

A Note on Deuteronomy XXVII. 1-8

Gerald T. Manley

[p.4]

The short passage in Deuteronomy xxvii. 1-8 which orders that after the Jordan has been crossed an altar should be erected on Mt. Ebal and the Law inscribed upon stones, is a veritable thorn in the side of those scholars who have accepted the view that Deuteronomy is a seventh-century composition whose object was to prohibit sacrifice at local sanctuaries and centralize worship in Jerusalem. How serious an obstacle it raises to this theory is evidenced by the efforts made to explain it away.

S. R. Driver (*I.C.C., Deuteronomy*, p. 294) frankly admits that 'the chapter presents considerable critical difficulties'; which is obvious enough, from his point of view. He decides that an older injunction (JE), verses 5-7a ...has been taken up by D (or a follower of D), supplemented by the addition of verse 7b, and combined with the instructions, written in his own words, for the inscription on stones of the Deut law.' Again he says, 'It is hardly possible that the chapter can form part of the original Deut. It seems that a Deuteronomy nucleus has 'been expanded by the addition of later elements, and placed here, in an unsuitable context, by a later hand,' This appears to decide that the author was, after all, not De, but 'a follower of D'. Elsewhere he makes it plain that, in his view, verses 9 and 10 are the only original part of chapter xxvii, and that they acted as a link between chapters xxvi and xxviii.

Why 'the elders' in verse 1 are associated with Moses he finds it 'impossible satisfactorily to explain'; the possibility of it having been true seems not to have occurred to him. This is not the only part of his hypothesis that is difficult to explain. The action of this Deuteronomic reviser

[p.5]

is no easier to understand. The centralization theory assumes that the local sanctuaries had been proclaimed illegal by the Deuteronomic law, a reform of which the reviser thoroughly approves; nevertheless, he takes upon himself deliberately to insert a paragraph which is in stark opposition to it. Moreover he deliberately places it in an 'unsuitable context'.

His sole authority for this appears to be that he found verses 5-7a in the JE document. We are left guessing whether, in its original setting, the command was ascribed to Moses, and connected with Ebal. We infer this, use later on Driver adds, 'no doubt, at the time when E wrote, there was such an altar on Ebal, together with slabs of stone inscribed with parts, of the law, which tradition told had been set up there shortly after Israel's entrance into Canaan. Cf. Joshua viii. 31' (*ibid.*, p. 297). These suppositions are beset with difficulties far greater than those which attend a belief in the accuracy of the record.

We are asked in the first place to believe that a book of acknowledged individuality and spiritual power, which for 'winning and persuasive eloquence' is unique in the Old Testament (cf. Driver, *op. cit.*, p. xxvi) was the work of an unknown reformer, whose courage was so small that he hid it in the Temple, hoping that one day it might be of use. We are told that its intention was to prohibit worship at the 'bamoth' (high places) though it never mentions

them, and to centralize worship in Jerusalem which is neither named nor hinted at. Upon its discovery by Hilkiah, this anonymous book is at once recognized as 'the book of the law', and its divine authority acknowledged. Worship is now, so the theory runs, for the first time centralized in Jerusalem; although this is not stated in 2 Kings xxii-xxiii, and the existence of Jerusalem as a religious centre seems to have been well recognized from the time of the disruption (1 Ki. xii. 25-33). This is enough to strain our credulity, but what follows is stranger still. The book of the law creates such a stir that it originates a 'Deuteronomic school' of writers and editors, who take upon themselves the task of revising, not only the JE document, but the sacred book itself, the source of their own inspiration.

On one point we can agree with the upholders of this theory, namely, that 'the book of the law' was, or at least included, Deuteronomy. It produced a profound impression upon the King, and he could not but have studied the one passage Dt. xvii. 14-20 which relates to the character of a future king; which orders him to obtain for himself and study a copy of the law.

Now we come to what is the strangest part of this strange story. A member of the Deuteronomic school discovers in the JE document the words which are reproduced in Dt. xxvii. 5-7a and invests them with a framework of his own. Armed with this he approaches Hilkiah and Josiah, and demands permission to insert it in their copies of the sacred roll. This is conceded, neither the king nor the high priest raising objection, nor perceiving that the passage renders nugatory the reform in which they have been so zealously engaged. Having secured the necessary permission the reviser inserts his production in a most unsuitable place. Those who study modern criticism of the Old Testament are accustomed to the perversities of these editors; but surely this is one of the most amazing! After all, we are not bound to believe it. Freedom of thought still exists, and if we wish, we may believe the Bible itself.

When Moses delivered to the people his great discourse, contained in Dt. v-xxvi, the tabernacle was in their midst, with the ark, and there Yahweh had set 'His Name', that it might be a centre for their national worship. That discourse ended, possibly after an interval, Moses calls to his side 'the elders' (xxvii. 1), and commands that, after the crossing of the Jordan, the law should be inscribed on stones, an altar raised, and the people acknowledge in a solemn ceremonial that they did not get the land in possession by their own strength, but that God gave it to them, as their sacrifices would testify. The elders were thus made responsible for the execution of the command. Next the priests the Levites stand by him (xxvii. 9) as he announces a further ceremony wherein the people bind themselves by solemn curses, eastern fashion, to keep the law even when no eye can see them.

What is there impossible in this? It is at least easier to believe than the centralization theory of Wellhausen and his followers, with all that this involves.

© 1956 G.T. Manley. All reasonable efforts have been made to contact the current copyright holder of this article without success. If you hold the rights, please contact me.

Prepared for the Web in August 2009 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>
