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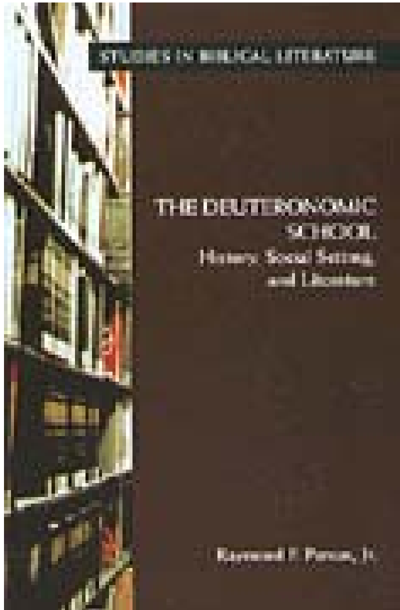

Person, Raymond F.

The Deuteronomic School: History, Social Setting, and Literature

Studies in Biblical Literature 2

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Person addresses the unsettling wide array of conflicting options that encourage skepticism of past attempts to sort out discrete redactional layers in the Deutronomistic History: "the redaction critical method has no basis for distinguishing the work of one from the other" (147). Person offers "four new perspectives" (147–48) to overcome the impasse: (1) link text criticism with redaction criticism, (2) recognize a vigorous Deuteronomic activity in the postexilic period, (3) explore Deuteronomic activity by investigating scribal culture elsewhere in the ancient Near East, and (4) recognize the oral dimension of Deuteronomic activity. Each of these four perspectives is the subject of each of the first four chapters, in which he reaches the conclusion that "Deuteronomic literature could have evolved gradually over a long period of time, even if no systematic, intentional revisions were made" (151). The remaining three chapters explore the interpretation of Deuteronomic texts in the Persian period and the Deuteronomic school's relationship to other postexilic works.

Person abandons any distinction between the terms *Deuteronomic* and *Deuteronomistic* (6–7), opting to use the former. The Deuteronomic school "probably formed in Babylon among exiled scribes, who formerly served in the Jerusalem temple and palace and carried various texts into exile with them" (152), where they produced the first redaction of the Deuteronomic History (DH). They "probably returned to Jerusalem and

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participated in the effort to rebuild the temple and its cult" (123) during the governorship of Zerubbabel. With "the failure of Zerubbabel to re-establish the Davidic monarchy" (123), "a certain level of disillusionment" set in, prompting skepticism toward "human institutions in general, including the temple cult" and a turn instead "to a heightened eschatological perspective" (135). This attitude would be seen as "increasingly defiant of the Persian empire," which would dispatch Ezra "to lessen the authority of the Deuteronomic school" (135). "The lack of the necessary support of the Jerusalem administration" (149) and "the mission of Ezra probably led to the demise of the Deuteronomic school" (123).

The introduction briefly surveys the scholarship on the DH and related matters. Chapter 1 assesses the lack of confidence one can place in most redactional analyses of the DH, unless one couples this with text-critical controls: "The prevailing views of the Harvard and Göttingen schools fail methodologically in that they both rely solely on redaction criticism to distinguish one Deuteronomic redactor from another" (24). "I am just as skeptical about the ability of source critics to define the limits of the sources for the Deuteronomic History as I am about the ability of redaction critics to discern redactional layers" (25). A paragraph summarizes Person's rejection (on linguistic and historiographical grounds) of the position held by those who date the DH to the Persian or Hellenistic periods (26–27).

Chapter 2 aims to refine the study of the redaction of the DH by applying text-critical analysis. On the basis of his own work and the work of others, he argues that the "LXX for the Deuteronomic History … generally preserves an earlier stage of the redaction process … than the MT" (42). Not everyone agrees with this position, and although he mentions a dissenter (McKenzie on 39), the dissenter's arguments are not addressed. Person presents extensive passages where text criticism uncovers "post-LXX [i.e., its *Vorlage*] additions to the MT" (48) of the DH where Deuteronomic language is also present, supporting his conclusion that the Deuteronomic school was active in the postexilic period. The Chronicler's use of a redaction "generally closer to LXX-Samuel-Kings than MT-Samuel-Kings" leads Person to conclude that "the later redaction had not yet occurred or … had not yet gained the same authority and popularity" (41). However, there are other options, such as both redactions being in existence at the same time and one being used simply because it was available to the Chronicler.

Person affirms that the earliest redaction of the DH "cannot be before the latest events which it describes—that is, the release of the exiled king Jehoiachin in 561 B.C.E." (40). But there could be earlier redactions to which this event is appended as a supplement (the position of the so-called Harvard school). Person discusses how the Deuteronomic school would be ideologically comfortable collaborating with the Persians. In reconstructing the fifth-century B.C.E. historical context, Person takes for granted the historical reality of the Megabyzus revolt (56) without alerting readers to the many good reasons for doubting it.

