Lecture 14: 2 Kings
History-telling in the Bible

Last session we surveyed the way Kings accounts for the rise of the rulers who succeeded David. In particular, we saw the LORD’s guarantee to David of an heir on his throne in perpetuity. However, we also noted how that promise was redefined in the light of Solomon’s turning to “other gods,” under the influence of his foreign wives. Instead of Solomon’s heirs continuing to rule over all Israel, they would maintain control of but a fraction of it: the tribe of Judah. The promise of the retention of that fragment of the former kingdom was made out of deference to David, who had followed the LORD with all his heart. And David’s coattails even extended to the periods when Judah was ruled by kings said to have “done evil in the sight of the LORD.” In spite of the wicked deeds of such kings, the LORD did not destroy Judah for the sake of David, since the LORD had promised “a lamp to him and to his descendants forever.”

At the same time, we noticed that while most rulers of the Davidic dynasty are commended for “doing what was right in the sight of the LORD,” some of those found to have “done what was wrong” are described as anomalous, more like northern rulers than southern ones. Moreover, all the northern kings, without exception, receive a negative evaluation, and each of them is charged with having “walked in the way of Jeroboam and in the sin that he caused Israel to commit.” In this becomes apparent the anti-northern bias of the Deuteronomistic History, as is evident also in the blame it lays on the north for the dissolution of the kingdom of David and Solomon: “So Israel has been in rebellion against the house of David to this day.” – That anti-northern bias helps clarify why every northern king is disapproved while the majority of those in the south receive commendation.

However, even the majority of the southern kings credited with “doing what is right in the sight of the LORD” have an “except clause” appended to their commendation: the high places remained standing. For the Deuteronomistic History, the “high places” are significant because they are a detraction from the temple in Jerusalem. While in Deuteronomy all such "extracurricular" sites are to be destroyed for their role in purveying illicit religion, the Deuteronomistic History condemns them more so because the temple in Jerusalem is the only legitimate worship site. Thus, for example, 1 Kings 3 excuses the people for trafficking them prior to the building of the temple. In the Deuteronomistic historian’s view, once the temple was built, the high places should have been closed down.

Only two kings escape this detraction from an otherwise laudable reign. Hezekiah and Josiah, who rule around a century apart, are both credited with having shut down the high places. But also, quite oddly, each is described as being the best king ever, without peer among those kings that preceded him and, equally,
without peer among those who succeeded him. As I pointed out, that is problematic, since the claim that Hezekiah had no peer after him rules out Josiah, while the assertion that Josiah had no peer among those before him overrides the statement about Hezekiah. How do we explain this? And how do we explain the promise to David that “there would be a lamp to him and to his descendants forever,” when the Deuteronomistic History ends with the story of Jerusalem’s destruction and a report about how Jehoiachin, the last legitimate Davidic king, was faring in exile? And what role do prophets play in this unfolding story of the monarchy and Israel’s life?

As for the issue of two “best kings ever,” these conflicting statements are key indications that the Deuteronomistic History was written in stages.

As you know, Martin Noth – who (around the middle of the 20th century) first made the case that Deuteronomy through 2 Kings composed what he called “the Deuteronomistic History” – contended that this history was written by a single author after the sack of Jerusalem in 586, to explain why first the northern kingdom and then Judah fell to foreign armies.

However, as Friedman tells you, in the late 60’s, Harvard’s Frank Moore Cross began pointing out features that betray more than one author at work. In particular, he highlighted evidence that an edition of the history had been produced during the reign of Josiah (the “Josianic edition”) that saw the zenith of Israel’s story in the reign of King Josiah. Above all, only Josiah is said to have read and followed “the book of the Law of Moses.” This is an issue we looked at in working on Deuteronomy, so I won’t say a lot about it, except to point out the explicit connection drawn by 2 Kings 23 between Josiah’s acts and the book of the Law: “Josiah put away the mediums, wizards, teraphim, idols, and all the abominations that were seen in the land of Judah and in Jerusalem, so that he established the words of the law that were written in the book that the priest Hilkiah had found in the house of the LORD.” – The removal of these items, outlawed by Deuteronomy, are said to be a matter of Josiah “establishing the words of the book of the Law,” a theme that runs throughout the description of Josiah’s reign.

