

o8. The Deuteronomists



A number of 'Schools' were responsible for the composing and establishing of the Torah. Here we reflect on the work of the so-called Deuteronomists who were responsible for the Book of Deuteronomy, and the Former Prophets: Judges, Samuel and Kings.

They also had input into other books, especially Genesis, Exodus, Joshua, and some of the prophetic scrolls.

The Deuteronomists were not priests. This becomes clear when we compare their treatment of matters concerning the cult with the treatment of the Priestly School.

Deuteronomy

Most scholars today think that Deuteronomy comes from the scribes of the royal court and the school that continued the tradition during and after the exile. They focus on the importance of social ethics. They are also interested in proper worship, but they leave ceremonial detail to those whose special responsibility lies in organising the cult.

The Book of Deuteronomy holds a special place among the writings of the Torah. It takes the form of a testament given by Moses to the people as they are preparing to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land.

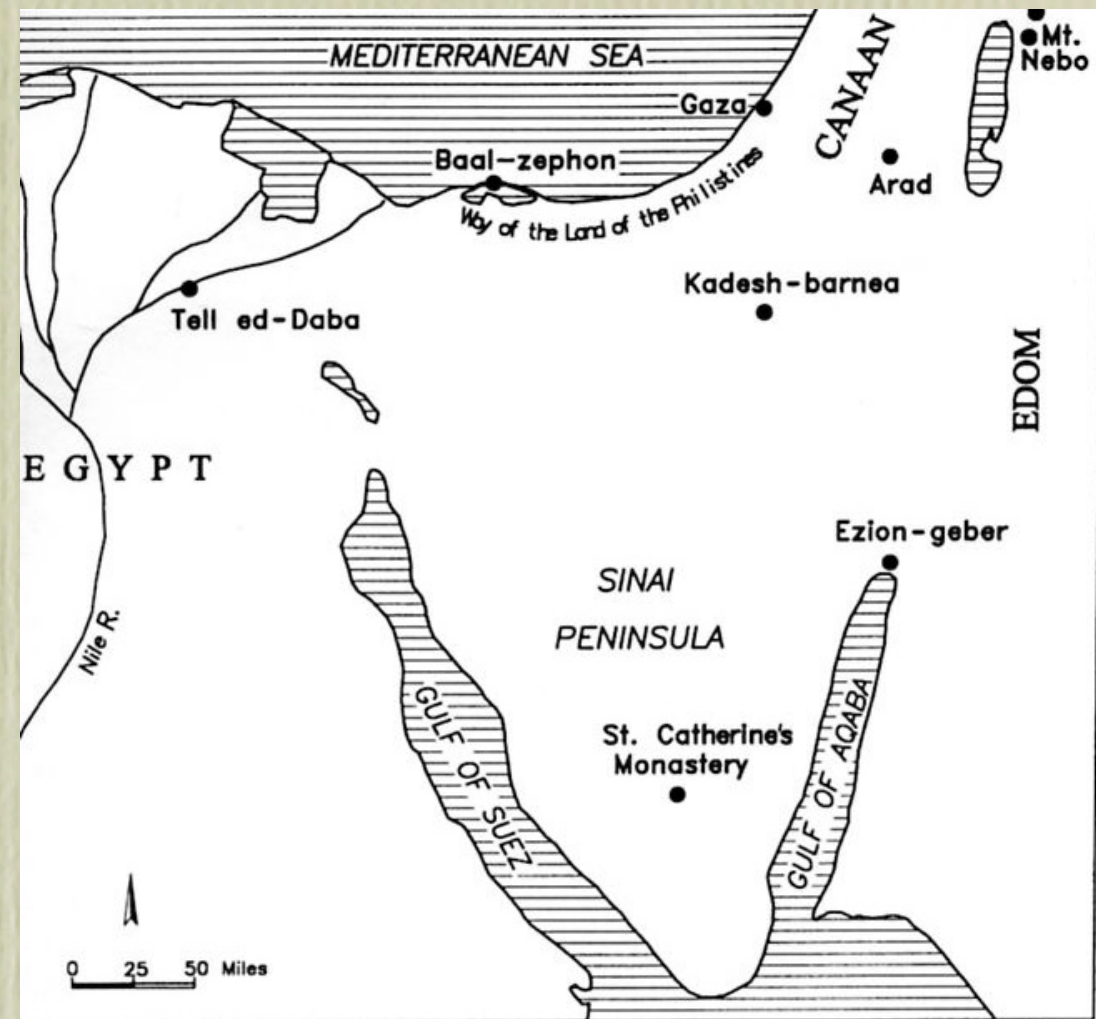
The Deuteronomists portray Moses before he dies and hands over the leadership to Joshua, as taking the people of Israel over all that has happened to them in their journey through the wilderness. In doing so they take us to the heart of what it is that identifies Israel as a special people, chosen and set apart by YHWH. They instruct the people on how they must live if they are to welcome and enjoy the fruits of this special relationship.

