

## The Impact of the JEDP Theory on the Book of Deuteronomy

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### Abstract

As part of the Pentateuch, the book of Deuteronomy has been affected by the JEDP theory more negatively than positively. The JEDP theory presupposes that there is no supernatural revelation in the book of Deuteronomy. As a result, the book of Deuteronomy is treated like any other literature. Hermeneutically, the presupposition has severely affected the process and the methodology of interpretation. The elements of authorship, dating, purpose, and occasion were altered. The texts were dissected in such a way as if they were not united in order to find the meaning behind a particular text. Thus the message of the book of Deuteronomy was affected.

### Introduction

The study of the Pentateuch today seems to be almost synonymous to the study of the JEDP theory, which says that ‘the Pentateuch was a compilation of selections from several different documents composed at different places and times over a period of five centuries, long after Moses’ (Archer, 1979, 81). Perhaps one reason for this situation has to do with the impact that the JEDP theory has towards the unity and the message of the Pentateuch. For this reason, this essay will focus its discussion on the impact of the JEDP theory on the message of one particular book in the Pentateuch—the book of Deuteronomy.

The traditional or conservative view of the authorship of the Pentateuch is that of Mosaic authorship. This view has influenced many conservative Bible scholars to treat the book of Deuteronomy as part of a united Pentateuch. However, with the introduction of the JEDP theory to the scholarly world of the Pentateuch, the view that Moses wrote the book of Deuteronomy (as part of the Pentateuch) has been challenged. The common understanding of the critical scholarship regarding Deuteronomy is that it was composed around the time of the revival during King Josiah’s period in the seventh century BCE. Others put it much later around the time of the exile (LaSor, Hubbard & Bush, 1996, 114-115).

Today, the study of the Pentateuch seems to have two opposing strands. On the one hand, a conservative approach to Old Testament interpretation still maintains the supernatural aspect of the Pentateuch. On the other hand, the critical scholarship of the Bible maintains that the Pentateuch that we have at present is the work of unknown editors, who put together several different sources. This paper takes the position that the JEDP theory which holds a prominent place in the world of critical scholarship has provided some negative impact on the book of Deuteronomy. Because of its presuppositions, it has affected quite severely both the methodology and the process of interpretation of the book of Deuteronomy.

This essay will, first of all, briefly discuss the position of the book of Deuteronomy in JEDP theory. Next a discussion on the impact of the theory on the message of the book of Deuteronomy will be presented from a hermeneutical perspective. Finally, this discussion will show how the presuppositions that undergird the JEDP theory influence the process and the methodology of interpretation.

### The JEDP Theory and the Book of Deuteronomy

The letters J, E, D, and P represent the strands of documents from which selections are derived. J comes from the Jahwist strand or tradition, E from the Elohist, D from the Deuteronomist, and P from the Priestly. The composition of the book of Deuteronomy is considered as derived mainly from the Deuteronomist tradition by critical scholars. The book of Deuteronomy is often called the keystone of the entire documentary hypothesis of the Pentateuch. The date of its composition has been set forth as one of the assured results of modern scholarship (LaSor, Hubbard & Bush, 1996, 114).

The ‘book of the law’ found in the temple during King Josiah’s reign is identified as the book of



Deuteronomy. This identification is based on the phrase 'book of the law' which can be found in both, the story of Josiah's reform (2 Kings 22.8) and the book of Deuteronomy itself (31.24-26). Another basis for the identification was the nature of the reform. It mandated the centralisation of place of worship in Jerusalem and the destruction of the other sites of worship. The insistence on a centralised place of worship is most clearly articulated in Deut. 12.1-14. The centralisation of worship would contribute to a closer political unification of the whole kingdom and would ensure that all revenues would come to the priesthood in Jerusalem (Archer, 1979, 82).

De Wette conjectures that Deuteronomy was most likely composed, or rather concocted, by pious conservatives and was put in the temple with the hope that it would be found and produce effect to the nation of Israel. The pious conservatives were doing it because they were troubled by the apostasy of Josiah's predecessors Manasseh and Amon. To add authority to the work, it was attributed to Moses. This gave impetus to the work of reformation (cited in Archer, 1979, 82-83).

It is a point of curiosity as to what the 'book of the law' found in the temple consisted of. Some scholars have claimed that it consisted of Deuteronomy 12-26, whereas others suggest that it was chapters 5-26 of Deuteronomy (LaSor, Hubbard & Bush, 1996, 114). But in general everyone agrees that it consisted of the central part of the present form of Deuteronomy. Clement (1993, 7-8) suggests that the heart of Deuteronomy is found in the collection of laws, which are contained in chapters 12-26 of the present form. Many scholars conclude that the original kernel of the book is to be seen in the law code, which was later expanded by the addition of an extended introduction (chapters 1-11) and conclusion (chapters 27-34).

