A GLOBAL REDACTIONAL PRINCIPLE WITHIN THE PRIMARY HISTORY?*

Anthony Abela

1 Aims of paper

This paper investigates the possibility of extending the insights of Gerhard von Rad into the redactional and compositional activity of the Deuteronomic Historian in I-II Kings to what some scholars are now terming the “Primary History” (Freedman 1962.1963.1987; Blenkinsopp 1992) that comprises from Genesis through to 2 Kings.

1.1 Gerhard von Rad first published his paper “The Deuteronomic Theology of History in I and II Kings” in his Deuteronomium-Studien, Part B, Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments, (New Series, vol XL, Göttingen 1947) 52-64. For the limited purposes of this short study we shall be using the translation of this article printed in The Problem of the Hexateuch and other essays, (SCM Press; London 1984) 205-221. We should note though that this translation was produced and printed for the first time in 1966 by Oliver and Boyd.

2 The Deuteronomic Historian for von Rad

This 1947 paper by von Rad assumes knowledge by the reader of the 1943 study by Martin Noth on the Deuteronomistic History published in Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien, Schriften der Königsberger Gelehrter Gesellschaft, II (Halle 1943). In the general characterization of this history, von Rad follows Noth quite closely though he differs in the evaluation of some details as, for instance, whether the history of the prophet Ahijah of Shiloh had ever existed as a complete and independent entity (p.121 nota 8; cfr Noth 1943:121); besides, von Rad ignores the crucial structural role said to be played by such texts as King Solomon’s Prayer at the Dedication of the Jerusalem temple (1 Kings 8, 22-53) and the narrator’s theological reflection on the fall of Samaria and the Northern Kingdom in 2 Kings 17, 7-23. These had been seen by Noth as landmarks of the deuteronomistic restructuring of the historiographical material available in his sources. Von Rad ignores the structural stance of these two texts as he ignores that of other texts in the Deuteronomical History as he opts to limit his investigation of the Deuteronomic theology of history to the two books of Kings “on the grounds that for the deuteronomist the reign of Solomon marks a new departure in every
sense, and it is only at this point that he broaches what is really his main theme”(206 nota 2).

2.1 For von Rad the work of the deuteronomic historian “fully deserves without any qualification the rarely-merited designation of ‘historical writing’.” This general positive statement rests upon two aspects of ancient historiographical writings which von Rad sees concretised in the work of the deuteronomic historian: a) the bringing together of “all kinds of ancient historical texts” and their welding “into a single whole, within the framework of an overriding plan”; b) “a rigorous selectivity” that has governed the entire work of the writer who continuously refers the reader to the sources for any material that goes beyond the scheme of his theology of history (p.205). “In both respects the office of the historian in the strictest sense of the word has been faithfully discharged”(ibid). Von Rad is of course aware that the deuteronomic historiographical approach differs sharply from that of modern historians and offends modern methodological sensibilities; for which reason, von Rad indulges in a moderate apologia pro this hypothetical historian.

According to von Rad, at least two must have been the hermeneutic principles that could have guided the deuteronomic historian in his work of composition. The first is the ‘purity of cult’ principle; the second may be called the ‘presence of the word in history’ principle. One should be warned that von Rad himself does not employ this nomenclature and that he discusses these principles in a rather rambling fashion. The second principle is wider than, and inclusive of the first; but again von Rad seems to ignore this relationship between the two principles.