The name ‘Deuteronomy’ comes from the Septuagint translation of the text that states: ‘**When the king has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the levitical priests**’(Deuteronomy 17:18).

‘Copy of the law’(מִשְׁנֵה הַתּוֹרָה mishneh ha tôrâ) is translated by the Greek word ‘δευτερονόμιον deuteronomion’. The name suits the book for its authors consciously present it as an interpretation, a ‘second look’ at the tradition that they inherited.

The setting for Deuteronomy is Moab, ‘beyond the Jordan’(Deuteronomy 1:1), not Sinai, the mountain on which God revealed himself to Moses, the mountain which the Deuteronomists call ‘Horeb’. They portray Moses as looking back to Horeb and presenting the revelation to a new generation.

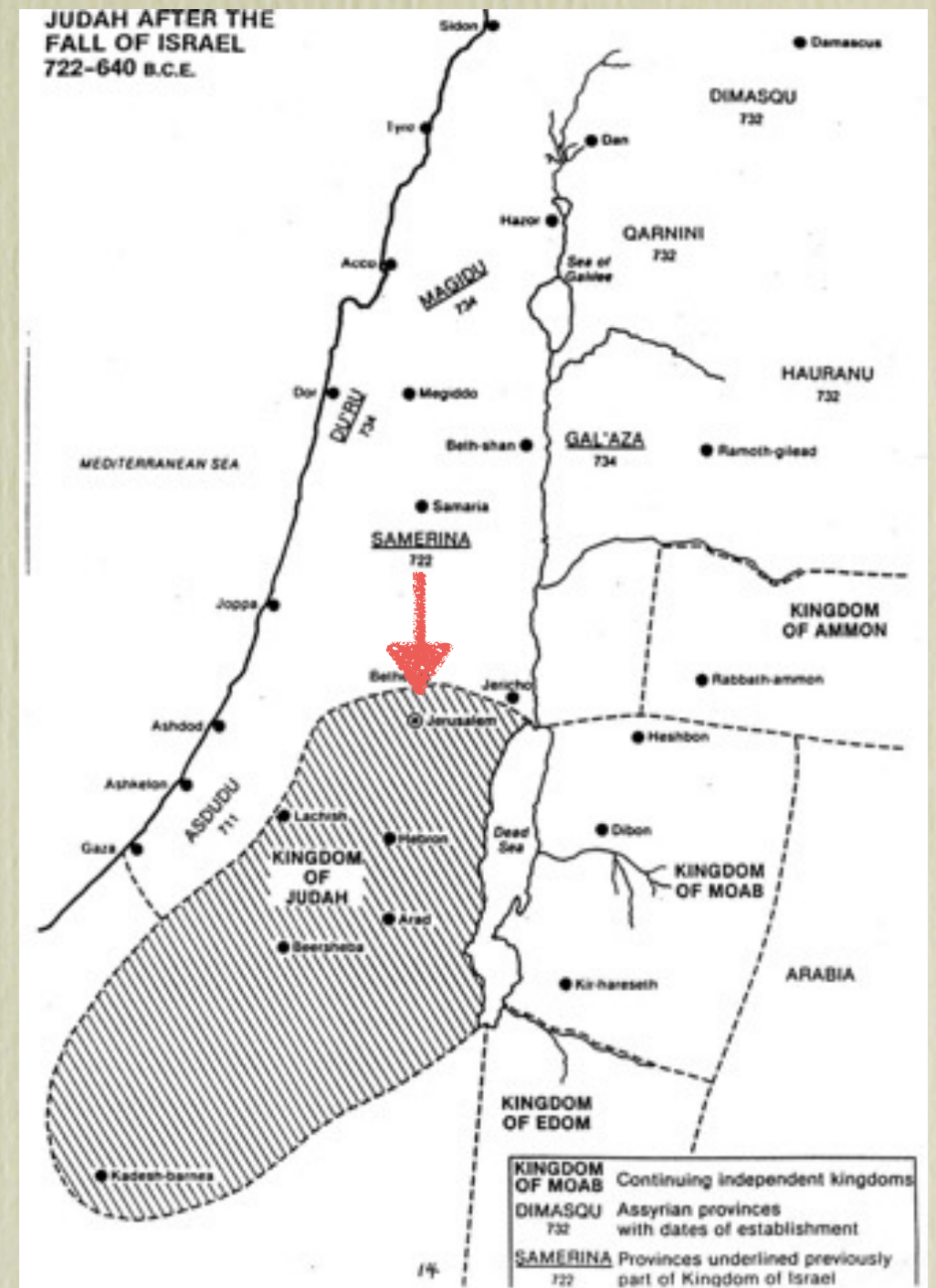
Presenting the essence of God’s revelation to new generations is what the Deuteronomic School sees as its aim.



