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A literary circle in Judah

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Modern scriptural research deals, among other subjects, with the questions of the modes of writing and methods of redaction and editing of the books of the Bible, on the one hand, and with the sources the authors availed themselves of, on the other hand. More recently this research has also focused on the questions of what need prompted the writing of the books, who their readers were and how they read them.

These questions are interconnected given the point of departure that a literary or historical work - and assuredly a work which possesses a theo-historical and national message - is written with the purpose of reaching the reading public of its time and to influence its consciousness, understanding, knowledge and behavior. Accordingly, the very act of writing and its product are enough to serve as sufficient evidence that the books of the Bible that were written during the First Temple period had a reading public already at the time of their writing.

Who constituted this reading public in the generations before the destruction of the First Temple? The only evidence that in Judah there was a public "that can read" (Isaiah 29:11) are the books of the Bible themselves; however, they cannot tell us anything about the identity of this public or about its scope. It is clear that this does not refer to the entire population of Judah, but to an elite group that could read, including mainly the holy priests, the Levites, the members of the royal court and the administration. In the seventh and eighth centuries B.C.E. these elements accounted for between 5 to 10 percent of the population - that is, a few hundred families. This social stratum could read administrative documents and letters of various kinds ("Jehu wrote letters and sent them to Samaria"). Various texts (books) were undoubtedly written in Judah, and not only in one copy, such as the book in which Samuel wrote the rules of the monarchy, "which he deposited before the Lord" (1 Samuel 10:25).

The elite class in Judah was also not monolithic. It contained competing groups that espoused different worldviews and perhaps also different historical narratives. We can therefore assume that they committed their views to writing and that this was replicated in a number of copies. In the 38 years between the reform of Josiah and the destruction of the Temple (622-586) - and perhaps even earlier -

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ramified literary activity certainly took place in Judah, mainly in Jerusalem. In this period story cycles, propaganda and polemical works, letters and the like were written, copied and disseminated.

Jeremiah is perhaps referring to some of these compositions when he says "for naught the pen has labored, for naught the scribes" (Jeremiah 8:8). Copies of several of the prophecies of Jeremiah himself were sent by the prophet "to the elders of the exile and to the priests and to the prophets and to all the people" (Jeremiah 29:1) and "to all the people in Jerusalem" (29:25). However, this was a short prophecy which was meant to be read aloud - not a book per se.

An ideal reader?

The elite in Judah undoubtedly read short compositions of various kinds, though we do not know what their literary quality was. However, could this group also have read the Mishneh Torah (Deuteronomist; Deuteronomy - 2 Kings) composition, which includes several scroll-books? Effectively, we do not know which segment of the elite group possessed reading skills that enabled them to understand the complex structure of each literary unit in its own right, to decipher the literary stratagems, to identify the overt or covert polemic the text contained and its contexts, and to take note of the points of similarity, parallels or contradictions that existed in each scroll-book in its own right, or between the literary units which made up the collection.

The conjecture that there was a circle of readers in Judah, however small, that was capable of evaluating the quality of the literature and discerning its subtleties, orientations and messages, and the assumption that the history of the people of Israel was written in historiographic compositions, obliges us to posit the existence of a reading audience which the works set out to persuade. These hypotheses describe an ideal reader. Such a reader is not the "addressee" of an administrative message, of a letter or even of a literary composition or a pamphlet. He is the ideal reader of a linguistically, poetically and conceptually complex text; a reader who has the time to delve deeply into the text in a rereading in order to unravel the connection - whether overt or covert - that exists between different textual units within it.

For the historiographic composition to have a readership, the scroll-books had to be accessible to those readers. Where could they read them? The palace library preserved administrative documents and analects describing the acts of the kings, which were written by the king's scribes, but these were not meant for a broad reading public. That library and the Temple library (if one existed) could serve authors in search of sources, but were not actually reading libraries. Therefore, for the circle of readers in question to be able to read the books - some or all of them - that are included in the Deuteronomist composition, they would have had to be copied for private use.