2.1.1 Von Rad states that the purity of cult of Yahweh in Jerusalem had become for Deuteronomy the articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae, and that this has become the discriminatory criterion in the hands of the deuteronomic historian who refuses to build the past by evaluating the pros and the cons of the main characters in this history, and “speaks only of the one deciding factor upon which in the last analysis, as he believes, acquittal or condemnation depends. In so doing the deuteronomic historian decisively attributes to the kings the power to choose freely for or against Yahweh, in contrast to the so-called classical historians of Israel, who rather depict humanity as the passive object of God’s purpose in history”(206-207). By the “so-called classical historians of Israel” here von Rad probably meant the presumed writers identified by source-critics as the Yahwist and the Elohist, especially the former, to whom von Rad attributed a crucial role in the writing of the Hexateuch (cfr von Rad 1938:1-78 especially pp.50-74; but also Rendtorff 1977:24-31.102-
136 for an evaluation of these positions). For the deuteronomistic historian, most of the kings of the kingdom of Israel had to be condemned outrightly because they all “walked in the way of Jeroboam the son of Nebat”, that is, they adopted the same cultic policy Jeroboam had formulated and enacted (1Kgs 12). It is also true that here and there the deuteronomist nuances his strong judgement by adducing moral and ethical defects on the part of the kings other than the adoption of the standard cultic policy (cfr 1Kgs 11,4; 2Kgs 18,5). “The deuteronomist judges the kings by the standard of perfect obedience” (208).

2.1.2 The ‘presence of the word in history’ principle is given wider coverage by von Rad. While the question of obedience as the fundamental notion underlying deuteronomistic history writing he calls “the subjective test”, von Rad immediately mentions an “objective” test which regularly coincides with the subjective one. And this touches upon how God acts in history: “The deuteronomistic view of the matter is evidently that God has revealed his commandments to Israel, and has threatened to deal with disobedience by means of heavy punishments, and even by condemning the nation to extinction. This has now come about. Yahweh’s words had fulfilled themselves in history, and had not failed, as the deuteronomist puts it (cfr Jos 21,45; 23,14; 1Kgs 8,56; 2Kgs 10,10). The word of Yahweh is thus related to historical events by the fact that once he has spoken, his word always and invariably achieves its purpose in history by virtue of its own inherent power” (208). And von Rad cites Deut 23,47 where we read that God’s word was not req, “empty”. This conception of Deuteronomy “can be reconstructed in a much clearer form from the work of the deuteronomist”. And here von Rad means “that system of prophetic prediction and of its exactly observed fulfilment which pervades the whole work of this writer. This may be described as the theological plan of the work, parallel to the structural plan, although by its very nature it is handled with greater freedom and elasticity” (208-209). There follows a list of 11 pairs of texts where the first offers a prediction/ prophecy and the second a fulfilment of the prophecy: 2Sam 7,13 & 1Kings 8,20; 1Kings 11,29-39 & 1Kings 12,15b; 1Kings 13 & 2Kings 23,16-18; 1Kings 14,6-16 & 1Kings 15,29; 1Kings 16,1-4 & 1Kings 16,12; Joshua 6,26 & 1Kings 16,34; 1Kings 22,17 & 1Kings 22,35-38; 1Kings 21,21-28 & 1Kings 21,27-29; 2Kings 1,6 & 2Kings 1,17; 2Kings 21,10-15 & 2Kings 24,2; 2Kings 22,15-20 & 2Kings 23,30.