Second, Josiah is uniquely described in Deuteronomic language – phraseology drawn from the book of Deuteronomy. E.g., recall the praise he receives at the start of 2 Kings 22: “He did what was right in the sight of the LORD, and walked in all the way of his father David; he did not turn aside to the right or to the left.” The idiom, “he did not turn aside to the right or to the left” is found elsewhere only in the book of Deuteronomy and the early chapters of Joshua. The application of this description to Josiah alone is one piece of the evidence that his description has been composed by an author distinct from those who wrote the evaluations of other kings who received commendation (including Hezekiah), an author who looked to Deuteronomy for guidance.
Equally significant is the language used to commend Josiah in chapter 23:

“25 Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the LORD 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.” – Not only is the description of him adhering to “the law of Moses” found only in this commendation, but the phraseology “with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might” appears elsewhere in the Bible only in Deuteronomy 6.5, which commands loving the LORD your God “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” Again, Josiah has been uniquely described with vocabulary drawn from Deuteronomy.

Also significant is the lengthy treatment of Josiah’s reign in 2 Kings. He not only receives accolades the majority of kings do not, but also has more space devoted to his actions than most of the other Judean kings. This by itself indicates the importance of his rule for the author.

Even more striking, there is a curious foretelling of Josiah and his deeds – unparalleled in the case of any other king – betraying the hand of the author of this edition of the Deuteronomistic History. As we have seen, 1 Kings 12 reports the shrewd political decision by the north's first ruler, Jeroboam, to establish shrines at Bethel and Dan so that his people wouldn’t keep heading south to Jerusalem. And so he sets up images of calves at those two sites, and he (on this occasion) officiates at the altar of the shrine at Bethel. Chapter 13 subjoins to that report this incident: “1 While Jeroboam was standing by the altar to offer incense, a man of God came out of Judah by the word of the LORD to Bethel 2 and proclaimed against the altar by the word of the LORD, and said, “O altar, altar, thus says the LORD: ‘A son shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name; and he shall sacrifice on you the priests of the high places who offer incense on you, and human bones shall be burned on you.’” 3 He gave a sign the same day, saying, “This is the sign that the LORD has spoken: ‘The altar shall be torn down, and the ashes that are on it shall be poured out.’” 4 When the king heard what the man of God cried out against the altar at Bethel, Jeroboam stretched out his hand from the altar, saying, “Seize him!” But the hand that he stretched out against him withered so that he could not draw it back to himself. 5 The altar also was torn down, and the ashes poured out from the altar, according to the sign that the man of God had given by the word of the LORD.”

The note that “the altar also was torn down, and the ashes poured out from the altar” presages the fulfillment of the word of this prophet, spelled out in four verses of 2 Kings 23 that detail Josiah’s actions and link it to this prediction:

“15 Moreover, the altar at Bethel, the high place erected by Jeroboam son of Nebat, who caused Israel to sin – he pulled down that altar along with the high place. He burned the high place, crushing it to dust; he also burned the sacred pole. 16 As Josiah turned, he saw the tombs there on the mount; and he sent and took the bones
out of the tombs, and burned them on the altar, and defiled it, according to the word of the LORD that the man of God proclaimed, when Jeroboam stood by the altar at the festival; he turned and looked up at the tomb of the man of God who had predicted these things. 17 Then he said, ‘What is that monument that I see?’ The people of the city told him, ‘It is the tomb of the man of God who came from Judah and predicted these things that you have done against the altar at Bethel.’ 18 He said, ‘Let him rest; let no one move his bones.’"

Given the prominent role for prophets in the Deuteronomic History, it shouldn’t come as a surprise that the work highlights the fulfillment of predictions uttered by the prophets. Recall, in fact, that 1 Samuel 3 declares Samuel a “trustworthy prophet” inasmuch as “the LORD let none of his words fall to the ground.” Recurrently we find that theme of fulfillment rising to the surface in the Deuteronomic History, even as in this case we find the prediction of a king named Josiah and then the report of that oracle’s fulfillment.

Parallel to this fulfillment of the words of a prophet who appeared in Jeroboam’s day is the promise we’ve read the prophet Ahijah announce to Jeroboam in flight from Jerusalem after deceiving Solomon: “29 About that time, when Jeroboam was leaving Jerusalem, the prophet Ahijah the Shilonite found him on the road. Ahijah had clothed himself with a new garment. The two of them were alone in the open country 30 when Ahijah laid hold of the new garment he was wearing and tore it into twelve pieces. 31 He then said to Jeroboam: Take for yourself ten pieces; for thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, “See, I am about to tear the kingdom from the hand of Solomon, and will give you ten tribes. 32 One tribe will remain his, for the sake of my servant David and for the sake of Jerusalem, the city that I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel.”

