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HISTORICAL ALLUSIONS FOR DATING DEUT 32[1]

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Recently, I analyzed the structural patterns (strophic and rhetorical) in Deut 32 in order to determine the literary type (*Gattung*) as an aid for resolving the date of the poem. In addition, I offered an interpretation of the religious sense of the poem, not as an object of interest in itself, but as a guide to dating.[2] Also, I considered the philological characteristics (syntax, morphology, parallelism, assonance, metrical structure and terminology) in Deut 32 for dating the poem.[3] The structural factors and the religious valences of each of the parts provided a relatively easy solution for dating the poem the period between the 10th and 8th century BCE. Similarly the inquiry of the linguistic characteristics indicated a mixture of early and late features, leading me to place the composition of the poem during the transitional period in poetic Hebrew between the 10th and 8th century BCE. Now, I would like to consider the historical references in Deut 32 in order to determine if they provide clues for dating it.

Historical References

Deut 32 contains no *explicit* references to historical events or persons, except for a single vague reference to "no-people" in v 21. The context suggests that because Israel provokes the jealousy of God with a "no-god" and vexes him with their vanities, so does God also express his intent to provoke Israel's jealousy with a "no-people" and to vex them with a foolish nation.

Since we established on both the structural and philological basis that the poem in Deut 32 must be dated to a transitional era between the early and late periods, the period between the 10th and 8th century BCE, we are finally in a position to treat the question of the concrete historical backdrop supposed by the author of the poem.[4]

The 9th century BCE is, in Israelite history, the period of two political seperate sister states known as "Israel" and "Judah" (the divided kingdom according to the biblical account).[5] The political history of Judah, the southern state, was dominated by the Davidic dynasty throughout the state's entire existence, except for the interim period during the reign of queen Athaliah (842/1-835 BCE).[6] Athalia of the Omride family was married to Jehoram (851-843/2 BCE) of Judah. When their son Ahaziah (843/2-842/1), along with all the relatives of Athalia,

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[2] S. A. Nigosian, "The Song of Moses (Dt 32): A Structural Analysis," *ETL* LXXII (April 1996): pp. 5-22.

[3] S. A. Nigosian, "Linguistic Patterns of Deuteronomy 32", *Biblica* vol.78 Fasc 2 (1997), pp.206-224.

[4] The historical survey in this article is based on the following works: Gösta W. Ahlström, *The History of Ancient Palestine from the Palaeolithic Period to Alexander's Conquest*, JSOTSup 146 (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); Gershom Galil, *The Chronology of the Kings of Israel and Judah* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996); Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 2001), Part Two, pp. 149-225.

[5] Based on archaeological remains, some scholars dispute the biblical tradition of united/divided monarchy. Among others see Margaret M. Gelinas, "United Monarchy-Divided Monarchy: Fact or Fiction?" in Steven W. Holloway and Lowell K. Handy, eds. *The Pitcher is Broken* (JSOTSup 190; Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 227-237.

[6] The chronology of the kings of Judah and Israel is one of the most difficult and complicated subjects of scholarly debate. The dates adopted in this article are from Galil (see note 4 above), p. 147. For differing opinions on the chronology of the kings of Judah and Israel see William Hamilton Barnes, *Studies in the Chronology of the Divided Monarchy of Israel*, HSM 48 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1991), pp. 153-154; John H. Hayes and Paul H. Hooker, *A New Chronology for the Kings of Israel and Judah* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988), pp. 102-112.

were murdered by Jehu (842/1-815/4) of Israel, Athaliah decided to take the throne herself. She immediately executed all the "royal seed" of the Davidic line. However, a sister of Ahaziah is said to have saved Athaliah's one-year-old grandson J(eh)oash, son of Ahaziah, and hidden him in the Solomonic temple (2 Kg 11:1-3; 2 Ch 22:10-12).[7] As one might expect, there is no information about what Athaliah's rule was like politically. Biblical tradition portrays the religious aspects and cultic circumstances; that is to say, Athaliah's establishment of the Phoenician Baal worship. Obviously everything was not peaceful. The mere fact that the priest Jehoiada could hide the boy for several years (if that is true) indicates divisions and factions in society. As Galil puts it:

> It is quite certain that Athaliah would not have succeeded in seizing power in Judah if she had not been supported by the army and at least a portion of the government ministers. It is also clear, however, that other circles within the Judahite leadership, headed by the Jerusalem priesthood, very strongly opposed her rule, and in the end they were responsible for her removal. Her history was written by those who deposed her. . .[8]

Indeed, the revolt started in the Solomonic temple in Jerusalem. Using the occasion of the changing of the temple and palace guards on a sabbath, the priest Jehoiada brought the young boy out to the temple court and anointed him king. When queen Athaliah heard the people shouting "Long live the king," she rushed to the temple. But just outside the temple she was arrested and executed (2 Kg 11:4-16). This incident however does not appear to conform to the narrative presented in Deut 32.

