

## **Deuteronomists**

One problem we deal with in our study of the Old Testament is the problem of the Deuteronomists. Webster defines Deuteronomist as follows: “Any of the writers or editors of a Deuteronomic body of source material often distinguished in the earlier books of the Old Testament.”

If that definition leaves you knowing no more than you did before you read it, you are not alone. First, note that the word comes from the book of Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Pentateuch in the Old Testament. The word Deuteronomy actually means “Repetition of the Law.”

The book of Deuteronomy primarily comprises three discourses supposedly given by Moses. The second discourse is in chapters 5 through 26. Chapters 5 through 11 contain the Ten Commandments and a practical explanation of them. Chapters 12 through 26 contain what is referred to as the Deuteronomic Code—a code of laws forming the basis of the entire book. It represents the law as interpreted by the 7th-Century-B.C.E. historians, the Deuteronomists. When the temple was being renovated for reopening under the direction of King Josiah of Judah, about 621 B.C.E., a book of the law was discovered by the workers that became the basis of a great reawakening. It is believed that the book found was likely the book of Deuteronomy and that the Deuteronomic Code now in that book was either revised extensively or actually written by the historians of the time (those whom we call Deuteronomists) to suit their own interpretation of the law.

It is also believed by many that these Deuteronomists revised other parts of what is now our Old Testament. (The popular theory is that what exists today in the books of Joshua through 2 Kings is mostly the result of Deuteronomic revisions.)

When you look carefully at the situation, it seems curious that the Old Testament contains no writings of some of the greatest prophets—such as Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha. Many believe that the writings *of* these prophets were revised to give us writings *about* them.

In the Old Testament writings, both Elohim and Jehovah were clearly and distinctly identified. But it is believed that the Deuteronomists obscured the distinction between them to satisfy their own beliefs. These revisions have an effect on my Old Testament stories. As I wrote the stories, I changed the Old Testament term “the LORD” (with "Lord" in small caps), as used by the King James translators, to “Jehovah” in an attempt to clarify. Some of my changes, however, may in fact be—and most likely are—incorrect. Some of them should probably have been changed to Elohim, but because of the work of Deuteronomists, it is virtually impossible to tell.

The scholarly study of the work of the Deuteronomists is intricate and complicated. It is not something that most people who read the Old Testament for spiritual uplift want to get involved with. Most of us are happy to have the Old Testament as it is—with perhaps a little help in the comprehension area—without becoming overly concerned about what the Deuteronomists changed and how they changed it. For those interested in pursuing such a study, I recommend a book by Thomas Römer entitled *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History: A Sociological, Historical and Literary Introduction* (London: T&T Clark), 2007 [ISBN 9780567032126].