There are good reasons for locating the origins of the Deuteronomistic School in the northern kingdom as a resistance movement against the compromises allowed and sometimes encouraged by the political leadership in Israel. This came to a head in the eighth century with increasing Assyrian influence.

The Deuteronomists would have welcomed the critique offered by the prophets Hosea and Amos in the years leading up to the catastrophic collapse of Samaria (721BC), for the Deuteronomistic School and these two prophets shared the same zealous opposition to the syncretism, idolatry and injustice which they recognised as a betrayal of all that it means to be YHWH's chosen people.

When the Assyrian army overran Israel and destroyed Samaria (721BC), members of the School joined the other refugees who fled to Judah. There they found an ally in King Hezekiah who inherited the throne c.727BC and who reigned in his own right from c.715 to 699BC. It may have been they who helped persuade him that the reason for Israel's collapse was its infidelity to the covenant, and that the only way to save Judah was to return to loyalty to YHWH. This is what Hezekiah attempted to do.



The situation Hezekiah inherited from his father, Ahaz, was no better than what was happening north of the border. Recognising Assyria as the growing power in the region, Ahaz had tried to win its support against the plotting of both Aram and Israel to take control of Judah. The people of Judah reacted to the regional insecurity by indulging their superstitions and worshipping any deity they thought might help them. Ahaz led them in turning to the ancient gods of Canaan (see 2Kings 16).



What happened in Israel persuaded Hezekiah that Assyria could not be trusted, and, encouraged perhaps by the members of the Deuteronomic School, he attempted to bring Judah back to the faithful following of YHWH. It was the covenant with YHWH that mattered, not cultivating relations to Assyria.

Part of his strategy in his war against idolatry and superstition was to centralise the cult in Jerusalem. This involved destroying the other sanctuaries in Judah. When writing a summary of Hezekiah's reign, the Deuteronomists reveal their admiration for what he tried to do:

‘He did what was right in the sight of YHWH just as his ancestor David had done. He removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole (Asherah)...

He trusted in YHWH the God of Israel; so that there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah after him, or among those who were before him. For he held fast to YHWH; he did not depart from following him but kept the commandments that YHWH commanded Moses. YHWH was with him; wherever he went, he prospered. He rebelled against the king of Assyria and would not serve him’(2Kings 18:3-7).

