

Summary

Deuteronomy as a 'Book' in the Context of the Culture of Writing within the Ancient Near East

The question concerning the conception of the written document – 'a book', expressed in the Book of Deuteronomy, is the starting point for this study. In order to understand it and describe properly, it became necessary to learn about the broader context of the ancient Near East, and especially about the ancient scribal culture. It is only through grasping the ideas and cultural circumstances of writing that it was made possible to determine the elements which constitute the conceptual structure of 'the book' within Biblical texts, especially in Deuteronomy. Consequently, this publication consists of three parts: Part I. Selected issues of the culture of literacy within the ancient Near East – with particular emphasis on Israel and Judah. Part II. Deuteronomy as *sēfer*. Part III. Deuteronomy as a participant within the culture.

I

In order to realize the project, it became necessary from the very beginning to confront the problem of cross-cultural influences since Israel, in fact, only 'appeared' on the stage of history when many written achievements, including the literary ones of Mesopotamia, had already been accomplished. The cultural and social situation of the Iron Age, changed comparing to that of the Bronze Age, may raise doubts as to what extent the influence of the culture of Mesopotamia in the second millennium BC could have been. Despite great changes, cultural continuity did not break: the culture of writing provides ample evidence of this. What also testifies to cultural continuity is found in the long process of creation of alphabetic writing, going back at least to the middle of the second millennium BC. Also the phenomenon of recording the same text in two different systems of writing, cuneiform and alphabetic, is a strong argument for cultural continuity. Significant evidence is also found in a motif of a pair of scribes with different writing tools: one with a tablet, the other with a scroll, repeated on reliefs and a fresco (Til Barsib) in the Neo-Assyrian period.

This 'cultural bridge', brought about through bilingual texts and records written in two scripts, testifies to the fact that the influence of Mesopotamian culture

(even that reaching back to the early second millennium) on the Biblical world was real. Ancient texts from the great culture of palaces, despite cultural change, were still inspiring, and the ideas contained in them enriched the writers. Adapted to a new context, they persisted in influencing the world of ideas and beliefs.

II

In order to understand the Biblical idea of writing, it became important to analyze the ideas and concepts related to writing and written text in the sphere of belief in Mesopotamia and Egypt. According to those beliefs, gods were engaged in the activity of writing, but not directly, having their divine secretaries, thus corresponding to the courtly order on earth: the king and his secretary/ies. Written activity of the gods was not ordinary, they would not keep business records, draw up inventories of the spoils of war, make civil contracts, or record the details of a trial, i.e. the most common documents among the written evidence of Mesopotamia. The most important texts created by the gods were the Tablet of Destinies in Mesopotamia, and the Book of Thoth in Egypt. The Tablet of Destinies was used by the gods to determine the fate of men and kingdoms (namely obligations and preset targets), while the Book of Thoth contained magic formulas. Both documents were closely related to the power over the world and the people; should such writings fall into the wrong hands, the divine balance and order could be disturbed. Thus, beliefs in gods maintaining the established order on earth were associated with the image of the divine document, which expressed the will and power of the gods on earth. With such an approach we can see the outstanding importance of recording, it being a sign of the decision of the gods. The so-called books of heaven, such as the Book of Life or the Book of Destiny, also fit into such a context and into such understanding of divine documents.

Earthly documents were made as, or sometimes modeled on heavenly records. The signing of treaties of alliance, e.g. during the reign of Esarhaddon, with seals of the gods – on the model of the image of the Tablet of Destinies – defined the importance of the document. In the neo-Assyrian kingdom, alliance treaties written on tablets were regarded as earthly equivalents of the mythical Plate of Destiny. The gods mentioned in treaties of alliance determined their durability; in the case of a breach in the alliance – the inevitable penalty, forsworn in the curses within the alliance oath.

Other aspects of the function of writing in the relationship between humans and gods are found in Neo-Assyrian the so-called letters from god to king. They show a particular form of revelation and – emphasizing his ‘written’ contact with the deity – are designed to strengthen the authority of the ruler (who governed under a mandate given to him by the gods).