2.1.3 A few comments i) Von Rad himself makes the reader aware that this survey “can evidently give no more than a broad outline of the theological structure of deuteronomic history in the books of the Kings” (211). ii) The relationship between
the word of God and the events in history wherein it is fulfilled and revealed is much more pervading as a reality than it actually appears: “By and large one can work on the assumption that the deuteronomist makes explicit mention of the fulfilment of a prophecy more particularly in those cases where the fact is not immediately perceptible to the reader, whilst in those instances where the events speak for themselves he was able to dispense with this” (211-212). iii) E. W. Trueman Dicken who was employed by Oliver & Boyd to translate the text into English, felt that he/she had to add the pair of texts 1Sam 2,27-36 & 1Kings 2,27 (texts that speak about the elimination of the house of Eli) to the original list of prophecy/fulfilment texts (209 nota 7). This text was probably left out because of von Rad’s option to limit his analysis to material that starts with the ascent of Solomon to the throne. It becomes clear that such an artificial demarcation is methodologically unjustified. The fact that von Rad’s list itself begins with a text in 2Sam 7 confirms this statement. iv) Perhaps a better point of demarcation would have been at 2 Sam 7 where we find Nathan’s oracle as well as David’s response. In this episode the historiographer recapitulates the history of David and at the same time he outlines in nuce the forthcoming evolvement of the monarchy after the death of David: “Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will build you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son. When he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men; but I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever” (2Sam 7,11-16, RSV). What David says at the end of his prayer to the Lord is also relevant to our line of arguing: “And now, O Lord God, thou art God and thy words are true, and thou hast promised this good thing to thy servant; now therefore may it please thee to bless the house of thy servant, that it may continue for ever before thee; for thou, O Lord God hast spoken, and with thy blessing shall the house of thy servant be blessed for ever” (vv.28-29, RSV). In this oracle and the responding prayer we find what Lawrence A. Turner termed “the Announcement of Plot”, a narrative technique he discovered to be present in the narratives of Genesis. The announcements of plot are “statements which explicitly state what will happen, or which suggest to the reader what the major elements of the plot are likely to be” (Turner 1990:13). It is from here that the overall downward evolvement of the monarchy as it is presented in this history starts, while it is here that we find the interpretative key of the
concluding episode of what to date we call the Deuteronomistic History in 2 Kings 25, 27-30, the relative freedom and promotion enjoyed by the Davidite monarch in Babylon Jehoiachin. But von Rad does not take this approach even though the conclusion of his analysis leads to identical exegesis (cfr pp. 219-220). The announcement of the plot in Nathan’s oracle and David’s own prayer determines the rather different treatments of the monarchy in the north and in the south: for the evolvement of the monarchy in the south was guided not only by the obedience principle but also by the efficacy of the prophetic word to David (213-221). v) “In view of its origin, this deuteronomic theology of history may be said to be that of the early prophets: the oracle is infallibly self-fulfilling, and therefore determines the course of history. It is interesting to notice how the deuteronomist proceeds from the basic assumption that the history of the two kingdoms is nothing more or less than the historical expression of the will and word of Yahweh. This is what makes history intelligible, and one can therefore ‘read back’ this motive into the past. It is apparent, from many different aspects of his presentation of the history of the two kingdoms, that for the deuteronomist the events of past history are the criteria by which theological truth may be known” (213).

3 Beyond von Rad’s contribution

3.1 We may ask whether we can use von Rad’s insights into the theological structuring of the material of 1-2 Kings to understand the compositional work that went in forming the rest of the Deuteronomistic History where the prophecy-fulfilment structure has not been employed so visibly, as well as the historiographycal material canonically adjacent to the Deuteronomistic History and which tradition called the Torah or more commonly the Pentateuch? And can we employ these insights to understand the textual extension we are calling the Primary History?

3.2 Gerhard von Rad’s approach to the study of 1-2 Kings is of course genetical in nature (Clines 1997: 11-12). And for him, the theological structure he discovered belonged to one of the layers of the text, that of the deuteronomic historian. But von Rad was also conscious that this Tendenz belonged not so much to a particular layer of redaction as much as to the source material itself. “One must bear in mind that from a literary point of view the deuteronomist is working almost exclusively with traditional material, which does not always readily accommodate itself to his basic theological attitude. It contains abundant difficulties of its own, and is on that account even less adaptable to the purposes of the deuteronomic ground plan. We tend habitually to overestimate the degree of literary licence exercised by ancient
writers with respect to traditional material”(212). Especially so since the explicit use of the prophecy-fulfilment structure is only one indicator of the theological interpretation of history that was being offered(cfr 2.1.3 v above). Besides, there is today the tendency to consider as based on circular argumentation the procedure that attributes to a particular layer of redaction literary elements(words, phrases, or sentences) that are perfectly integrated within the literary fabric of a context that is supposed to belong to a different layer(cfr Whybray1987). And the hypothetical character of the pre-final stages in the formation process that went into the making of both the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomistic History (we are still debating whether there was one or more than one redaction behind this latter historiographical complex, cfr Nelson1981), is leading some to the methodological option of starting with the final form of the text rather than with reconstructed previous layers whether they be sources or redactions(cfr Clines1997: 88; the genetic approach is still advocated by Rendtorff1977, though he demolishes the source criticism of the classical documentary hypothesis, and by Campbell/ O’Brien 1993). And scholars take this option because they are convinced that redactional layers however wide they may be detected within the text, they never solve the problem of the final text (cfr Rendtorff 1977:196). This means that it is methodologically safer to attribute the theological structure as well as the ideological interpretation of history unearthed by von Rad, and which scholarship has so far assigned to the deuteronomist, to the final form of the text.