Hezekiah's rebellion against Assyria, occasioned by the death of Sargon in 705BC, was short lived. The authors of 2Kings go on to tell of the siege of Jerusalem (701BC) and its 'miraculous' escape. However Judah was completely ravaged and the price of Jerusalem's survival was an enormous tribute paid to Assyria. The collapse of Judah meant the collapse, too, of Hezekiah's attempt at religious reform.

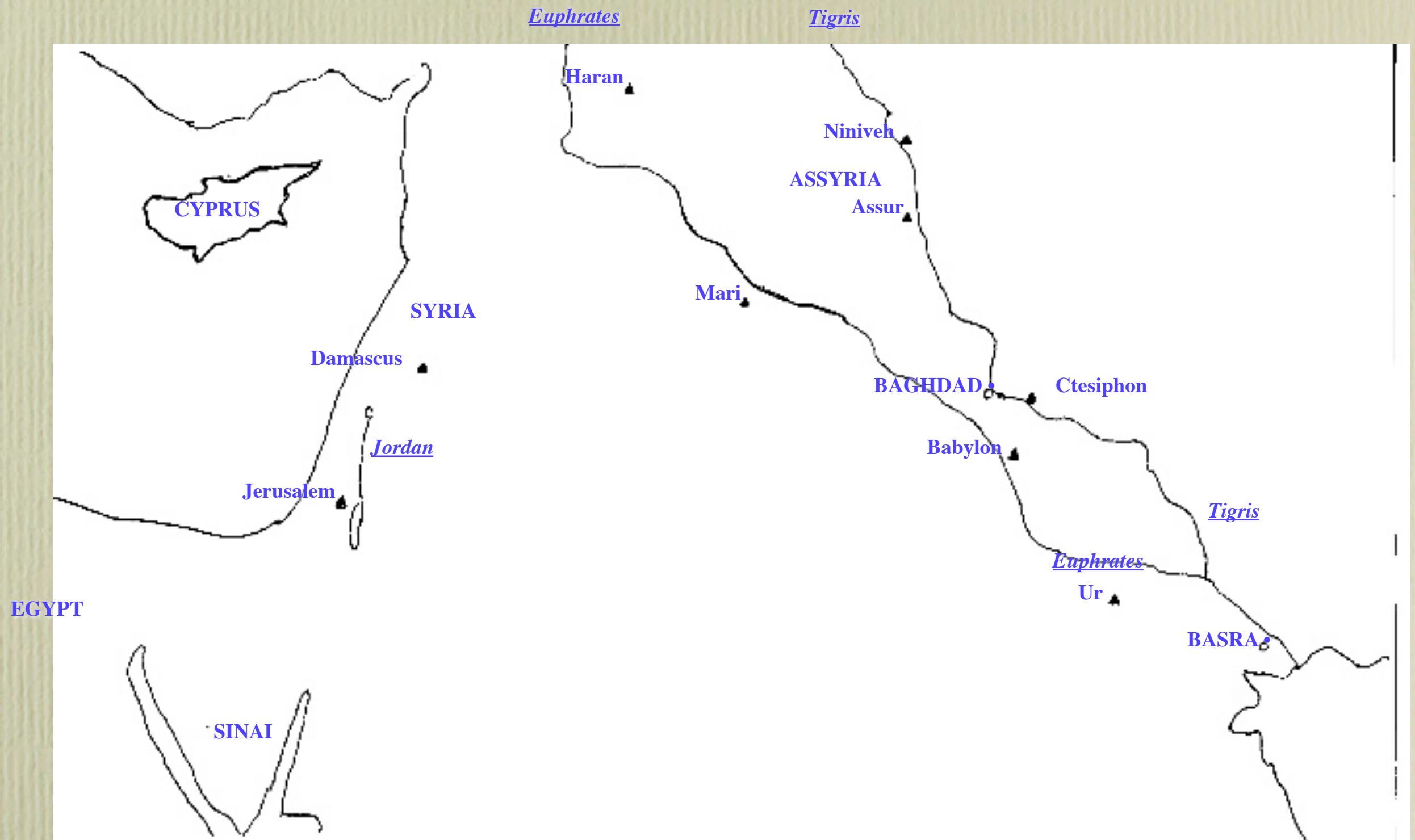
Hezekiah's son, Manasseh, inherited his father's failed revolt and had no choice but to submit to being a vassal of the Assyrian king, Sennacherib.

