

Chapter 18
The Israelite Underground:
Theology of the Deuteronomic Movement

The Movement, having gone underground some three generations before, was now about to surface once more. Made up of remnants of all the major groups of Judah and southern Israel, the Movement had waited impatiently for an opportunity to reassert itself in the life of the Kingdom. The opportunity came early in the reign of King Josiah. This boy-king had begun to turn the direction of Judahite life in a manner that fit the position of the Movement. Announcing his independence from Judah's century-long vassalage to Assyria, he stopped paying tribute to this erstwhile overlord, and he set about to erase from the temple of Jerusalem all vestiges of the suzerainty of Assyria's rulers and its gods. This rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem provided the Movement with its chance. A priest secreted in the temple the Movement's most sacred book, the one they knew as "The Second Law of Moses," and he saw to it that a priest not of their group discovered it. That priest opened it, read it, was moved by it, and brought it to the young king that he might hear its words. When that Law was read to King Josiah, the Israelite underground was above ground at last.

I.

We need to interrupt this scenario in order to introduce the first of the Old Testament theologies, known to biblical scholars as "The Deuteronomic Theology."

This is different from the D document mentioned earlier. D is a portion of the present Book of Deuteronomy, whereas "The Deuteronomic Theology" is the name given to a theological position centered in that book but extending beyond it into the books of Joshua through Second Kings and which is characterized by the following:

Yahweh has said that good will be rewarded and evil will be punished: when a king or a nation acts according to the good, they will be rewarded; but when they act in an evil manner, they will be punished. But this does not happen automatically. It happens because Yahweh has said it. Yahweh is the one who sets it in motion: Yahweh is the one who punishes evil and rewards good.

The question is sure to arise, however: who or what is "good?" This gnawing question had a clear answer as far as the Deuteronomists were concerned. Moses, the great leader of the Israelites is the good one, and whoever lives like Moses is therefore good. To act in the way he prescribed was to do the good. To act contrary to his way of life was to do evil.

The next question to concern the Deuteronomists was this: who acted in the way Moses did?

Joshua did, they said. He picked up the work Moses had begun and brought it to completion. The judges did too. These were the men and women who came forth at the call of God to lead the Israelites in battle against their enemies. During the time the judges were active, Yahweh was exalted as the only king of Israel, and his commandments were kept.

David was the next to do it. He was faithful in all things to Yahweh. He brought the tabernacle of Yahweh into the holy city of Jerusalem and made it the center of all worship. He kept the commands of Yahweh as he attempted to deal justly with his people. He was not a perfect man by any means. While he was king, he attempted to make a census of the people, and the Deuteronomists considered this a blatant sin: it meant David was depending on the innate strength of the nation to see it through crises rather than the goodness of the Lord. There was also that sin with Bathsheba which no one could excuse or explain away. Nevertheless, in the delicate scales by which the Deuteronomists measured out the worth of kings, David came out well. More than any other of the kings of Israel and Judah, he tried to organize the kingdom along the model set down two centuries before his time by Moses himself.

Some of the other kings of Judah were also given good ratings. The Deuteronomists picked out Asa, Amaziah, Josiah, Hezekiah, Jehoshaphat, and Uzziah for special acclaim. But none of the kings of Israel (the Northern Kingdom) passed their rigid test: Jeroboam I and Jeroboam II, Omri, Ahab, even Jehu who started a rebellion in Yahweh's name, and Zimri who ruled only seven days and could not do too much that was evil in that short span of time--in the eyes of the Deuteronomists every one of these kings was considered evil. Why this is so provides the clue to the special standards of judgment the Deuteronomists employed.