III

In the context of the Bible and the culture of writing, an important place is occupied by the concept expressing relationship between revelation and writing down. Deuteronomy is a book in which this concept was developed in a special way. Two distinct traditions were combined here: one concerning God writing on Mount Horeb, that is on the mountain of revelation, the other about the writing of Moses. Although the account from the mountain of revelation shows co-operation between the figures of God and Moses, aimed at the creation of a record on stone tablets, in terms of the activity of writing itself, it is *Yhwh* who is the only Writer here (unlike in the account of the Book of Exodus). In Deuteronomy it can be seen that while it is *Yhwh* who writes on Mount Horeb, within the framework of revelation, Moses (in the order of narrative) – only writes a few decades later, before his death, in the land of Moab, at the gates to the Promised Land.

Each of the two traditions combined in Deuteronomy (one concerning God as writer and the other about Moses as writer) indicates the effect of writing: the first – two stone tablets containing the Ten Words of *Yhwh*, the second – Moses's 'Book' of *Torah*. Both of these unusual recordings, one of which is an expression of the revelation of *Yhwh* (the tablets), the other its evidence (The 'Book' of *Torah*), have their different continuation in the traditions of other Biblical books. The Ark, containing the stone tablets written with the 'finger of God', becomes the object of worship and the place of the presence of *Yhwh* among his people (he leads the procession of the conquerors of the Promised Land; cf. The Book of Joshua) as a throne or a footstool of God; the God who reveals his glory above the covering of the ark, firstly in a portable sanctuary-tent, later in the temple of Solomon. Meanwhile, the other of these unusual recordings, The 'Book' of *Torah*, is somehow 'promulgated' by its 'discovery' in the temple during the rule of King Josiah and becomes the basis for the purification of the worship of *Yhwh* and the renewal of the covenant. After the Babylonian captivity, it is regularly read during assemblages and commented upon, giving rise to the legal traditions of Judaism and is the beginning of collections of writings, leading to the formation of the canon of the Hebrew Bible.

These two written documents, which are the foundations of the two key traditions of the Bible, in Deuteronomy are shown as being relatively independent. This is clearly expressed by the command of Moses that the Levites should place The 'Book' of *Torah* next to the ark with the stone tablets. The addition of 'on the side' seems too artificial, without any clear conception of the relationship between the two, after all extraordinary, recordings. This distinction may also result from the different functions of both documents, which formed the basis of the distinct traditions: the tablets as a cultic object, *Torah* as a subject for preaching and teaching.

IV

The two theological concepts of revelation that underpin the construct of the authority of the holy Scriptures, and are presented in the activities of the process of recording made by *Yhwh* and by Moses, appear to be similarly independent, but complementary. The act of revelation of *Yhwh* through the monumental inscription on stone tablets was supplemented by Moses's act of the recording of all the words *Yhwh* uttered to him before, as to a prophet on Mount Horeb, the mountain of the revelation. One of the determinants of the significance of the deuteronomic 'Book' of *Torah* is based on the authority taken from the authority of the stone tablets, which in the Near Eastern cultural context can be read as a 'monument' of God's order and justice (cf. Stele of Hammurabi recalling Shamash, the god of justice).

Yhwh God reveals his word both saying it 'out of fire' in a resonant voice, as well as writing it on two stone tablets with 'the finger of God'. It is worth noting that in the early culture of writing, the message in the form of writing was accompanied by its reading out aloud. This co-occurs with such a dual form of the Divine revelation. The activity of writing words intended for Israel by *Yhwh* with 'the finger of God' expresses the idea of revelation through the written word. The phrase 'the finger of God', very rare in the Bible, expresses the power of divine action. This is an unusual and original idea, as in ancient imagery the gods used their secretaries, the intermediaries. It expresses more forcefully the idea of God revealing himself, God who writes himself on the mount of revelation. The divine act of writing opens a space for writing and adds credibility to it as a potential place for the placing and storage of God's Word. In the cultural and theological context, the record is given the status of a capable intermediary and witness. The message concerning God who writes is the basis for the concept of the recorded word of God, and the holiness of the scriptures. God's act of writing becomes the new paradigm of revelation, which will henceforth, however, be mediated by the writer.