It was a time of turmoil. During the 9th century BCE Judah was, on various occasions, at war with its sister state Israel. One such occasion occurred, for instance, during the reigns of king Asa of Judah (911-870 BCE) and king Baasha of Israel (908-885 BCE). Again, the historical events do not seem to correspond to the events in the Deut 32, especially since Asa is considered a "good" king who destroyed numerous idols and restored the temple treasures (1 Kg 15:9-15; 2 Ch 16:1-14).

Another such occasion occurred during the reign of king Amaziah of Judah (805/4-776/5 BCE) and king J(eh)oash of Israel (805-790 BCE), the result of which was the defeat of Amaziah (2 Kg 13-14). Not only does this event fail to match events in Deut 32, it occurs several years after the period which is postulated for the date of Deut 32.

During the 9th century BCE, Judah also allied itself on various occasions with Israel to wage war against Syria. Such was the case, for instance, during the reign of king Jehoshaphat of Judah (870-845 BCE) in an ill-fated war against Syria (1 Kg 22:1-40). This event does appear to bear close resemblance to some features of the poem. Ahab's religious policy, which is described as "wicked" (1 Kg 16:29-34), coupled with the Assyrian showdown at Qarqar (853 BCE), suggest certain parallels with Deut 32. The evidence which is lacking, however, is any reference to the kind of catastrophe described in Deut 32 which might have befallen Judah or even Israel at this historical juncture.

Similarly, the short reign of king Ahaziah of Judah (843/2-842/1 BCE), who joined king J(eh)oram of Israel (851-842/1 BCE) to fight unsuccessfully against king Hazael of Syria (2 Kg 8-9; 2 Ch 22) cannot be accepted as historical equivalents of the themes that run through Deut 32.

There is very little in the history of the southern state around the 9th century BCE that corresponds to events in Deut 32. This conclusion leaves only the political and religious conditions of the northern state to consider.

The political history of Israel is more turbulent than that of Judah. At the turn of the 9th

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[7] It is incredible that all during Athaliah's seven years reign she did not know what had happened to her grandson! For the suggestion that J(eh)oash might have been the son of Ahaziah's sister and her husband-priest Jehoiada, see M. Liverani, "L'histoire de Joas," *VT* 24 (1974), pp. 452-453.

[8] Galil (see note 4 above), p. 47.

century BCE, the northern state went through a period of revolution during which there were three aspirants to the throne. In the resulting confusion, there was a rapid turnover of kings owing to assassination, suicide, and intrigue. Finally, through a *coup d'état*, the commander of the army, Omri emerged as the victorious king (884-873 BCE; 1 Kg 16:23-38). His political astuteness is evidenced in his wise decision to transfer the capital from Tirzah to Samaria and to establish a dynasty of such prestige that for many years after his death Assyrian kings continued to refer to the northern state as "the land of the house of Omri".

In order to strengthen himself against the Syrians, Omri made an alliance with Phoenicia, while his son, Ahab (c. 873-852 BCE), married the Phoenician princess Jezebel (1 Kg 16:31). This event paved the way for Phoenician cultural and religious influence which, inevitably, roused prophetic opposition. The practice of importing and introducing foreign deities, including the complete cultic ritual associated with these deities and their priestly and prophetic functionaries, evidently originated as a policy of the northern state during the reign of Ahab and Jezebel (1 Kg 16:29-22:40; 2 Kg 9:30-37).

Jezebel's reputation as a strong-minded woman and as a fanatical worshipper and promoter of non-Israelite deities is so well documented that it requires no further elaboration. Suffice it to say that the series of prophetic narratives that centre around the figures of Elijah and Elisha (1 Kg 17-22) indicate the activity of cultic rituals and practices foreign to the YHWHistic group. Such activities, however, were not limited to the reign of Ahab. His two sons and successors to the throne, Ahaziah (852-851 BCE) and Joram (851-842/1 BCE), were also considered to have indulged in the "evil" ways of "the house of Ahab" and provoked the anger of the God of Israel (1 Kg 22:51-53).

One must however keep in mind that the information provided in the biblical texts are more of a "religious" nature than "historical" facts. The main actors in the drama are the Omrides, particularly king Ahab and his "notorious" wife queen Jezebel, along with the legendary elements associated with the prophets Elijah and Elisha. In fact, biblical texts present the Omrides as among the most despised characters of biblical history. The whole reign of king Ahab and queen Jezebel is viewed as a religious contest, between royalty and prophets. Jezebel is regarded as a bad queen who influenced the king as well as court and religious leaders.