The whole question before them was this: did this king exalt Yahweh as Moses did? Exalting Yahweh meant worshipping in the temple, and there only. Joshua and the judges honored the tabernacle as the dwelling place of Yahweh. David brought this shrine from its disuse and put it in the center of Jerusalem; he did not permit the people to build any other shrines or worship any other gods. The good kings of Judah were those who tore down the shrines to the other gods. But every king of Israel (the Northern Kingdom) either erected other shrines or worshipped at ones previously existing within their borders. By the strict standards of the Deuteronomists, every one of these kings was an idolater who had broken Moses' command about idolatry, and they only got what they deserved when their kingship was taken from them and their land ravaged. To "exalt Yahweh" by worshipping at his one and only shrine in Jerusalem was fundamental to the Deuteronomist standard of judgment.

This standard may seem automatic, mechanical even: build a shrine to Yahweh and you are rewarded, build a shrine to another god and you are punished. Yet behind the religious requirement was an ethical purpose: when shrines were built to other gods, the behavior of the people changed. They not only worshipped these other gods, they observed their values as well, and they soon forgot the values of the Lord their God. The Deuteronomists

knew what modern people have forgotten, that people become like that which they worship. Worship Baal, and you take on all kinds of uncouth Canaanite conduct, but worship Yahweh and you walk in his ways of Yahweh. The Deuteronomists were pointing to the intimate relationship between religion and ethics when they set up their single standard: only the people that exalted Yahweh would keep his commandments.

There was a last question they had to confront. What kind of a God is this one who must be exalted and whose commandments set the standards for our own lives? Their answer was this: the God who judges those who do not live by God's standards but who saves those who do. God saved Moses and the people when they exalted God and lived by God's commandments. God saved Joshua and his warrior band when they did the same; and God saved the tribes when under the judges they were faithful to their Lord. God saved David and made of him a mighty nation. God judged all the northern Israelites; it was no wonder, in the Deuteronomists' view, that the nation had been destroyed for its faithlessness. But God saved Judah when her kings abided by God's commandments. This, therefore, is the stern hope of the Deuteronomist's message: if you sin, you will be destroyed: but if you do right, you will be saved and rewarded. And the Deuteronomists proclaimed their message so that the people might hear it and turn to the Lord and experience the power of God's saving love again as they had experienced it in days of old.

II.

They put their message into a body of writing that is truly extensive. It begins with the Book of Deuteronomy and runs through to the end of the Second Book of Kings. They also collected and edited some of the oldest of the prophetic works and perhaps even brought out an updated Book of Psalms for the worship of the people. Almost half of the present Old Testament, in the form we have it today, bears the imprint of the Deuteronomists. That is an impressive legacy indeed.

The sources upon which they drew were many, and the manner in which they dealt with them was creative.

They started with the document we called D, chapter 12 through 26 of the present Book of Deuteronomy. To these laws by which Israel was to live, they added a discourse of Moses designed to put the laws in their proper setting. To them were added the Ten Commandments (chapter 5) and, in chapters 6 through 11, an exhortation from Moses to keep these commandments. These passages prefaced the law. Following the law, chapter 27, is a covenant ceremony in which the giving and receiving of a new covenant between Yahweh and Israel is ratified, and chapter 28 gives a listing of the blessings expected if the covenant is kept and the curses that will fall upon them if it is not.

It is clear what the editors were doing. They were shaping their new book to give it the outlines of a Hittite suzerainty treaty, similar to the one by which Moses organized the life of the people at Sinai. All the parts of the treaty are present: the history of God's

benevolent dealing with God's people; the stipulations of the covenant; the ceremony of ratification; the blessings and the curses. The reason for this arrangement is not hard to find.

The Deuteronomists were purposefully substituting this new covenant with God to take the place of the treaty existing in Judah between Assyria the suzerain and Judah the vassal. "The old treaty no longer holds," asserted the Deuteronomists. "In its place we are ratifying a new covenant with the God of Israel, whereby God is once more our sovereign and we once more pledge to organize our lives in accord with our treaty of covenant with our Lord." Even the form of the Book of Deuteronomy takes on new meaning: it is a declaration of independence from Assyria and a new declaration of loyalty to Yahweh, the God of Israel.

The second source contained the accounts of Joshua, Judges, Saul and David.