The answer to this 'opening' of the space of writing is a prophetic act of witness by Moses, who, before his death, writes the words of God's *Torah* for Israel (the *Torah* revealed to Moses at Mount Horeb, and which he had taught to Israel). Since this time, a human can, just like God, write the same words, he can write the words of God. Apart from the prophet, it is also 'The Book' that becomes a witness to God's words. It can therefore be concluded that in Deuteronomy the final concept of the nature of revelation of The 'Book' of *Torah*, and consequently of other writings coming from the prophets and transmitted by writers, was based on these two traditions.

Three stages in the concept of the development of mediation of God's revelation (God himself, the prophet – speaker, writer and book) have also been rendered into a threefold division of Biblical writings. The first collection of Biblical books refers to the presence of God who reveals himself (Pentateuch), the next refers to the prophets, the intermediaries of the word of God (Prophets), the last books (Writings) refer to the scholars and sages who, by virtue of their education, were writers.

The act of writing by God expresses not only the credibility of revelation but also the aspect of validity and the binding of a contract. The tablets written by *Yhwh* God are given to Israel – according to the Deuteronomy’s message – within the covenant, which emphasizes their significance. The writing on the tablets expresses the decisions made, and the particular commitment of Israel. It can also be seen that the document written by God has the character of a certificate of the covenant and in some way defines ‘the destiny’ of Israel – the fact that it was ‘chosen’, which was confirmed by the covenant, and thus refers to the mythical ‘Tablet of Destinies’. At the same time, the prohibitions and orders written on stone tablets defined and revealed to Israel the Divine world order in social and cultic dimension.

V

The concept of ‘the Book’ expressed in Deuteronomy is based on yet another idea represented by the learned scribes in Mesopotamia (known today from Neo-Assyrian versions of such texts as the myth of *Adapa* and the *Catalogue of Texts and Authors*). This is the concept of exclusive knowledge, coming from the gods, brought from their seat, from the heavens or the underground ocean by the antediluvian sages *apkallū* and kept by the learned scribes. This knowledge, handed on through initiation, was available to the few, and it included the mysteries of divination, exorcism, astrology and medicine. The Deuteronomic writer clearly refers to this concept, but he does not repeat it. Just the opposite – he announces that the words of the *Torah* revealed by *Yhwh*, the God of Israel, and recorded, are available for everyone and it does not need a sage, or daredevil who would have to ascend to heaven, or to reach the inaccessible ends of the sea, to bring them from the seat of the gods (although Moses did ascend Mount Horeb for them). Conducting polemics, the Deuteronomic writer operates in the same world of Near Eastern concepts and ideas. In this context, Moses grows in his function into the semi-mythical *apkallū*, but this is not an analogy at the genetic level, rather similarity of function (A. Lenzi). The extremely elaborate figure of Moses contains many images and functions. In the literary context, Moses is the founder of the Biblical writing tradition because in the theological order he is the first writer after God.

VI

The concept of ‘the Book’ expressed in Biblical texts is very strongly affected by perception and beliefs associated with the beginnings of the formation of script and the culture of writing using an alphabetic script. What influences this perception is the specific oral-literate dynamic, imprinted not only in the form of the message but also in its content. We can recall here one of the many consequences of literacy, emphasized by Grzegorz Godlewski, namely a growing abstracting of the message and its universalization by the separation of the message from the individual context of the speaker (e.g. a prophet). By the fact of being written

down, the Words of God, transmitted by the prophets, were given not only a new form but also the solemnity coming from the written form (in antiquity), while the universalized theological message gained strength of expression.

Deuteronomy bears clear marks of orality. It seems that at the beginning of the formation of the deuteronomic composition, orality was one of the important factors which co-constructed the content of the message. Apart from a general rhetorical frame of a written composition, we can easily indicate in Deuteronomy a number of repetitions and combinations of the same motifs and phrases, which is closer to the characteristics of an oral message.

In the text of the Biblical book studied here, two bigger parts have been singled out and a thesis formulated that their original structure comes from oral transmission. The first of these parts is an account of the conquest of the lands located east of the river Jordan (1,6–3,7), based on a repeated scheme and formulas (formulaic style as a feature of the orality). The second part is the narrative cycle concerning the revelation on Mount Horeb and the stone tablets. The repeated narrative pattern, visible in individual parts of the cycle, points to their oral character.