3.3 If this interpretation of history which has guided the writer is one of the ingredients used by the author while he was shaping the text in its final form, one may easily deduce that this theology of history belongs not to 1-2 Kings alone but to the Deuteronomic History as a whole. In this historiographical complex we read of “a course of events shaped by the word of Yahweh, continually intervening to direct and to deliver and so steadily pressing these events towards their fulfilment in history” (von Rad1947:221). But can we extend this description to the contents of the Primary History? The writer of this paper is proposing that a positive answer may be given to this question. However a number of factors need to be taken into account:

3.3.1 The “presence of the word in history” principle The material of the Primary History is not a disorganised jumble but a well-organised narration of the events that the historian thought worthwhile to narrate. With regards to the Deuteronomic History as a cohesive historiographical work we have already quoted von Rad’s judgement (cfr 2.1 above). Concerning the Pentateuch we shall cite the opinion of
Clines who claims that the Pentateuch contains throughout "a progression, both temporal and local," "a progression that does not simply signify that in the course of the narrative one thing happens after another, or that people move from one place to another; it is a progression that is prepared and anticipated and that is purposive and not directionless"(1997:28). This "movement" within the Pentateuch receives its impetus from the Lord's word to the patriarchs that takes the form of a promise "with its various elements, and in its various formulations"(ibid., 29). Naturally, Clines examines this element from the literary rather than from the historical point of view. In the manner of Turner who had him as the director of his Ph.D Dissertation, Clines understands 'promise' to refer mainly to Genesis 12,1-3 and "the repetitions and amplifications it receives throughout Genesis"(ibid). For Clines the "theme of the Pentateuch is the partial fulfilment—which implies also the partial non-fulfilment—of the promise to or blessing of the patriarchs. The promise or blessing is both the divine initiative in a world where human initiatives always lead to disaster, and are an affirmation of the primal divine intervention for humanity"(ibid.,30). In chapter five of his monograph (pp.31-47), Clines lists formulations and allusions to the promise: "For the text itself articulates the promise in varying and repeated formulations, and often makes quite explicit attachments between the narrative material and the divine promise that has brought the narrated event into being. Nevertheless, a great deal of the Pentateuchal material is related only implicitly to the promise in its various forms" (ibid.,30). In chapter six then Clines investigates how close this implicit relationship is. The point to be made in this sub-paragraph is that the entire Primary History is built around the "presence of the word in history" principle.