There would have been those in Judah, including probably priests from the smaller sanctuaries, who blamed Hezekiah for the way things turned out, and many welcomed Manasseh's long reign (698-643).

Things fell apart religiously, but because he was a loyal vassal of the powerful Assyrian king there was peace in Judah and growing economic prosperity.

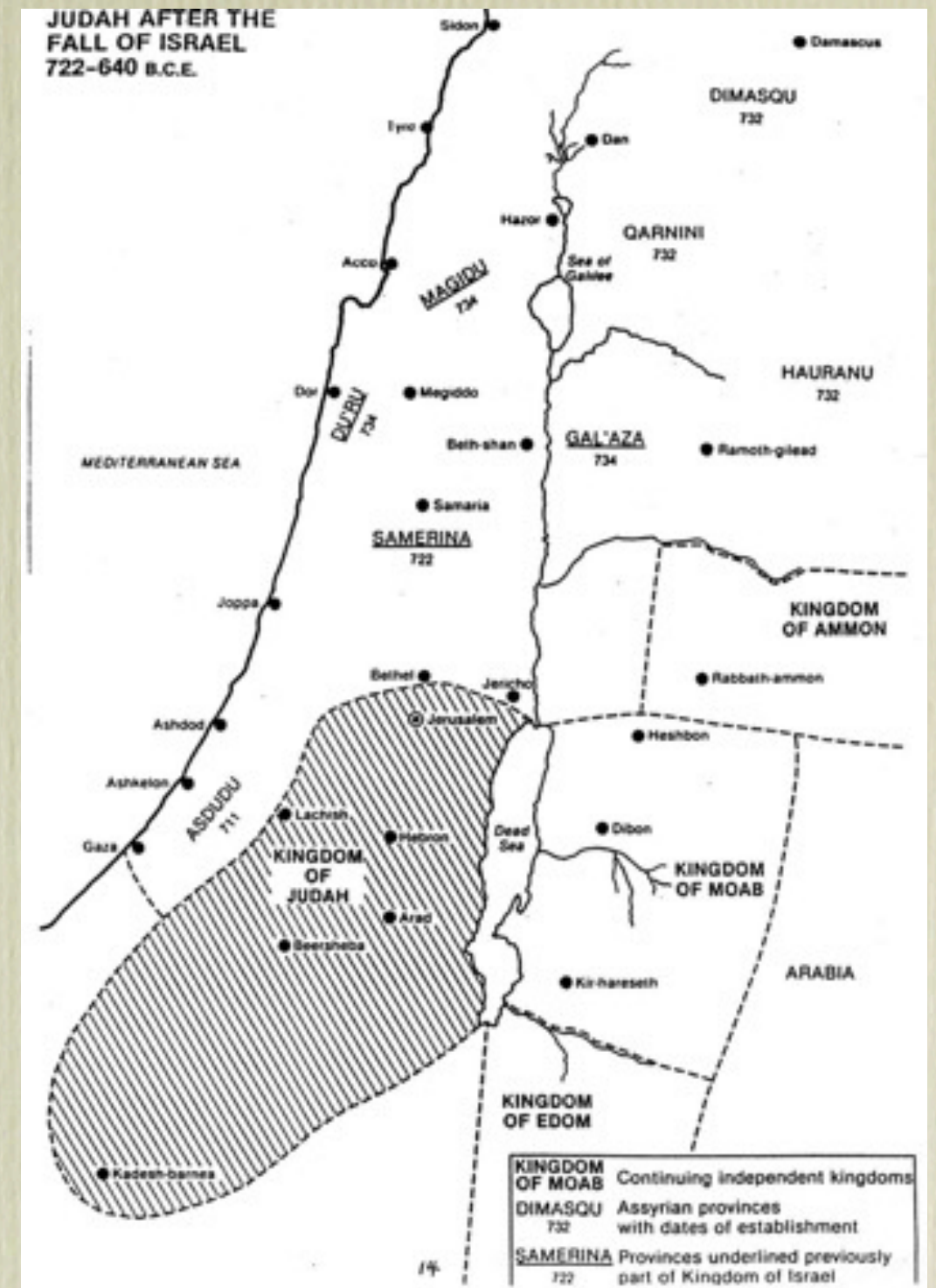
During the reign of Manasseh the members of the Deuteronomic School went underground and continued their spiritual reflection on the covenant with YHWH that gave Israel its identity. They saw themselves as preparing a blueprint for a loyal king whom they trusted God would send them: one who would no longer swear allegiance as a vassal of a foreign king, but who would lead his people to be loyal vassals the great lord, YHWH, faithfully adhering to the covenant.