Deuteronomy is also characterized by a tangle of oral-literate practices, their particular example being the famous *Shema Israel* (6,6-9 and corresponding text 11,18-20). The instruction concerning 'activities' connected with the words of the *Torah* contains a number of both oral and written practices. Moreover, the recommended 'written' practices belong to the early stage of the use of script. Writing has a symbolic character: words are to be written as signs on gates and doorposts (protective signs), as signs and decorations placed on the headband on the forehead and on the bracelet on the hand.

Against this background of oral-literate practices, which illustrate the culture of the early stages of the use of script, the so-called 'Law of the king' (17,18-20) stands out as being different from them. It represents a developed culture of literacy. The king, who has to obtain a copy of the *Torah* and study it, is modeled on the image of learned writers from the late period, who would not part with the source of their knowledge and wisdom, which in later tradition, after the exile, would become the The 'Book' of *Torah*.

The spoken word in oral culture builds its status drawing strength from the dignity of the individual speaker. This kind of authority of the word is also present in Deuteronomy, containing the words *Yhwh* uttered on the mountain from the fire, and the words of Moses, who taught the words of God's *Torah* as an intermediary chosen by God. Thus the authority of God himself and the authority of God's chosen intermediary found the authority of the texts, The 'Book' of *Torah* and the Book of Deuteronomy.

Moreover, apart from the person who enriches the words with his authority, Deuteronomy, as a written document, also received the formal features of the rank and importance of a text. In Deuteronomy there is an extensive collection of curses (Ch. 28), which were attached to treaties of alliance, collections of laws, or placed on boundary stone called *kudurrū* to protect the integrity of the recording, and ensure the sustainability of a treaty. It clearly shows that Deuteronomy as a docu-

ment of the covenant received a formal element of protection, which raises the rank and importance of the recording.

VII

Another direction of research, parallel to that outlined above, undertaken in this publication and running through all its parts relates to the practical side of the culture of writing. It concerns the writer's skills, customs and the specificity of the ancient literary process leading to the creation of a written composition.

This search is opened with reflection over the concept of authorship in the ancient world, based on the critique of notions of editor, editing and the so-called 'final form' in relation to the books of the Bible – presented by John Van Seters – and ultimately leading to the denial of the phenomenon of the author's work and authorship of a work (before the Greek influences – after the fall of the Persian empire). There are many arguments which testify in favour of such a thesis. Firstly, the names of people being associated with the works point to the source or authority of the words contained in them (specific for oral culture). Secondly, literary works were created throughout a long process with the participation of many successive writers, none of whom had an awareness of 'authorship'. Hence the anonymity of the works, under which, in the colophons, were signed 'only' writers in the role of copyists. Creation of a work occurred within the framework of its duplication. A general practice was to create new compositions based on earlier texts, in the course of compilation, adaptation and expansion, which also explains the inter-textual relationships between the works.

The specific character of the process of the shaping of a literary composition is examined in the third part of this analysis, in relation to the Book of Deuteronomy. Previously, however, in the second part, an analysis of complex structure of the text of Deuteronomy had been carried out, and the problem of difficulty with its disambiguation was exposed. The text of Deuteronomy is not characterized by any lack of the elements of composition: just the opposite, it has them in abundance. Such a presence of too many introductory and summarizing formulas as well as other elements of the composition make it 'overloaded'. Such specificity at the level of the structure also corresponds to the level of content. Analyses of the literary modes of working out the text of Deuteronomy lead to conclusions concerning the occurrence of multiple literary activities, happening gradually. This in turn leads to the further conclusion that Deuteronomy was the result of a slow process of enrichment of literary composition, as a means of gathering and transmission of tradition (paraphrasing and expanding the expression by Gerhard von Rad).

An analysis of structural and literary features as well as an analysis of the way in which the content was presented in the text of Deuteronomy, have led to the formulation of the thesis that the process of working out of the Biblical book was longer, and in terms of the nature of writer's work different than was assumed by many biblical scholars, who wrote about some few or more redactions of Deuteronomy.