3.3.2 The "Moses as the first prophet"principle The author of the Primary History organises his material around a number of "reliable characters" (Kissling1995) among whom we find Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, Elijah and Elisha. We shall not discuss the art with which this author weaves these characters(cfr Alter1981; Sternberg1987; Bar-Efrat 1989) and through which he expounds upon his theses. Our interest at this stage is to state that Moses is the central figure in the entire Primary History. Moses as character is developed in Exodus-Deuteroonomy. Around him the author/narrator collects all the material related to the experience of the exodus and the desert which he is considering, together with some prophets (Jeremiah for instance), as the foundational experience; for this reason this author inserts within the narration of this period all that is regarded essential to the social identity: all legislation and all the important institutions as the priesthood, the temple, prophecy. Like other characters in this history, Moses
delivers an important interpretative speech (Deuteronomy) in which he recapitulates past events and prospects the lines of development that history of his people has to take if it is be canonically sound. One should notice that Moses is presented by the narrator as the first and the most important prophet (Num20,18-20;Dt34). He is the prophet (Dt 18). It seems that the writer is here reflecting a ‘prophet like Moses’ tradition which “assumes that prophecy originated with, and is embodied paradigmatically in Moses, and that it functions throughout the history in the service of the covenant” (Blenkinsopp 1983:59; cfr also pp.61-64; and Neher 1972.1983). The origins of prophecy as a historical institution is shrouded in mystery (Porter1982), and the judgement of our historiographer may have been inaccurate if not totally wrong; but what interests us in this context is the view of the writer of the Primary History that prophecy started with Moses. This explains how the typical prophetic literary genre, the oracle (March 1974), is to be found only in episodes narrating events of the mosaic (cfr for instance Num 16.20) and the post-mosaic periods. The word of God in history therefore could not assume for our historiographer this form before Moses, the prophet, appeared; and this explains why the word during the patriarchal period had to be a promise in one of its many forms. But this word of God in history played the same role of giving impetus to the train of events as they evolved.

3.3.3 A hypothesis about the expression ‘the Law and the Prophets’ The present writer is proposing that the polar expression “the Law and the Prophets” which in the extant sources often refers to the totality of the canonical literature among the Jewish community of the intertestamental and the rabbinic periods (together with other nomenclature, Beckwith 1985:105-109), originally referred to this historiography we are calling the Primary History. During the intertestamental period and in the periods that followed it, as the canonization principle (Dt 4,1-2) was extended to a wider collection of writings, the term ‘prophets’ in this expression started to include reference to what by time were identified as ‘the latter prophets’ (cfr Ben Sirach, prologue and chapters 46-48). But the original meaning of ‘prophets’ within the phrase ‘the law and the prophets’ was that of ‘the former prophets’ in Zach 1,4-6: “Do not be like your ancestors, to whom the former prophets proclaimed, ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts, Return from your evil deeds’. But they did not hear or heed me, says the Lord. Your ancestors, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever? But my words and my statutes, which I commanded my servants the prophets, did they not overtake your ancestors? So they repented and said, ‘The Lord of hosts has dealt with us according to our ways and deeds, just as he planned to do”(NRSV). Of course one may read the phrase ‘the former
prophets' (hannô'bî'îm harî'shônîm) as a reference to the pre-exilic preaching prophets (Stuhlmueller 1968:392); but if one compares this introduction to Zach 1-8 to what so far has been known as the Deuteronomic History, one cannot fail to notice intertextual connections with, say, 2 Kings 17 [Meyers/Meyers (1987:94) note the Deuteronomic flavour of Zechariah’s text, but refer to Jeremiah rather than to the Deuteronomic History]. This means also that the phrase ‘the former prophets’ in Zach 1, 4 is at least polivalent, referring at one blow to both the prophets who acted as preachers during the pre-exilic period, and to the second half of a historiography where prophets predominate as characters (Barr 1983:54). By time, the word ‘prophets’ must have assumed the nuance of ‘inspired writers’ and it is in this meaning that it appears in b. Baba Batra 14b-15a (cfr Blenkinsopp 1983:22). Rabbinic literature then, probably under the inspiration of Zach 1,4, distinguished ‘the former’ from ‘the latter’ prophets (Eissfeldt 1974:566) just as patristic writers took the cue from 2 Cor 3,14 to distinguish between the writings of the ‘New Testament’ from those of the ‘Old Testament’ (Höpf 1928:1026).