The fulfillment of this promise is specially noted in 1 Kings 12, where Rehoboam’s failure to satisfy the northerners’ demand for tax relief is explained not as mere folly, but as fulfillment of prophecy: “15 So the king did not listen to the people, because it was a turn of affairs brought about by the LORD that he might fulfill his word, which the LORD had spoken by Ahijah the Shilonite to Jeroboam.” – According to the narrator, Rehoboam’s unwillingness to listen to the northerners’ demands was due to the LORD’s decree through the prophet that the kingdom would be torn from Solomon’s son as punishment for Solomon’s sins.

No less than eleven times the Deuteronomic history utilizes this pattern of a prediction and fulfillment, with the fulfillment typically marked by an explicit reference back to the “word of the LORD” spoken through such-and-such a prophet. And this is, again, in keeping with the prominent role that prophets and their words play throughout.

And yet, the especially striking feature of the forecast of the demolition of Jeroboam’s altar in 1 Kings 12 and its fulfillment in 2 Kings 23 is the specification
of a particular king, “Josiah by name,” as the one who would obliterate the altar. Given the ways we have seen the authors of this work manipulate and utilize prophets as the central figures in dealing with kings (not least of which is the enlargement of Samuel's role as a prophet), it is hardly a stretch to see in this another tailoring of a prophet to set a trajectory in the narrative. The trajectory set up here is the age of Josiah as the climax for one of the major problems for this history: the apostasy of the northern kingdom. The problem begun by Jeroboam will ultimately be dealt with by Josiah, even though that would occur over a century after the northern state had been dismantled by Assyria. I.e., the embedding in 1 Kings 13 of the forecast of Josiah's role in this matter is a literary artifice of the author of the Josianic edition.

These features in 1 & 2 Kings, then, are strong evidence that an edition of this work was produced in the days of Josiah, touting him as the high point of Israel’s history: he was the one who fully obeyed what was demanded by “the book of the Law” and the one who once-and-for-all dealt with the northern problem created by Jeroboam, son of Nebat, with his establishment of shrines at Bethel and Dan.

But that, obviously, was not the last edition of the Deuteronomistic History. As Friedman reports, there is equally strong evidence that this history, as we have it, was completed only during the exile, with an edition that finished telling the story through the fall of Jerusalem and into the early period of the exile.

The evidence that Cross, Friedman, Nelson, and others have uncovered for a different author composing the remainder of chapter 23 through the end of chapter 25 includes the observation that no evaluation of any king after Josiah takes note of the high places, even though we know from both Jeremiah and Ezekiel (as well as archaeology) that the high places were rebuilt. As we have seen, the status of the high places has figured in the evaluation of every Judean king since the temple was built by Solomon. To find the narrator silent about that issue for each of the four last kings is a curious anomaly that makes it difficult to assume that he was the same narrator as in the preceding chapters.

Moreover, looking at the assessments of each of the four last kings, their stereotypical form is striking: each is compared to his forefathers, whether his own father or his predecessors generally, noting that he did what his ancestors or father had done. If, on the other hand, we compare the assessments of earlier kings, we find a more wide-ranging set of comparisons, more creativity in the formulation.

Several, of course, are compared to David, whether they are found wanting in that comparison or meet his standard. As we have also noted, a number of the Judean kings who incur disapproval are spoken of as following in the footsteps of their northern counterparts. In the case of Ahaz, we find both comparisons: “[Ahaz] did not do what was right in the sight of the LORD his God, as his ancestor David had done, 3 but he walked in the way of the kings of Israel.”
On the other hand, the deeds of the next king to do evil after Ahaz, Hezekiah’s son, Manasseh, are compared, not to the deeds of the kings of Israel, but simply to “the abominable practices of the nations that the LORD drove out before the people of Israel.”

The first southern king to be ranked simply by comparison to his father (other than Solomon to David) is Manasseh’s son Amon, whose assessment reads as follows: “[Amon] did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, as his father Manasseh had done.” – Notice how the meaning of that summary is teased out in the next two verses: 21 He walked in all the way in which his father walked, served the idols that his father served, and worshiped them; 22 he abandoned the LORD, the God of his ancestors, and did not walk in the way of the LORD.”

By contrast, the comparison of each of the final four kings to their predecessors is generic and unimaginative: each did what his father or ancestors had done. These are perfunctory executions of a feature that has been a vital part of the story up to this point. And that also points to a new author for these chapters.