A relatively recent development in Deuteronomy scholarship has been in regard to the reworking of the historical account recorded in Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings (Campbell & O'Brien, 2000, 1-37). Scholars who adhere to this assessment assert that some theologian-historian during the exilic time recounted and judged the history of Israel in terms of their adherence or lack of adherence to the covenant demand of Deuteronomy. They argue that this so-called 'deuteronomistic history' is not a mere recital of the events and movements of the post-Mosaic age but a telling of the story as 'sacred history' (Merill, 2001, 34).

This assessment has caused some scholars to conclude that Deuteronomy could have been written much earlier than the time of King Josiah. They conjecture that the composition could be as early as the time of Samuel. However, with the same assessment, other scholars have come to a conclusion that it might have been composed later, that is during the time of the exile (LaSor, Hubbard & Bush, 1996, 114-115; Archer, 1978, 253).

### **The Impact of the JEDP Theory: Hermeneutical Perspective**

Interpreting Deuteronomy is not an easy task. To arrive at the message of the book requires the interpreter to go through specific hermeneutical processes, and to follow certain hermeneutical principles. However, the application of those principles may not be the same for all interpreters. Their presupposition can greatly influence their application of the principles. As a result, the methodology of interpretation is affected and the interpreters are directed towards a different understanding of the book altogether (Bromiley, 1979, 62-65).

The presuppositions that undergird the JEDP theory have influenced critical scholars a great deal. What basic presuppositions do the JEDP theorists base their principles upon? In what ways have these presuppositions influenced the meaning of the book of Deuteronomy? These are two questions that we need to answer in the rest of this essay.

#### *JEDP Presupposition and Its Impact*

Generally speaking, there are two kinds of presuppositions in biblical interpretation. On the one hand, some people presuppose that the Bible is the Word of God, revealed supernaturally by God to humans and guarded and guided in its transmission process. Hence, they respect the unity of the Bible. On the other hand, there are those who presuppose that the Bible is an old literature, written by ordinary people with different backgrounds and agendas. They do not believe in a supernatural revelation of the Bible. Hence, they feel free to treat the Bible with criticism like any other literature.

While it can be said that one positive contribution of the JEDP theory is the effort to explain the discrepancies in the Pentateuch, we cannot ignore the negative impact it has on Deuteronomy. This is because the very basic assumption of the theory treats the Bible like any other literature that went through a natural development. There can be no such thing as supernatural revelation. Everything in the book of Deuteronomy must be explained rationally, intelligently, and humanly. This is exactly what the humanistic



and deistic philosophies are selling (Archer, 1979, 105). One clear implication of this assumption not only for the book of Deuteronomy but also for the entire Bible is to impose one's personal theology or theory into the text. Thus making the text to support one's own view (Carson, 1996, 128, 129)

The presuppositions of the JEDP theory have influenced at least two areas in the interpretation of the book of Deuteronomy. This has to do with the background information of the book and the methodology of interpretation.

#### *Impact: Background Information*

The underlying assumption of the JEDP theory is that there was neither supernatural revelation nor communication between God and Moses. Therefore, Moses did not write the book of Deuteronomy as traditionally believed. The immediate implication of this assumption is that everything related to the authorship, dating, occasion, purpose, and historical background in the composition of Deuteronomy has to change also.

As Interpreters attempt to understand the message of the book of Deuteronomy, they need to gather information with regards to the elements mentioned above. A proper understanding of these elements is very important for Bible interpreters. However, the JEDP theory has altered the information about these elements and by doing so, it has changed the whole picture and meaning of the book of Deuteronomy.

Traditional calculation by most conservative Old Testament scholars date the composition of the book of Deuteronomy back to the time about forty years after the Exodus, which would be around the late fifteenth century BCE (probably around 1407/1406). The discovery of the Hittite suzerain-vassal treaty document dated back to that century and the parallel to Deuteronomy affirmed the conclusion that Moses wrote the book. Most traditional introductions to the book of Deuteronomy point to the fact that Moses wrote the book with two important concerns in mind. First, the Israelites should understand who they were, where they originated, and what their God intended for them in the years to come. Second, Moses was about to die, so it was essential that he commit to writing the whole collection of tradition and truth that he understood to be the very revelation of God (Merill, 2001, 23-27; Geisler, 2006, 77-82).

However, with the reconstruction introduced by the JEDP theory, the dating shifted to a later time, which was in the seventh century BCE (LaSor, Hubbard & Bush, 1996, 114-115). What this means in essence is that, instead of it being a document specifically written by Moses to prepare the Israelites to enter Canaan, Deuteronomy became the vehicle to gather support for governmental campaign for centralised place of worship. A serious implication of this view is that the story, or rather the history, of Israel through Moses' eyes is not important. What is important is not the account of the eyewitness of Israel's history, but the composition of the editors. The composition was not aimed at understanding Israel's position in God's plan as chosen people bound by covenant, but simply for the sake of composing history and making sense of their existence (Clement, 1993, 11; Manley, 1957).