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Person acknowledges a law book in Jerusalem between Zerubbabel and Ezra that “most likely differed somewhat” from Ezra’s law book (143). This hesitant speculation becomes more confident elsewhere: “Ezra’s mission [is] to impose a new law in Jerusalem” (152), for he “brings ‘the law’ with him” (59), “reintroducing the ‘true’ law of Moses” (73; see also 143–44). What is the evidence that allows Person to move from a tentative and undefined difference between legal corpora to the claim that “Ezra’s law book competed with a body of religious literature that already existed in Jerusalem” (58)? Where is Ezra portrayed as “imposing” or “bringing” or “(re)introducing” a new law of Moses/God? These are strong words that stand in stark contrast to the task Person envisions for the Deuteronomic school, who returned to Jerusalem simply to preserve and codify already-existing material (58). He seems to be assuming an argument elsewhere that is not explicitly made here.

Chapter 3 briefly surveys a few highlights regarding scribal schools in the ancient Near East (a discussion centered on pages 66–68 and based primarily on one book: J. G. Gammie and L. G. Perdue, *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* [Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990]) in order to query what we know of the phenomenon in first-millennium B.C.E. Judah. He concludes cautiously that the material “suggests that schools for the training of professional scribes existed in preexilic Judah and that these scribes were not necessarily mere copyists” (71). Person prefers to call the Egyptian Udjahorresnet a “scribe,” never identifying him by the term that Udjahorresnet prefers to call himself (twelve times in his inscription), “chief physician.” It is true that Udjahorresnet once identifies himself as a scribe in an extended list of his bureaucratic credentials, but in other such listings in his inscription he fails to mention this. Because Ezra is, on the contrary, most frequently identified as a scribe (less frequently as a priest), there is on these grounds not the ready parallel of the two officials that Person repeatedly makes. One should note that the summary statement on the top of page 74 is more accurate than the summary statement on page 80, which describes “the missions of the scribes of Udjahoresnet [*sic*] and Ezra, who led groups of scribes to reintroduce religious texts.” Neither Udjahorresnet nor Ezra is described as leading groups of scribes, nor are they ever said to “reintroduce” religious texts. When Person actually makes his argument on pages 73–74, he notes with greater precision that Ezra “probably” led other scribes back with him to Jerusalem and that Udjahorresnet was part of Darius I’s amalgamation of existing (not new laws) laws in Egypt.

Scribal issues are further explored in light of Qumran material (which Person seems to access only secondhand; e.g., 74–75 nn. 37 and 39), enlisted to demonstrate a conclusion long established (78): scribes worked in two ways, through careful copying and some intentional modifying. Person notes that “scribes who have reached a higher status … had more latitude for scribal interventions and could even produce new compositions” (78; see also 80, 99, 151). No evidence is provided for this interesting observation beyond his confidence that “there must have been some hierarchy among the scribes” and his

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suspicion that "probably" lower-ranked scribes at Qumran were assessed by their accuracy and required to be more precise in their copying (78; see also 99, 150). Why would not higher-ranked scribes be similarly assessed and indeed held to a higher standard in order to qualify and maintain their status? Is there more than intuition to argue for the greater freedom of higher-ranking scribes?

Chapter 4 explores the oral context of Israelite scribal culture: "the ancient Israelite scribes were literate members of a primarily oral society. They undertook even their literate activity … with an oral mindset" (89), and "what they possibly understood as a faithful copy of their *Vorlagen* we would understand as containing variants" (95). Recognition of an oral context allows for the presence of minor textual modifications and at times even "what we might consider as a significantly different text," which would nevertheless "not have been understood as 'new' redactions of 'earlier' works as long as the redactions were judged to be well within the limits of what the tradition understood as acceptable" (151). The accumulation of variants over a long period of time means that "it is virtually impossible to distinguish one Deuteronomic redactor from another strictly on the basis of phraseology and themes," and this explains "why there are so many tensions within Deuteronomic literature" (100).

Chapter 5 focuses upon selected texts (Deut 30:1–14; Josh 1:1–11; Judg 17:6; 21:25; 2 Sam 7:1–17; 23:1–7; 1 Kgs 8; 2 Kgs 17; 25:27–30; Jer 11:1–17) whose date of composition—whether exilic or postexilic (and even post-Zerubbabel; see 104)—is peripheral to Person's argument. What is instead crucial for Person is the way in which scribes in "the Deuteronomic school might have interpreted" (117; or reinterpreted, according to page 123) these passages had they read and preserved them during the governorship of Zerubbabel. He concludes that the Deuteronomic school, anticipating God's intervention in changing human hearts, would have encouraged cooperation with the Persian government during the time of Zerubbabel, such cooperation being perceived as a means to an end in seeing God's work accomplished as the people are encouraged to strict adherence to the law.