But these closing chapters are not the only place a new author’s hand is evident. This author seems not to have been content with merely playing out the rest of the story, but also took a hand in refashioning the story so as to make sense of the new and tragic ending. E.g., 1 Kings 9 reports an appearance by the LORD to Solomon, just after the temple had been dedicated: 1 When Solomon had finished building the house of the LORD and the king’s house and all that Solomon desired to build, 2 the LORD appeared to Solomon a second time, as he had appeared to him at Gibeon [when Solomon received the gift of wisdom during a dream]. 3 The LORD said to him, “I have heard your prayer and your plea, which you made before me; I have consecrated this house that you have built, and put my name there forever; my eyes and my heart will be there for all time. 4 As for you, if you will walk before me, as David your father walked, with integrity of heart and uprightness, doing according to all that I have commanded you, and keeping my statutes and my ordinances, 5 then I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever, as I promised your father David, saying, ‘There shall not fail you a successor on the throne of Israel.’”

The promise that “there shall not fail you successor on the throne of Israel” does not align precisely with the initial promise to David in 2 Samuel 7: 13 I will establish the throne of his [Solomon’s] kingdom forever.” – Subsequently the LORD tells David: “Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.” The transformation of this in 1 Kings 9 into a promise of an heir on the “throne of Israel” is deliberate. For “the throne of Israel” is characteristically used throughout 1 & 2 Kings to refer to all of Israel’s tribes under the rule of a single king, as in the days of David and Solomon. These verses make the promise to David apply to rule over the entire kingdom and
(at the same time) make that promise contingent on Solomon’s fidelity, demanding that he behave like David. This expansion, by the Deuteronomistic historian, prepares us for the division of the kingdom after Solomon is judged to have fallen far short of the standard set by his father, David.

So far, however, we have seen nothing that could not have been composed by the author who wrote in Josiah’s day or even earlier. The problem comes in the next set of verses, where the writer abruptly and strangely switches from the second person singular pronoun, appropriate for addressing Solomon, to the second person plural pronoun, addressing a group: “If you (pl) turn aside from following me, you (pl.) or your children, and do not keep my commandments and my statutes that I have set before you (pl.), but go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut Israel off from the land that I have given them; and the house that I have consecrated for my name I will cast out of my sight; and Israel will become a proverb and a taunt among all peoples. This house will become a heap of ruins; everyone passing by it will be astonished, and will hiss; and they will say, ‘Why has the LORD done such a thing to this land and to this house?’ Then they will say, ‘Because they have forsaken the LORD their God, who brought their ancestors out of the land of Egypt, and embraced other gods, worshiping them and serving them; therefore the LORD has brought this disaster upon them.’”

Recall that this speech is part of the LORD’s private appearance to Solomon ("as he had appeared to him at Gibeon") the prayer he offered at the dedication of the temple. Not only is the sudden shift to an address of a group inexplicable in this private address to Solomon, but there are also abrupt changes in theme and ideas. For one thing, the address to Solomon was a promise of what he would gain if he followed the example of his father, David: his kingdom would be established over Israel. The address to the group emphasizes what they will lose if they fail to obey the LORD’s commands. While one can reason from the promise given Solomon to what he will lose if he fails to fulfill the requirements, the abrupt transition to the notification of a group about what they stand to lose after the statement to Solomon alone about the reward he can expect for obedience is peculiar.

Moreover, there is a striking, if not immediately noticeable conflict between statements made about the temple in these two sets of verses. In the first set, the LORD affirms Solomon’s request to consecrate the temple, promising, “I have put my name there forever; my eyes and my heart will be there for all time.” The adverbs, “forever” and “for all time” suggest that the LORD’s establishment of the temple as the dwelling for his name is a permanent arrangement. Especially noteworthy is the promise to set his “eyes and heart there for all time,” implying his constant protection of the temple.

Thus it is striking, when we turn to vv. 6-9, to find the LORD threaten that, if the
people turn to serve other gods, “the house that I have consecrated for my name I will cast out of my sight.” This threat effectively removes the “forever” from the earlier statement, insofar as the LORD can imagine a situation in which his eyes would not be there for all time. In fact, in spite of his promise to set his name on this house forever, he can imagine a time when “This house will become a heap of ruins.” – These abrupt changes in who is addressed and in what is promised or threatened mark vv. 6-9 as having been supplied by an exilic redactor/editor to account for the fall of Jerusalem.

Another telling passage stands in 2 Kings 21, which begins by asserting that Manasseh did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and then provides details about Manasseh’s crimes: “3 He rebuilt the high places that his father Hezekiah had destroyed; he erected altars for Baal, made a sacred pole, as King Ahab of Israel had done, worshiped all the host of heaven, and served them. 4 He built altars in the house of the LORD, of which the LORD had said, “In Jerusalem I will put my name.” 5 He built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the LORD. 6 He made his son pass through fire; he practiced soothsaying and augury, and dealt with mediums and with wizards. He did much evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger. 7 The carved image of Asherah that he had made he set in the house about which the LORD said to David and to his son Solomon, “In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name forever.”