But the archaeological evidence provides an entirely different picture on the reigns of the kingdom of Israel. As Finkelstein and Silberman state:

> . . . Ahab was a mighty king who first brought the kingdom of Israel to prominence on the world stage and that his marriage to the daughter of the Phoenician king Ethbaal was a brilliant stroke of international diplomacy. . . . the Omrides built magnificent cities to serve as administrative centers of their expanding kingdom.[9]

Moreover, Omri and his son Ahab succeeded in creating one of the most powerful armies in the region. Hence, the state of Israel enjoyed natural wealth and extensive trade connections all during the Omride dynasty. It is also possible that both Omri and Ahab were not particularly religious and at times may have acted brutally. Similarly, Jezebel may have promoted the priesthood of Baal to the consternation of the priesthood and prophets of YHWH. The biblical texts portray the bloody demise of the royal family – a divine punishment for the crimes committed against their own society.

The religious conditions as depicted in the biblical texts are reminiscent of the allusions of Deut 32, in particular the denunciatory tone of the poet in response to Israel's infidelity to its God (vv 16-17). Israel forsook its God and turned to "new gods who came in of late, whom they knew not, whom their fathers were not acquainted" (v 17). Israel embraced "abominable practices and provoked the anger of its God" (v 16). Deut 32 seems to reflect the religious condition of Israel during the reigns of Ahab and his two succeeding sons.

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[9] Finkelstein and Silberman (see note 4 above), pp. 169-170.

There are, furthermore, other historical events that occurred in the northern state in the 9th century BCE, which may possibly be associated with some of the allusions in Deut 32.

J(eh)oram (851-842/1 BCE) was the son of Ahab and the last of the Omride dynasty to inherit the throne of Israel after displacing his weak and sickly brother Ahaziah (852-851 BCE). During his reign, Ben-Hadad I of Syria (880-842 BCE) besieged Samaria (2 Kg 6:24-7:20).[10] The precise date of this event is not known, but the condition that developed in Israel is revealing. As a result of this siege, there was such a great famine in the city that mothers ate their own children (2 Kg 6:28-29). It is quite possible that the reference to the famine in Deut 32:24 alludes to this period.

After the siege J(eh)oram was murdered in 842/1 BCE by Jehu (842/1-815/4 BCE), who usurped the throne and became king in his stead (2 Kg 9-11). His bloody revolution against the house of Omri, followed by the slaughter of Ahab's whole family in Samaria (some seventy persons in all), the extermination of all the high officials in Jezreel (2 Kg 10:1-11), and the murder of some forty members of the visiting royal party of Judah (2 Kg 10:12-14), may possibly represent the "internal terror" alluded to in Deut 32:25.

The same fate in the same year overtook J(eh)oram's adversary. Ben-Hadad I of Syria was murdered in 842 BCE by his servant Hazael, who usurped the throne and became king in his stead (842-798 BCE; 2 Kg 8:7-15; cf. 1 Kg 19:15). The Assyrian annals of Shalmaneser III report the incident as follows ". . . Hazael, the son of a nobody, seized the throne".[11] It is interesting to note that Hazael is referred to as "the son of nobody". By extension, it seems logical to speculate that the Syrians are the "people of nobody" or, as Deut 32:21 puts it, the "no-people."

The historical records strengthen the conclusion that the Syrians during the reign of Hazael are the "no-people" who, as Deut 32:21-26 states, harassed Israel.[12] By his continual assault and depredations against Israel, especially after 837 BCE when Assyrian pressure on Syria ceased, Hazael menaced the state of Israel (as well as Judah) throughout the reigns of Jehu and J(eh)oram (2 Kg 13:3, 13). Hazael annexed from Jehu all the Israelite lands east of the Jordan River (2 Kg 10:32-33; Am 1:3). Then, around 815 BCE, he marched through the length and breadth of Palestine in order to capture Gath. When Hazael arrived at the gates of Jerusalem, king J(eh)oash of Judah (842/1-802/1 BCE) was forced to pay him a heavy tribute (2 Kg 12:17-18; 2 Ch 24:23-24). His sustained assault and oppression during the next few years humbled Israel and seriously reduced its military force (2 Kg 13:1-3, 7, 22). This incident is described by the biblical writer as follows:

> Hazael king of Syria oppressed Israel all the days of Jehoahaz (2 Kg 13:22).
> And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he gave them continually into the hand of Hazael, king of Syria . . . Then Jehoahaz entreated the Lord, and the Lord hearkened unto him; for he saw the oppression of Israel . . Therefore the Lord gave Israel a saviour . . . (2 Kg 13:3-5).

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[10] The dates of the Assyrian kings are adopted from Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1988).

[11] Wayne T. Pitard, *Ancient Damascus* (Winona Lake, IN.: Eisenbrauns, 1987), p.132-138 discusses the inscription of Shalmaneser, in particular the problem of identifying the biblical name of Ben-Hadad. After surveying the various solutions proposed by biblical scholars, he concludes that "the evidence available for the critical period of 845-841 B.C.E. is insufficient to settle the matter." To us, the important point is the Assyrian slander of Hazael as "son of a nobody," not the identification of Ben-Hadad. For the Assyrian text see J.B. Pritchard (ed.), *ANET* 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), pp.278-282.