Manasseh's son, Amon, succeeded his father on the throne but was assassinated after only two years and in 641BC Amon's eight-year old son, Josiah, inherited the throne. There is no record of who was responsible for Amon's assassination, or who acted as regent while Josiah was still a boy, but Josiah developed into just the kind of king the Deuteronomists had been praying for.



Assyria was preoccupied with the rising power of Babylon (in fact, the Assyrian Empire was falling apart).

Josiah took the opportunity to throw off the vassalage that had kept Judah subject to Assyria for the previous sixty years. He was determined to win back for Judah the kingdom reigned over by David, and he brooked no opposition to reforming the religious life of his people.



Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria, died in 628, and Josiah, now twenty and able to take control in his own name, picked up where his great-grandfather, Hezekiah, had left off.

Summarising his reign, the Deuteronomists wrote:

‘Before him there was no king like him, who turned to YHWH with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him’ (2Kings 23:25).

This was the opportunity the Deuteronomists had been waiting for. They had a champion ready to carry out with rigorous efficiency the reform for which they had been preparing. According to the account written by them (but absent from the account given by the Chronicler, see 2Chronicles 34-35), on Josiah's orders the temple was being cleared of Assyrian altars with a view to being re-consecrated, when a document, called 'the book of the law', was 'discovered'. This was 622BC.

We are told that when Josiah heard 'the words of the book of the law':
'He made a covenant before YHWH, to follow YHWH, keeping his commandments, his decrees, and his statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. All the people joined in the covenant'(2Kings 23:3).

According the account in the Book of Kings, the document expressed YHWH's anger against his people and threatened punishment for just the kind of behaviour that had brought about the collapse of Israel and that had flourished in Judah under Josiah's grandfather, Manasseh.

According to the Deuteronomists' account this 'discovery' reinforced Josiah's determination to purify Judah and the re-conquered territories of all signs of cult of any other deity but YHWH. Josiah insisted that all cult had to take place in the Jerusalem Temple, and nowhere else.

This centralising of the cult was the single most influential change brought about by Josiah's reform.

Jesus draws on Deuteronomy

After Jesus' baptism, he went off alone into the wilderness. Matthew and Luke both portray him as facing the trials that Israel faced in the wilderness. Unlike Israel, Jesus rejects the temptations, and does so in words taken from Deuteronomy.

Matthew 4:4; 4:7; 4:10

Jesus answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"(Deut 8:3).

Jesus said to the devil, "It is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"(Deuteronomy 6:16).

Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him'"(Deuteronomy 6:13).

Mark 12:29-30

Asked by a scribe: “Which commandment is the first of all?”

Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength’(Deuteronomy 6:4-5).

Matthew 19:8

When asked his opinion on divorce, Jesus declares that no one has the right to separate what God has joined. They go on to ask why Moses allowed it (the reference is to Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

‘Jesus said to them: It was because you are so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.’