Most likely these materials had undergone a considerable process of editing even before the Deuteronomists used them. The Book of Judges, for example, has at its heart stories of the judges themselves. These include among others the accounts of Othniel, a model judge; Deborah, a charismatic and commanding woman; Gideon, a comic figure; and Samson, nobody's example of what a judge should be. Someone between the time of David and Josiah gathered these stories together and added an introduction to them; this introduction is found in Judges 2:6 through 3:6. Finally, the Deuteronomists took the material and made it fit their own purposes. They started out in chapter one by showing the disintegration of the people of Israel, every man and woman in their own tent, every tribe barricaded in its own mountainous fortress and none caring about the fortunes of the others. They concluded, in chapters nineteen through twenty-one, by showing the people living in a new unity and harmony with Yahweh and each other. The Deuteronomists inherited major source material in this heritage of folk tales about the judges of Israel; and without tampering with their sources, they skillfully adapted these traditions to express their own purposes.

A similar process took place in the construction of the books we now call First and Second Samuel. There is evidence within them of an early account of the activities of Samuel the seer, who was a judge and yet seemed more than a judge. Interwoven within this is another set of narratives that contain anti-royal sentiments; it probably came from a group in Northern Israel which harked back to the tribal traditions of the Israelite federation and looked upon the establishment of kingship in Israel as an affront to the will of Yahweh. In Second Samuel also there is the magnificent "Succession Narrative" coming from the time of Solomon and constituting the largest portion of that book.

That this narrative was inserted in toto into the Deuteronomists' work tells something important about the method they used to compose their writings. They were not apt to make significant changes in the accounts they received from others but rather incorporated them into their work in the form in which they had received them. They expressed their own point of view primarily through the way they organized the material

and by adding to it distinctive passages that set forth their own line of thought. By this means they both respected the integrity of their sources and yet presented their own theological position with intensity.

An additional source used is "The Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel and Judah." Though referred to frequently in our present books of the Kings, this book has never been found in any of the archaeological excavations that have taken place. Most likely, it was an official record of the reigns of the many kings of the two kingdoms; we know from sources in Assyria and Babylonia that it was common practice in the Mideast at that time to compile such a chronicle. We also know that these chronicles were kept in the official archives of the Temple, and this probably accounts for the fact that we no longer have access to it. When the Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 B.C., these irreplaceable records probably went up in flames. All the more fortunate, then, that the Deuteronomists saw fit to place parts of it in their text; important pieces of it were Deuteronomic text; sketchy as it is, it is our only recollection of what occurred in the reigns of some of these kings.

Using the basic sources to construct his history, at the same time the Deuteronomist kept inserting his own point of view. In Judges, it usually reads this way:

And the people of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, forsaking the Lord their God, and serving the Baals and the Asheroth. Therefore, the anger of the lord was kindled against Israel, and he sold them into the hand of (and here some enemy is named); and they served him. But when the people of Israel cried to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for the people of Israel, (and here he is named). The Spirit of the Lord came upon him; and he judged Israel; he went out to war, and the Lord gave (his enemy) into his hand. (Based on Judges 3:7-11.)

This introduces the cycles of apostasy, enemy oppression, repentance, and deliverance that provide the framework for Judges. In Kings, the statement carries a similar intent but is worded differently. One of the places it occurs is in the account of the kingship of Omri. Omri, a powerful king in Israel who built the city of Samaria as his capital and extended the power of Israel almost to the borders it had had when David was king, also established a line of kings that extended into a short dynasty. But of this the Deuteronomist gives us nothing. When he talks of Omri, he simply says, I Kings 16:23-28:

In the thirty-first year of Asa king of Judah, Omri began to reign over Israel, and he reigned for twelve years; six years he reigned in Tirzah. He bought the hill of Samaria from Shemer for two talents of silver; and he fortified the hill, and called the name of the city which he had built, Samaria, after the name of Shemer, the owner of the hill. Omri did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did more evil

than all who were before him. For he walked in all the way of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and in the sins which he made Israel to sin, provoking the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger by their idols. Now the rest of the acts of Omri which he did, and the might that he showed, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Israel? And Omri slept with his fathers, and was buried in Samaria; and Ahab his son reigned in his stead.

