

621 BCE and the Origin of Deuteronomy

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One of the discrepancies of the Torah (Old Testament Bible) is that the language, tone, terminology, sequence of events, and perspective of paragraphs, chapters, and sentences are NOT consistent. Much like an anthology with several authors, analysis of the Bible as a “document” reveals multiple patterns of origin. However, the possible interpretive nature of the Bible does NOT lessen the empirical wisdom of its contents, or its historical significance.

To understand how this might have occurred, you must remember that the Torah was originally an ORAL document, handed down from generation to generation as a verbal history. Only in about 621 BCE (Before the Common Era) was the document codified (set as the Final Written form) in the process of putting all of the volumes into writing. (The term BCE, Before the Common Era, is a Jewish concession to the Gregorian date system as a substitute for the term BC, Before Christ, since Judaism does NOT recognize the deity aspect of Jesus Christ.)

In the year 621 BCE, while the Temple was undergoing repairs, a “Book of Teachings” was “discovered” that purportedly was a scroll written by the “hand of Moses.” (II Kings 22:8) That “Book of Teachings” is the core of the material found in Deuteronomy, and the major instrument of religious reforms carried out by King Josiah (652 – 608 BCE, II Kings 22 and 23). Josiah became King of Judea at age 12 when HIS Father was assassinated after being King for only two years. Josiah continued the reforms started by his Great Grandfather Hezekiah, Grandfather King Manasseh, and his Father King Amon.

Prior to King Hezekiah (715 – 687 BCE), “Israel” was divided into two kingdoms. The northern “Kingdom of Israel” (where 10 of the original 12 Tribes resided) was conquered by Assyria in about 720 BCE. The fall of the northern Kingdom was preceded by decades of Prophets warning against political and religious corruption (Elijah, Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah). To counter the political and religious corruption of the North, Hezekiah began a series of reforms including the prohibiting idolatry and centralizing control of worship in Jerusalem, the capitol of Judea. The centralization of religious activities also resulted in large amounts of money being deposited in the Temple treasury and government.

Prior to 621 BCE there were known to be only FOUR Books of sacred stories that had been transcribed in various forms from the oral traditions. Of the worshipers who were directly influenced at that time by these Books, only a very small minority (likely about 5%) was actually able to read the texts. Until the “discovery” of the fifth Book of the Torah, the Oral tradition of the first Four Books was subject to variations and subjective interpretation. By codifying the narrative, the “History of the World” and the “History of the Jewish People” would no longer be challenged by multiple interpretations. The “primitive” view that “if it is in writing it must be True” could be enforced since the rulers and priests were also the ones most likely to be able to read.

The emphasis of the dictums in Deuteronomy seem designed specifically to counter the traditions and practices that the rulers of Judea felt had led to the destruction of the Northern “Kingdom of Israel.” Even the amazing event of the “defeat” of the Assyrians at Jerusalem by Judea (701 BCE) seems to have a hygiene as well as military and political significance. Rather than being defeated by the Judeans, the Assyrians abandoned the siege of Jerusalem leaving their belongings and dead behind them after a plague killed a large number of soldiers and officers.

While not understanding the exact origin of the value of some of the laws that Deuteronomy exhorts, there seems to be recognition of the political, cultural, hygienic, and economic value to such dictums. Unlike the previous, mostly historical, volumes of the Bible, the fifth Book primarily emphasizes moral, civil, and criminal laws. These dictums seem to incorporate a wide range of civil, criminal, and hygienic law ranging from “honest weights and measures” (25:13) to food handling (“You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.” – 14:21, a repeat of the Exodus 23:19 and 34:26 dictum) to inheritance, sexual behavior, and clothing. (The empirical injunction against cooking meat in milk came far before any understanding of the high bacteria content of un-pasteurized milk and the effects of incubating those bacteria with the highly nutritious blood of the meat. The “scientific” explanation was not essential to justify the empirical value of that dictum. Judaism is also one of the only religions that require washing of the hands, albeit also saying a prayer, prior to eating.) When some of the laws from previous Books are repeated, they tend to be modified to include “updated” concepts (for the 600 BCE era) such as adding compensation to freed slaves, both men and women, which was changed from the “law” in Exodus.

The irony is that the primary function of codifying the Torah into five Books, and adding empirically derived civil, criminal, moral, and hygienic concepts, to strengthen the political and religious Authority of the government and priesthood, resulted in preserving the religion, culture, and history long after the government and priesthood were gone. When the Babylonians and the Romans subsequently destroyed Judea and the Temple, the written history in the form of the Torah Scrolls went with the Judeans providing a link to both the history and empirical traditions of the past.