However, the Bible does not say anything about organized activity of the copying of books, only about reading aloud in public. For example, 2 Chronicles 17:9 relates that King Jehoshaphat sent a group of officers, priests and Levites, who "had the book of the law of the Lord with them, and went about throughout all the cities of Judah, and taught the people." When the one and only copy of the Book of the Covenant was discovered, it was read out publicly to the people (2 Kings 23:1-2), and King Josiah had it taught in Judah: "Go, inquire of the Lord on my behalf, and on behalf of the people, and on behalf of all Judah, concerning the words of this scroll that has been found. For great indeed must be the wrath of the Lord that has been kindled against us, because our fathers did not obey the words of this scroll to do all that has been prescribed for us" (2 Kings 22:12-13).

Textual complexities

These testimonies show that there was only one copy of the Book of the Covenant, and therefore the king's men had to go from one settlement to another to read it out; or, alternatively, they show that a number of copies of the book were made and these were given to the readers who traveled around Judah.

But the monarchical establishment did not dispatch emissaries with several copies of the Deuteronomist composition. Even if we assume that historical literature was read out at some type of public assemblies, it is difficult to believe that anything more than the stories concerning the nation's beginnings were read. In cases where the Bible describes a retrospective historical speech, it includes a brief summation of the course of the history of the people of Israel (see Joshua 23; Nehemiah 8). In any event, listening makes it difficult for even an educated person to contemplate the complexity of the text, and that is certainly true of a text such as the Deuteronomist composition, which was never meant to be read out to an audience.

It follows that for this text to fulfill its religious, national and political role in the First Temple period, a certain number of copies of it had to be made, and then it had to be recopied whenever additions and corrections were inserted. Since the work of writing and editing was complex and multilayered, it was impossible to make do with writing part of it anew and pasting it on the scroll; consecutive work of repeated copying of the original by professionals was required. Even if we assume that during the generation between the reform of Josiah and the destruction of the Temple the text was recopied a number of times, it is unlikely that this sufficed to forge a consciousness of the past in the whole nation, or even in part of it. Consequently, we cannot know what a resident of Judah knew, even if he belonged to the elite, about the history of the people of Israel until his time, or his perception of his past.

Even if we assume that a few copies of the Deuteronomist composition

existed, this is a work whose complexity can be grasped only by individual reading, which was not customary in the ancient world (in Greece, for example, it did not start before the fifth century B.C.E.). Even if we assume that in Judah individual reading began earlier, it is clear that such a reader does not resemble an author, who draws for his work on earlier sources and conducts a conscious dialogue with them. A contemporaneous individual reader could read only five or six lines and would find it very difficult to read ahead or refer back - as could be done in later generations in the codex.

For this reader to grasp the intertextual connections which are found by readers of later periods, he would have had to reread the entire text. Moreover, to identify parallels to and passages borrowed from the different books, or a later commentary on early books - the reader would have had to be in possession of all of them. Individual reading of this kind and the realization of the text in this form are like the expositor and exegete of later generations, or of readers and researchers of recent generations, but were certainly not available to a reader of the First Temple period. That reader did not reread the texts in order to decipher properly their secrets and their intertextual relations, and he did not approach the books equipped with sophisticated techniques and theories about reading and interpretation.

It seems likely, then, that if the authors and editors of the Deuteronomist text wished to imbue the public of Judah with a common consciousness of the past, they could easily have found a more effective and simpler way, and would not have created a text meant only for the cognoscenti. Certainly they would not have made do with a small group of ideal readers who were capable of appreciating the modes of textual shaping, the stratagems, the parallels, the refinements and the contradictions between different and distant literary units, or the rhetorical devices and the existing overt and covert polemic that informed the text.

What we have is a wonderful and singular phenomenon: A large disparity existed between the rare quality of the scriptural work and the reading public for which it was in theory intended at the time of its composition, but which it could not reach. If so, it is impossible not to wonder whether the Deuteronomist composition (and not only it) was not written for its time, but with thought for future generations, and whether it indeed became the formative text of the consciousness of the past only generations after the return to Zion and not "in the present" - that is, in the First Temple period. It was only then that the people of Israel became a community of the book; that is, a community whose world is constructed and shaped by one compilation of texts, which became a "book."

It was only in the generations that followed - when the book was disseminated in many copies and individual reading became widespread, and subsequently the main form of reading - that the cornucopia of interpretive creation and of creative interpretation

revealed many aspects which its authors and editors had not intended and never imagined.