It was these phrases—“died evil in the sight of the Lord,” and “provoking the Lord,”—and their frequent recurrence in these chapters that led scholars to understand they were dealing with a work edited from a particular point of view and which opened the way to understanding the force of the theological position of the Deuteronomistic movement.

Even this significant historical reconstruction does not exhaust the work of the Deuteronomists. The Deuteronomists also edited the works of the prophets Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah. What happened to Isaiah's prophecy is instructive for all the others. This compilation of prophecies and narratives concerning the prince of Jerusalem who prophesied in the time of King Hezekiah shows the hand of an editor since some of it is a narrative in the third person and not the first. Some of it, indeed, duplicates material that is also found in the Book of Kings, and that does indeed relate Isaiah to the Deuteronomistic movement. To it was later added the work of a prophet who prophesied during the time of exile.

Not only were these Deuteronomists responsible for most of the writings of the Old Testament from Deuteronomy through II Kings; they also had a hand in giving us the completed works of the so-called "writing prophets" of the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.

Who were they then, these Deuteronomists who influenced so much of the faith of later Israel and the Christian Church? When did they begin? Who made up the group? When did they emerge into the light of history? What happened to the group at the end? In the enigma of these questions a great deal of the mystery of the writing of the Old Testament lies hidden.

III

It is at this point that the biblical scholar has much in common with the detective. Both are investigators who assemble all the possible evidence and then draw the best possible conclusion from that. No solution is ever complete; new evidence can always be uncovered, and new hypotheses need to be constructed. All I can do now is list the clues at hand and draw my own conclusions. All things considered, we have a remarkable amount of information about the people who participated in this Deuteronomistic movement.

This group had strong affinities with the prophetic movement of Israel, so strong in fact that they were the first to label Moses, their central figure, as himself a "prophet." According to strict historical usage Moses should not be so classified. Moses was of Egypt; the prophetic movement of the Mideast was primarily a Canaanite phenomenon. Never mind; interpretations of history need not correspond with the historical realities. In their view, prophets were important; and since Moses was the most important person of all to them, he was therefore a prophet.

The affinities are further shown in that this group assembled the works of the prophets. Not only did they collect and edit the works of Amos, Hosea, Micah and Isaiah, they also accumulated and honored the narratives of Elijah and the memory of Elisha. These Deuteronomists, whoever else they were, honored the prophets.

They also had attachments to the northern kingdom of Israel. The Elijah stories come from the north; so do the prophecies of Amos and Hosea. So do many of the ancient narratives of Judges and all the accounts of the activities of the kings of (Northern) Israel. The fact that these northern traditions enter their work at all has more than a little significance because during the time of their major work (which I have dated between 721 and 550 B.C.) the northern kingdom no longer existed; their life and faith lived on only through the offices of this group of Deuteronomists.

It was a group to which scribes made a major contribution. Scribes of the court were skilled in drawing up covenant-treaties between one nation and another; a covenant-treaty between Yahweh and Israel is at the heart of their work. Scribes were the source of wisdom literature; and this courtly wisdom dating from the time of David and Solomon made its way into the work of the Deuteronomists. Scribes controlled the ability to write; and the Deuteronomists were a highly literate group reworking the writings of others. Scribes also had access to the documents of the royal court; whoever was responsible for the actual production of the Deuteronomic writings was able to put his hands upon those most sacred writings stored in temple and palace. Since scribes had a monopoly on all the processes by which this com- position was constructed, we have to posit the presence of scribes in this group.

It had a priestly element, too. The intention to centralize worship once more in Jerusalem and to abolish the provincial sanctuaries com-peting with it and the fact that at least one copy of the original book had been surreptitiously stored in the Temple shows the priestly hand in the movement.