A further implication of the change has to do with the influence of certain individuals on the rest of the Old Testament books and the New Testament. According to the JEDP theory, Moses was not the most influential prophet in the Bible. Even though Moses is presented by Deuteronomy as the person who dominates the Old Testament above all other human figures, it was the redactors of the Pentateuch, referred to simply as 'the deuteronomists', that are considered to be the most influential (Clement 1993:10). However, the prophets and the writings in the Old Testament and the mention of Moses in the New Testament provide a different picture. In JEDP conception, Moses becomes only a legendary character who is portrayed as a central figure in the Pentateuch. If that is the case, then, it is pointless to study his biography as one tries to understand Deuteronomy.

Another issue arises out of the change. If Moses did not write Deuteronomy, as the JEDP theory suggests, but concocted by pious ones during the time of King Josiah, then it is a forged document. Ultimately, Christ's authority is involved and so are the authorities of the rest of the New Testament writers. Since Christ quoted Deuteronomy (cf. Matthew 4.7, 10; 19.7; Mark 7.10; Luke 20.28) and attributed it to Moses (Geisler, 2006, 77-78), then Christ's authority can be questioned. Such an approach makes Christ and the rest of the New Testament writers a bunch of liars.

#### *Impact: Methodology of Interpretation*

The JEDP theory employs a mixture of several critical methods. But the most obvious of all is source criticism. Source criticism postulates that the book of Deuteronomy has its source in the Deuteronomistic documents which were found and combined with the other strands (J and E) of documents during the reign



of King Josiah in the seventh century BCE (Bratcher, 2003, 2, 3, 7). What was found in the temple by Hilkiah the high priest prior to the revival was the 'book of the law' which made up the central part of Deuteronomy. This document (chapters 12-26 of the present form of Deuteronomy) was then expanded to include the introductory materials (chapters 1-11) and the conclusion (chapters 27-34) (Clement, 1993, 1).

An obvious implication of such methodology is the creation of artificial divisions in the book which results in dissecting the texts. The dissected texts would then be studied independently from the whole body of the Pentateuch. This way of interpretation can be observed today in various researches that follow the JEDP tradition. What is important here, then, is not the cohesion of the Pentateuch, but rather the ways and means by which Deuteronomy came to be in its present form. The texts that the book of Deuteronomy currently possesses are not sufficient to provide the meaning of the book. In other words, the diachronic approach to Old Testament exegesis seems to be more emphasised than the synchronic approach. In order to find a balanced interpretation of the book of Deuteronomy, one has to interpret it based on the present text while not neglecting the importance of textual criticism. Despite what happened during textual transmission, the present text contains all the essential information for a person to do exegesis (Baker & Arnold, 1999, 140-141).

As presented earlier, the JEDP theory demands an absolutely obligatory rationalistic explanation for every supernatural occurrence in the Pentateuch. This premise has not only influenced the methodology of interpretation of the Pentateuch, but also its message to a great extent. The impact can be seen in at least three ways. First, the theory has tried to explain the process of merging the different sources of the Pentateuch through evolutionary concept. The basic conviction of the theory is that the religion of the people of Israel can be explained in terms of a natural evolutionary process. Second, since it demands some rationalistic explanations for everything in the Bible, all the supernatural events in the Pentateuch are reduced to only myths, concocted merely for the purpose of teaching lessons to the children of Israel. Third, this methodology has been unduly influenced by the teachings of Deism. God is not directly and actively involved in the making of the history of Israel. If that is the case, then there would be no important message in the book of Deuteronomy (Archer, 1979, 103-109).

## Conclusion

Since its inception, the JEDP theory has tried to explain the supposed discrepancies in the Pentateuch using the methods of source criticism. Even though scholars of this tradition may be applauded for their scholasticism, the theory that they espouse has negatively impacted the message of Deuteronomy. Taking its presuppositions as the basis for interpretation, the JEDP theory has affected quite severely both the process and the methodology of interpretation of the book. In other words, the impact can be clearly seen through hermeneutical perspective.

Presupposing that there can be no supernatural revelation necessitates wide shifts in the elements that provide background information to the book Deuteronomy such as authorship, dating, occasion, purpose, and historical background. As a result, instead of Moses as the author, the editors played a very significant role in the composition of the book of Deuteronomy. Moses is no longer the important figure in the process of interpretation but the editors are. Even the purpose of composition shifted from an action for people being bound by God's covenantal promise to an effort of a people who are trying to make sense of their existence in the history of mankind.

Methodologically, the JEDP presuppositions have affected the way interpreters interpret the book of Deuteronomy. They no longer treat Deuteronomy as God's word, but as ordinary literature. As a result, they can do anything they like. They can dissect the texts and interpret them out of context. They can also read their theology or impose their own views into the texts. Thus they subject Deuteronomy to a barrage of theological interpretations.

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