3.3.4 The ‘continuity factor’ between the Pentateuch and Joshua-2Kings Most hypotheses about the genesis and growth of the Pentateuch or the ‘historical books’ (Joshua-2Kings) betray awareness in the proponents that some kind of continuity exists between the first five ‘books of Moses’ and the contiguous four ‘books of the prophets.’ Such awareness may have been seen a) in the version of the Documentary Hypothesis that contemplates the possibility that the Pentateucal sources continue into Joshua and the other historical books (Schrader 1869; Meyer 1881; cfr Eissfeldt 1974: 244); b) in the hypothesis of the Hexateuch which reads Joshua as part and parcel of the Pentateuch (von Rad 1938); c) in the hypothesis of the Deuteronomistic History which would read Deuteronomy as the introduction to this history (Noth 1943); and in the deuteronomistic recension of the Pentateuch (Rendtorff 1977; Blum 1984). The hypothesis of the Primary History reads the Pentateuch and the ‘former prophets’ as essentially interrelated, as constituents of the same historical and cultural project addressed to the Jewish exilic community in Babylon somewhere in the second half of the sixth century as the turn of international events opened for the community the prospects of returning to their land ‘beyond the Euphraties.’ In view of this possibility of returning to their homeland, the author of this historiography composed this history in order to help his contemporaries reflect upon their cultural identity (cfr also what Clines 1997:103-126 has to say about the ‘function’ of the Pentateuch). Like any other traditional history (Huizinga 1963), this ‘Primary History’ offers a reflection on the addressees’ current situation in the light of their past.
After an introduction in which stories of the original founders are narrated (Genesis), and the word of God as a dynamic principle in history is introduced in the form of promise, the author passes on to tell the tale of the foundation period (Numbers-Deuteronomy) in which the word is not simply a promise but ordinances, commands, precepts and rituals which define the relationship between the people and the divinity. Sometimes these ordinances, commands, and precepts are immediately carried out according to the command-execution scheme. It is this word which shapes the life as well the history of the people. The author concentrates all the legislation and the founding of most institutions on to the foundation period. With the death of Moses, Joshua succeeds him as leader of the people (Jos1-2) and as the man in charge of executing the project concerning the occupation and distribution of the land. Joshua confesses "that not one thing has failed of all the good things which the Lord your God promised concerning you; all have come to pass for you, not one of them has failed" (Jos 23,14). This dynamism of the word of God which realised the past guarantees the future even though this is conditional: "But just as all the good things which your God promised concerning you have been fulfilled for you, so the Lord will bring upon you all the evil things, until he have destroyed you from off this good land which the Lord your God has given you, if you transgress the covenant of the Lord your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them. Then the anger of the Lord will be kindled against you, and you will perish quickly from off the good land which he has given you" (Jos 23,15-16). Again here we have an announcement in outline of the developments to be expected in the historiography. If in the Mosaic section of the historiography (Exodus-Deuteronomy), our author presents the cultural programme which is the identity of the Jews as he and tradition saw them, in the remaining half of his historiography he narrates how the project was enacted or rather not enacted in history. This non-enactment offered the justification for the negative judgement upon this history in this historiography, a judgement of which von Rad writes about and which he attributes to the Deuteronomic History. This compositional option in the Primary History favoured then the division of this unitary work into two 'separate' entities, the Law and the Prophets, which however cannot be read one without the other.

Department of Holy Scripture
University of Malta
Msida, Malta
Bibliography

BARR James *Holy Scripture Canon Authority Criticism*, (Clarendon Press; Oxford 1983).
BLUM E. *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte*, (WMANT 57; Neukirchen-Vluyn 1984).
CAMPBELL Antony F./O'BRIEN Mark A. *Sources of the Pentateuch. Texts, Introductions, Annotations*, (Fortress Press; Minneapolis 1993).
CHILDs Brevard S. *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, (SCM Press; London 1979) 69-79.
KISSLING J. Paul *Reliable Characters in the Primary History*, (JSOT Supplementary Series, 234; Sheffield 1996).


STOEBE Hans Joachim, Das Zweite Buch Samuelis mit einer Zeittafel von Alfred Jepsen, (Kommentar zum Atten Testament, Band VIII 2), (Gütersloher Verlagshaus; Gütersloh 1994).


TURNER Lawrence A. Announcements of Plot in Genesis, (JSOT Press; Sheffield 1990).