It was a reform-minded group. It wanted nothing less than a total recasting of the major institutions of Israel: court and king, religion and cult, justice and law, common daily life were all to be radically reconstituted as Yahweh was again declared to be the sovereign lord of Israel, and Israel was once again to discover its vocation as the chosen people of God.

Was there any identifiable group in Judah at this time whose make- up parallels these concerns? Admittedly, the question is almost impossible to answer. On the one hand, we know next to nothing about the internal social groupings of Israel. On the other, if there

was such a group, its very nature forced it to go underground. Whatever the group was, it most likely disappeared from sight around the time of the destruction of Samaria and the Assyrian attacks on Jerusalem when Hezekiah was king; had to stay submerged, definitely, under King Manasseh who would not at all have supported its aims; had to keep out of sight of the Assyrians; and only with the accession to the throne of the young Josiah could it begin to show its presence once more.

There is, however, one group in Judah whose outlines, barely discernible on the pages of the Bible, might fit the above description. It is the group of disciples gathered originally by the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah had access to the court of the king and consequently he had courtly friends, some of whom were of the scribal class. He was a prophet and a conscious successor of Amos, Hosea, and Micah; around his personage the messages of these others would be gathered; and behind the prophetic messages stood the prophet Elijah pointing to the great prophet Moses. Isaiah was a man of the Temple and visualized his call to prophecy as coming within the sacred precincts. Isaiah had counseled King Hezekiah not to join the alliance gathered against Assyria but to remain quietly behind the fortifications of his mountain capital. Rebuffed by the king's decision to join the alliance, Isaiah had gone underground; he had retired from the capital city to a country retreat in the mountains on the borders between the two kingdoms. For a period of almost twenty years from 734 to 715 B.C., during the reign of Ahaz, and during the time of the destruction by Assyria of Israel and its capital city of Samaria, Isaiah had simply disappeared from public view. At the time of his withdrawal he indicated that he was going to spend the time instructing a group of disciples. "Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples," he said (as reported in Isaiah 8:16ff). "I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him. Behold, I and the children whom the Lord has given me are signs and portents in Israel from the Lord of hosts." In other words, he withdrew from public ministry in order that his words could be taught to those who shared his concerns. This group of disciples even had a name: the "Remnant," whom Isaiah hoped would someday return to be the inheritors of God's rule and favor, and in that mountainous redoubt the movement, so important to biblical history, was born. My hypothesis is that the origins of the Deuteronomists are to be found among these followers of Isaiah, and now we are in a position to resume the scenario with which we began this chapter.

IV.

Persons representing all facets of Israelite life either joined on their own initiative or were recruited into it. Young princes, their imaginations set aflame by the example of Isaiah, himself a courtier of Jerusalem, discussed the message of their teacher. Priests, both of the royal temple at Jerusalem and from the outlying shrines, found in it support for their honored traditions dating back to Aaron and Moses. Scribes contributed their skills in writing and their understanding of statecraft and especially their knowledge of the intricacies of working out covenant agreements between contesting parties. Elders of the clans, nurtured in the ways of the independent tribes of the Judea hill-country who had had little contact with the monarchical manner of David and Solomon and their heirs and who drew their inspiration from the tales of their fathers about Moses and Joshua, joined the group. Remnants of every important segment of that People of God who called

themselves Israel participated in the Movement, and as they did so they fulfilled the prophet's intention as indicated in the name he had bestowed upon his original band of followers, "The Remnant that Shall Return."

Unable because of conditions in the realm to assert themselves fully, the Remnant set themselves to tasks accessible to them.

