reports, to its equivalent in the *Samaritan Pentateuch*, (which is like our Old Testament but considerably shorter).²⁸ The Samaritans, remember, were descended from those

²⁴ Thompson, J. A. (October 1963), 'The Significance of the Ancient Near Eastern Treaty Pattern', *The Tyndale Bulletin*, Volume 13, pp. 1-6, 3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁶ Kitchen (1966), 91-92

²⁷ Wenham (1985).

²⁸ Schubert, Josef (2018), *Dating Deuteronomy: The Wellhausen Fallacy*, Eugene, O. R.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 68. To be precise, it is just the first five books. And it 'features approximately six thousand textual variants of the Masoretic Text (MT).' (Eshel, Esther and Eshel, Hanan (2003), 'Dating the Samaritan Pentateuch's Compilation in Light of the Qumran Biblical Scrolls', in Paul, Shalom M.; Kraft, Robert A.; Schiffman, Lawrence H. & Fields, Weston W. (Eds.), *Emanuel: Studies in the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, and the Dead Sea Scrolls in Honor of Emanuel Tov*, Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, pp. 215-, 215.) ('The Masoretic Text', by the way, 'was used as the basis for translations of the Old Testament in Protestant Bibles such as the King James Version', (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masoretic_Text.) Furthermore, the Eshels argue that the "SP" "had "roots" in a 'Jewish version of the Pentateuch adopted by the Samaritans in the second century B. C. E.', to which were 'added' [s]ectarian changes establishing Mt. Gerizim as the primary sacred

few Jews from the northern tribes who survived the Assyrian destruction of the Kingdom of Israel *after* its split from the Jerusalem monarchy. They built their own temple (to God) on Mount Gerizim in competition with the one built by those Judeans who returned from the Babylonian Exile, which they themselves avoided having become a separate and distinct polity; and '[i]t is not credible that the Samari[t]ans would copy the[ir – the Judeans'] Pentateuch or collaborate with the Judeans in its final redaction'.²⁹ (Consider the deep animosity that existed during Jesus' ministry.) Rather, they must be, theorizes Schubert, 'different editions of the same document' – a document that existed 'as a unit [at least] *before* the separation between the kingdoms'.³⁰

To be clear, this does not mean Moses wrote chapter 34, and that it wasn't added during some subsequent editorial work on *Deuteronomy*. This almost certainly was the case. Those conservatives who cling to saying *every* word was penned by him *must* conjecture divine foresight that isn't itself, strictly speaking, claimed. But more and more merely rise above the issue, deeming it of no consequence.³¹ One of those is Peter Craigie to whom I'm going to give the final word on these matters: 'Both the form of the book and the religious significance of that form make it not unreasonable to assume that the book comes from the time of Moses or shortly thereafter; the nature of the evidence, however, is not such that the date can be either proved or disproved.'³²

site', 240. A similar proposal is made too by Robert T. Anderson and Terry Giles in *The Samaritan Pentateuch: An Introduction* (2012), Atlanta, G. A.: Society of Biblical Literature, 15.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

³⁰ 85. (My emphasis.)

³¹ See, for example: MacArthur, John (2005), *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, Nashville, T. N.: Thomas Nelson, 193.

³² *The Book of Deuteronomy (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: Volume V)* (1976), Grand Rapids, M. I.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 28.