Galatians 3:13

Paul sees the way Jesus died as freeing us from the curse pronounced by Moses:

‘Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.”

(Deuteronomy 21:23)

Romans 11:8

Paul applies to those Jews of his day who rejected Jesus
words spoken by Moses to his contemporaries

‘As it is written,

“God gave them a sluggish spirit, eyes that would not see
and ears that would not hear, down to this very day.

(Deuteronomy 29:4)

Romans 10:6-8

Inviting his readers to open their hearts to the grace they are being offered,
Paul writes:

‘The righteousness that comes from faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” (Deuteronomy 30:12-14) (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim).’

Acts 7:37

Stephen reminds those who are about to stone him

‘This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up a prophet for you from your own people as he raised me up.’

(Deuteronomy 18:15)



‘Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, “I will never leave you or forsake you’(Hebrews 13:5)

‘Be strong and bold; have no fear or dread of them, because it is YHWH your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you ... It is YHWH who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.”(Deuteronomy 31:6 -8)

It is likely that it was at this time that the scribes, including members of the Deuteronomic School and members of the Priestly School, produced the first draft of what would become Exodus 1-24, and the Book of Joshua.

The story of Egypt reflected what had been happening under Assyria. Mount Sinai reflected the importance of Mount Sion. The story of Joshua supported Josiah's attempt to expand the kingdom to the west and north, with a view to re-establishing the Promised Land.

The Book of Joshua portrays Josiah as going from success to success. He cleared Judah and the re-conquered territories of cult sites.

However, tragedy struck in 609BC when the Egyptian Pharaoh, Neco, on his way to support Assyria in its war with Babylon, had Josiah assassinated at Megiddo. The young king (he was only thirty-nine) who carried with him the ideals of the Deuteronomic School was dead.

Twelve years later, in 597BC, Jerusalem surrendered to the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, and Josiah's grandson, Jeconiah (his throne name was Jehoiachin), and the leading citizens were taken into exile. Ten years later an ill-conceived revolt led to the destruction of the city and the temple and a second group of exiles.

The Babylonian Exile (597-538BC) demanded an enormous religious adjustment. In spite of all the hopes built upon promises understood to have come from their God, the Promised Land had been taken from them. Despite the assurances that they had been given that Jerusalem would not be defeated by a foreign king – assurances that were reinforced when Sennacherib failed to capture the city in 701BC – despite all this, the Babylonian army had razed YHWH's city to the ground.



Despite assurances that God would guarantee the dynasty of David, they had lost their king. Despite their belief that the temple was the house of their God YHWH, it had been destroyed. Any national, institutional basis for their religious identity had been swept away. If they were going to retain any sense of themselves as a people, they had to discover a firmer basis. They had to learn a new humility, and find a deeper faith in God, independent of political and economic success.

The Deuteronomists composed a 'history' from the beginnings of Israel's presence in the land through to the Exile. Their work developed into the Books of **Judges**, **Samuel** and **Kings**.

The word 'history' is put in quotation marks, for the aim was not to create an accurate record of historical facts, though facts can be found in what they wrote. The aim, rather, was to focus on what God had done and was doing among them, and on their obedience or disobedience to God. The aim was to inspire fidelity to the essential elements of the covenant that they believed their ancestors had entered into with God, a covenant that identified them as a people. They were convinced that only obedience would ensure blessing and so success.

Three things stand out in the Deuteronomists' presentation of the history of the kings of Israel and Judah. The **first** is that King David, with all his undeniable faults, is portrayed as having the essential qualities required of a king. Subsequent kings of Judah are judged by how they measure up to his standard of fidelity to YHWH. His dynasty continued even when kings were unfaithful because of YHWH's commitment to David.

The **second** is that Jeroboam, who is portrayed as being responsible for the northern kingdom breaking away from Judah, is judged as guilty of apostasy, and every king of Israel after him is condemned for carrying on the apostasy.

The **third** is that it is YHWH who is determining events, and who expresses his will through his prophets. Whatever the kings think they are doing, it is YHWH who is guiding history.