One task was that of collecting and reducing to writing some of the preachments of persons important to their cause. Isaiah's messages, of course, were collected, edited, and carefully preserved. Not caring about the chronology of his preaching, they put first in the scroll of his works that which appeared most important to them, his words about calling the sinful nation to repentance because they had substituted religious rites for justice; in the middle they included his call by God in the temple when he "saw the Lord, high and lifted up," and at the end they included a vision of the marvelous return of the ransomed of the Lord to see the glory of the Lord:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom.
They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God.
Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.
And a highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way.
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing,
with everlasting joy upon their heads; They shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

They gave similar reverent attention to the words of other prophets. The message of Amos, delivered at the shrine of Bethel approximately a generation before the time of Isaiah and whose impact lay behind Isaiah's own work, was written out, given a short historical introduction on, and edited slightly to fit the needs of the group. The prophecies of Hosea, proclaiming the love and forgiveness of God and postulating the day when the people of Israel would be driven anew into a desert so that God could woo them anew as God had once courted the band of Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, was added to that of Amos; and the words of Micah, including those identical with that which Isaiah has preached about beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, were added to the collection. These memories of the prophets formed a portion of the position of Isaiah's remnant.

Scribes among the group made additional contributions. Taking from their archives in Jerusalem some of the sacred writings - the account of Solomon's accession to the throne and the saga of Israel's beginnings, to name just two - and adding to these documents rescued from the burning of Israel's capital city of Samaria like the accounts of the Judges -

perhaps reconstructing these documents from their prodigious memories (as scribes they were trained not only to read but to remember what they had read, not only to write but to draw upon their memories for the source material of their writing) -they constructed the epic of Israel beginning with creation and moving to the time of the destruction of Israel. They also constructed a completely new book, the Book of the Second Law. Using traditions about Moses drawn from sources in northern Israel, drawing upon creeds that expressed their faith and upon the laws that governed their own communities, their "Deuteronomy" (the name is of Greek derivation, deuteronomos, a second law, and was given to the book by the seventy scholars of Alexandria who made an official translation in Greek of the Hebrew Scriptures) was written in the form of a Hittite treaty and presented in capsule form the faith and life of the group.

Their writings intact, their emissaries in place in the courts of government, the halls of religion and the walkways of society, they waited their chance.... and, as we said earlier, they received it when the King was rebuilding the temple.

After the death in battle of King Josiah and the deprivations of the Babylonian invasion that ended with Judah in exile, the Deuteronomists continued their literary work by bringing the account of the life of the People of God to its tragic conclusion with the report of the destruction of the city and the painful humiliation of King Zechariah. But the purpose of their writing was not merely literary. It was to call the exiles to repentance for their sins and for the sins of their fathers. If Judah repented of their sins, would God repent of God's anger and restore them to their homeland? The great prophet of the exile thought so: " Comfort, my people," he said, "your sins are forgiven."

The above is a scenario, and only that, of the history of the Israelite underground, and it is open to refinement and correction. Yet tying the Deuteronomic movement into the events surrounding Isaiah of Jerusalem may help to explain one of the most curious facts of all biblical history: that the writings of the greatest prophet of the exile are attached in one biblical scroll with the writings of the Prophet Isaiah. Why did this happen? Why was not "Isaiah of Babylon" given an identity like Amos, like Hosea, like Isaiah of Jerusalem? Why did this greatest of prophets choose to remain anonymous? Was it that he thought of himself as a simple disciple of his great master and felt that the highest honor he could receive was to have his work forever joined to the writings of him whom he and his group revered above all other men?

At any rate, this is my speculation: the impact of Isaiah of Jerusalem upon his own disciples began the Deuteronomic movement about the year 725 B.C.; these disciples of Isaiah began to collect and preserve the ancient traditions and initiated this great reform movement in Judah which had been so influential in Christian thinking.

For indeed it has been that. Scratch the theology of the average reader of the Bible and see how closely it resembles that of Deuteronomy; good being rewarded and evil being

punished; of the importance of holding to the ethical standards of the Bible, standards clearly set forth in the Ten Commandments; the centrality of God in our life; of God being a God of judgment as well as the God of grace. The Deuteronomists did their work well. The position they espoused worked its way not only into Jewish thinking but into Christian theology. It would have made even more of an impact had not something else happened: another group of theologians, working from another perspective, decided that this work needed further editing and so gave Scripture an added complexity. These are the "Priestly Theologians of the Old Testament," and it is to their work we next turn.