Among the assumptions in addressing how the ancient Deuteronomists "could" (121), "may" (118), "might" (117) interpret texts, Person affirms the bedrock conviction that "the Deuteronomic school would not only support the mission of Zerubbabel, but would also be eager to participate in it" (105). Those with experience in dealing with both politics and scholars can confirm that it is an uphill battle to achieve assent to leadership, political programs, theological priorities, the sharing of power, and the utilization of resources among such individuals. To predict the political program of a group based on its theological commitments alone is a precarious enterprise; not all Jews who attend a particular synagogue support the same political candidates, nor do all Christians who attend a particular church vote for or against the same civic issues. The political and religious history of Israel and postexilic Judaism is one of factions, power struggles,

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armed confrontations, and assassinations, even among those with shared convictions and backgrounds. There may have been good reasons for scribes in the Deuteronomic tradition to support Zerubbabel, but there may have been factors that prompted other scribes even within the Deuteronomic tradition to disagree vehemently. We do not know. Person himself wisely and repeatedly notes that the DH characteristically portrays human leaders as flawed (e.g., 105, 115, 122), compromising the conviction that Zerubbabel was an obvious magnet for all in the Deuteronomist school.

Person speaks of the "obviously … suicidal" nature of rebellion against the Persian Empire as a sufficient deterrent for the Deuteronomic school to even consider it as an option (112). However, the fact that there were repeated unsuccessful revolts against the Persian Empire in the Mediterranean provinces indicates that the "obviously suicidal" option was chosen by many. Since the DH is filled with stories of military endeavors, many of which are related as successful with divine help against disproportionate odds, the Deuteronomist school is not so obviously one to disavow military solutions. According to Person, "the Deuteronomic school did not advocate armed rebellion against the militarily superior Persians" (130), a position that Person suggests was defended in part by the story of David and Goliath. But since in this "obviously suicidal" encounter David actually fights in this story, when all other cowards do not, why could not Deuteronomists interpret this text (and many others relating military victories in the DH) as an encouragement to armed conflict? How does Person know that the Deuteronomic school—or a part of it—did not interpret this passage, and the successful military ventures in the DH, as a call to arms? Is it because the Deuteronomic school survived? Still, history is filled with accounts of failed revolts where the defeated ideologies continued to survive.

Chapter 6 makes the same assumptions and follows the same format as chapter 5 but shifts the time frame of the hypothetical interpretations to the period between the governorship of Zerubbabel and Ezra's appearance. Passages discussed with possible reinterpretations by the Deuteronomic school include Deut 4:29–31; 30:1–14; Judg 3:1–6; 1 Sam 16–18; 1 Kgs 21:1–20; Jer 7:1–15; 30:1–3; 31:27–34, 38–40 (note that Deut 30:1–14 is discussed in both chs. 5 and 6). Once again, for some texts, Person does not find it "difficult at all to understand the meaning this text would have for the Deuteronomic school in postexilic Judah" (127). Although the stories of David, Saul, and Goliath for Person might have had "possible" (128) relevance for Zerubbabel's non-Davidic successors, who would have be perceived as illegitimate, for this reader the presumed demise of Zerubbabel before the Persian juggernaut sounds more like Goliath defeating David. How does one referee what putative interpreters might have to say about such texts for times when we have only the barest access to political realities?

Chapter 7 investigates "how the Deuteronomic school may have related to" (137) some postexilic texts (Haggai, Zechariah, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah). Since the

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Deuteronomic school continued in the postexilic period, Person argues for and "expands the category of Deuteronomic literature" (142) by finding traces of it in Haggai and Zechariah. At the same time, the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles represent a different trajectory at odds with the Deuteronomic school, so much so that "the clash between these two scribal groups … eventually led to the demise of the Deuteronomic school and the rise of another scribal group in Judah" (144). The one paragraph where this position is focused with respect to the book of Ezra (143–44) leaves unanswered why Ezra is portrayed in the book bearing his name as so supportive of Deuteronomic agendas.

In sum, Person's skepticism regarding our ability to distinguish discrete redactional layers in the DH will not be welcome to most researchers in this field. But his response is understandable in the light of the competing and mutually exclusive proposals that presently dominate the field. Person's linking of text criticism with redaction criticism is a welcome emphasis, even if text-critical conclusions are not as univocal as Person proposes. Person's recognition of Deuteronomic activity in the postexilic period is defensible, but its demise with Ezra remains problematic. We simply do not know what happened in any interstices between Ezra and the Deuteronomic school, and since even the Chronicler preserves and reuses texts associated with the Deuteronomic tradition, the Deuteronomic school at some level was not defunct. We can be grateful that Person has given us cause to look forward to further forays into exploring Deuteronomic activity by investigating scribal culture elsewhere in the ancient Near East, as well as the oral-literate symbiosis that Person develops.

The text proper is well-written, but extensive parts of the notes and bibliography were not proofread (e.g., the Hebrew at 38 n. 16 is inscrutable). I will note only more significant corrections in the bibliography to minimize frustration for those chasing down references with unforgiving computer searches: Pedersén (not Petersén); Entstehung (not Entstellung for Bogaert, Lohfink); Herrmann is not in BZAW but rather in BWANT 5. Folge, Hefte 5 - der ganzen Sammlung Heft 85; Levenson, *JBL* 1984 (not 1983); Sweeney, *VT* 47 (not 46); van der Kooij is in VTSup 66; Brueggemann, Kerygma (not Brueggeman, Keryma); Eerdmans (not Eerdemans); Bogaert, trois (not trios); Baruch is A. Levine's first name (sub Rofé); and Craigie (not Craige).

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