[12] The conclusion that the allusion to the "no-people" refers to the Syrians has been proposed by earlier critics, notably Knobel (1861), Dillman (1886), Oettli (1893), Westphal (2 vols. 1888-1892), and Kaufmann (1960), as cited in Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, translated and abridged by Moshe Greenberg (Chicago, IL.: Chicago University Press, 1960), p. 280; also see S. R. Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy* in *ICC*, (Edinburgh, Eng.: T & T Clark, 1895), p. 346.

This "saviour" was none other than the Assyrian king Adadnirari III (811-783 BCE), who by his military campaigns against Syria and Palestine around 805 BCE succeeded in breaking the power of the Syrian empire.[13] Thus, the historiographer's statement and the words of the poet in Deut 32:35-43 seem to correspond once again with the historical facts of the period under consideration. Syria continued to decline for several years until it was first conquered by Jeroboam II of Israel (790-750/49 BCE),[14] and later by Tiglathpileser III (745-727 BCE), who converted it into a district capital, a stronghold of Assyria in Trans-Euphrates.

Conclusion

Thus, the evidence suggests that the religious and political history of the northern state during and after the second half of the 9th century BCE corresponds to various allusions in Deut 32.

First, the religious policy of Israel as represented by Ahab, Ahaziah, and Joram is interpreted by both the historiographer and the author of Deut 32 as a rejection of their God, YHWH. According to the author Deut 32, this act of rejection calls for divine retribution (vv 19-26). Because Israel provokes the jealousy of God with a "no-god" and vexes him with its vanities, so also God provokes Israel with "no-people" – the Syrians.

Second, according to the author of Deut 32, God determines to discharge his wrath and judgement upon Israel, as a result of its disloyalty (vv 19-26). Thus, as a result of Ben-Hadad's siege, Israel is plagued internally by a famine (v 24), followed by terror and insecurity (v 25) created by the bloody revolution of its king Jehu. In addition to this internal horror, there comes the external panic (v 25) brought about by Hazael's bloody campaigns that almost exterminate Israel (v 26). Both Jehu (842/1-815/4 BCE) and Hazael (842-798 BCE) are contemporaneous rulers whose reigns are marked by bloody events. It appears, therefore, that the author of Deut 32 considers these two kings and their activities as the instrument of divine retribution. God's wrath and punishment is discharged over Israel internally and externally (v 25). The internal punishment seems to refer to Jehu's bloody slaughter of all the members of the Omride dynasty sometime around 842 BCE. The external punishment, on the other hand, seems to refer to Hazael's sustained and ruthless campaigns which seem to have stretched from about 835 BCE to 815 BCE.

Third, despite this gloomy picture, the author of Deut 32 is full of optimism and anticipates an imminent reversal of conditions (vv 35-43). His prediction that Israel's enemy, the Syrians, will shortly be struck down (vv 35, 41-42) and that Israel's blood will be revenged (vv 36, 43), shares significant similarities with the historical narrative and may indicate the poet's keen foresight in predicting the consequences of the resurgent Assyrian power under Adadnirari III. The record shows that Adadnirari III's military campaign to Syria and Palestine took place around 805 BCE. If this date is accepted as Israel's date of "victory" from oppression, then Deut 32 was composed sometime between Hazael's and Adadnirari III's campaigns – sometime between 815-805 BCE.[15]

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[13] It is widely accepted by biblical scholars that the Assyrian king Adad-nirari III was the "saviour" of Israel during the time of Jehoahaz. So stated by Galil (see note 4 above), p. 56, whose source is S. Yeivin, "The Divided Monarchy: Rehoboam-Ahaz/Jeroboam-Pekah," p.105, in A. Malamat (ed.), *The Age of the Monarchies: Political History The World History of the Jewsih People*, 4/1, Jersualem, 1982, pp. 82-120. For the inscriptions of Adadnirari III see *ANET* (note 11 above), pp.281-282.

[14] There has been considerable discussion among biblical scholars about the reign of Jeroboam II, in particular the question of the subjugation of Damascus (2 Kg 14:28). Consult Ahlström (see note 4 above), pp. 617-619, and Pitard (see note 11 above), pp. 176-179.

[15] It is interesting to note that G.E. Wright, "The Lawsuit of God: A Form-Critical Study of Deuteronomy 32", in B.W. Anderson and W. Harrelson (eds.), *Israel's Prophetic Heritage* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1962), p. 67, identifies precisely this date as the date of composition of the Song, though he arrives at it through a form-critical study rather than a linguistic or historical analysis.