VIII

As a further step in this research, the attempt has been made to confront the existing proposals as to the formation of the text of Deuteronomy, in the light of the knowledge concerning the processes of creation of ancient literary works. The epic *Gilgamesh* was assumed as the reference point, as its text has multiple copies and versions, which may shed some light on the kind of writing activities that were undertaken and on the process which lead to the formation of this work. Although the *Gilgamesh* epic is not really a work comparable with anything else (taking into consideration its Sumerian origins), the elements and mechanisms of the long process of its development remain valid to a large extent for the works created later in the Near East, in the areas of Mesopotamia and Syro-Palestine.

An outline of the history of the development of *Gilgamesh*, presented on the basis of a detailed analysis by Jeffrey Tigay of the nature and sequence of changes taking place gradually in the text, has been defined by myself as 'a model of Gilgamesh' of the development of a text. The model of Gilgamesh is not a matrix used to reconstruct the history of the formation of other literary works, but it can provide an illustration of specific literary activities characteristic of the process of creation of literary works in the ancient Near East. It is certainly closer to the history of the text of many a Biblical book than it was suggested by many Biblical scholars, who based their proposed redaction histories on the concept of the author's or editorial work.

Since the structure of the text of Deuteronomy cannot be fully explained on the basis of the theory of existence of a certain number of editors, research was undertaken to examine whether the history of the development of the *Gilgamesh* epic may shed light on the complex process of the development of the book. Surprisingly, it turned out that many different literary characteristics testifying to a specific type and order (!) of writing activities, proved to have their parallels in both of the compared works. Similarities also exist at the associational level of each of these works with literature (inter-textual connections) and with the culture of their environment (connections with the forms in the field of speech and ritual).

IX

As a consequence of the conducted analysis, a new research approach is proposed, referred to as a new *Kompositionsgeschichte*, presented against the background of and in confrontation with its closest, *Redaktionsgeschichte*. Also the key assumptions and an outline of research procedures have been presented, as well as an attempt at an initial confrontation of the suggested method with selected theories (concerning the formation of Deuteronomy). Also a brief project for further research has been outlined, which would lead to determining essential elements within the process of the textual formation of Deuteronomy. One of the assumptions of the method says that the stages of development of a text may be determined on the basis of the set of political, social and cultural conditions (which,

on the one hand, forms the history, and on the other – shapes the interpretation of the history expressed in the texts). The project outlines the three suggested basic steps in the textual development of Deuteronomy, based on the proposal presented by Eckart Otto (defined as *Das vorexilisch-vordeuteronomistische Deuteronomium*; *Das exilisch-deuteronomistische Deuteronomium*; *Das nachexilisch-postdeuteronomistische Deuteronomium*).

X

Finally, the conclusion should be indicated which is key to the understanding of what the Biblical text is from the literary and historical perspective, and also from the standpoint of the history of tradition. I would like to refer here once again to the findings presented in this study: this particular process of the development of a work, sketched here as ‘a model of *Gilgamesh*’, leads to the formation of a specific text, that is in some ways richer than a coherent composition created by one person (which is a standard in the contemporary world). Its wealth is found in the multiplication of the deposits of the cultural and theological traditions, being developed in writing, whose testimony is the text of the Biblical book.

Writers, working on a text and interpreting it anew, did not ‘change’ its meaning in the sense that they did not cancel or reject old elements. Rather, they tried extracting and adding new interpretations, integrating these elements with the previously existing text. As a result of this process a new work developed, unknown in contemporary literary practice – a work of unusual value, a record-witness to the accumulation of tradition.

A multi-thread analysis, both from the cultural and theological perspective, showed that the concept (idea) of ‘The Book’ contained in Deuteronomy is deeply rooted in the culture of writing from the ancient Near East. The elements that make up this concept come from that culture as a development, as a kind of ‘final’ (God writes with ‘the finger of God’), while other elements emerge on the basis of controversy and opposition – when the words of *Torah* are presented as non-hidden, available knowledge. All these elements belong to the same conceptual plane, to the common world of Near Eastern ideas, perceptions and practices of writing.

The identification of the elements of the ancient process concerning the shaping of literary composition has allowed us to work out a new way towards understanding the process of Biblical text formation, which in turn results in a new proposals for a fresh research approach.

The expansion of cultural horizons in the perception of Biblical texts and their location in the ancient literary environment – both in relation to the process of the development and functioning of the work – allows us to change the perspective of interpretation in the approach to both the Bible as a book, as well as to the contents included in it.