So far, so good. But then the passage takes an unexpected turn by extending the LORD’s statement, which has been cited to affirm the sanctity of the temple in which Manasseh had set (horror of horrors!) a carved image of Asherah. Here’s how this divine speech continues: “8 I will not cause the feet of Israel to wander any more out of the land that I gave to their ancestors, if only they will be careful to do according to all that I have commanded them, and according to all the law that my servant Moses commanded them.” – The problem is the way this abruptly shifts the purpose of the divine address. The LORD’s words defining the “house” in which Manasseh placed the image of Asherah, inexplicably turn to a different subject: a guarantee not to expatriate the people if they follow his commandments through Moses. In the end, then, v. 8 has nothing to do with the reason the divine speech stood in the list of Manasseh’s crimes to begin with, and thus raises suspicions that it was inserted into the list of his crimes by a later writer.

Confirmation of those suspicions comes in vv. 9-15, which continue this new train of thought by narrating the people’s response to the LORD’s offer: “9 But they did not listen; Manasseh misled them to do more evil than the nations had done that the LORD destroyed before the people of Israel. 10 The LORD said by his servants the prophets, 11 “Because King Manasseh of Judah has committed these abominations, has done things more wicked than all that the Amorites did, who
were before him, and has caused Judah also to sin with his idols; therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, I am bringing upon Jerusalem and Judah such evil that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. I will stretch over Jerusalem the measuring line for Samaria, and the plummet for the house of Ahab; I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down. I will cast off the remnant of my heritage, and give them into the hand of their enemies; they shall become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies, because they have done what is evil in my sight and have provoked me to anger, since the day their ancestors came out of Egypt, even to this day.”

Thus, what began as a quotation of a divine speech to emphasize the heinous crime Manasseh committed by introducing the image of Asherah into the temple turns into what amounts to a warning again against going astray, together with a report that the people refused to listen to that warning, as well as to the subsequent warnings of imminent peril delivered by the LORD’s servants, the prophets. The list of Manasseh’s crimes is resumed only in v. 16: “Moreover Manasseh shed very much innocent blood, until he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another, besides the sin that he caused Judah to sin so that they did what was evil in the sight of the LORD.”

To put it another way, it is quite likely that the list of Manasseh’s crimes played out somewhat as follows, picking up with v. 6: “He made his son pass through fire; he practiced sooth-saying and augury, and dealt with mediums and with wizards. He did much evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger. The carved image of Asherah that he had made he set in the house about which the LORD said to David and to his son Solomon, ‘In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name forever.’ Moreover Manasseh shed very much innocent blood, until he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another, besides the sin that he caused Judah to sin so that they did what was evil in the sight of the LORD.”

The exilic editor tags onto the quotation of the LORD’s words, which (by the way) you’ll notice includes language of the LORD “placing his name there forever.” It is at this opportune juncture that the exilic author expands the divine speech, followed by a narrative of what the people did and the warning of impending disaster the LORD sent through “his servants the prophets.”

Notice that in this explanation of the causes of the fall of Judah, both Manasseh and the people are indicted. Manasseh “misled them to do more evil than the nations had done that the LORD destroyed before the people of Israel,” but it was the people who did not listen to the LORD’s exhortations to obey the law of Moses. And yet, it is noteworthy that ultimately the LORD resolves to bring destruction on Judah and Jerusalem “because King Manasseh committed these abominations” and “caused Judah also to sin with his idols.” Manasseh becomes the southern equiva-
lent to Jeroboam, son of Nebat, who set the north on the path to certain destruction.

This observation, in turn, leads us to another set of sentences added by the exilic author. Following chapter 23’s praise of Josiah as the greatest king ever, we find these words: “26 Still the LORD did not turn from the fierceness of his great wrath, by which his anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked him. 27 The LORD said, “I will remove Judah also out of my sight, as I have removed Israel; and I will reject this city that I have chosen, Jerusalem, and the house of which I said, My name shall be there.”

Here again, blame for the fall of Judah and Jerusalem is laid at Manasseh’s doorstep. The exilic editor explains why all the good deeds of Josiah were for naught: Manasseh’s deeds were so wicked that they set the LORD’s resolve to destroy his nation. This, of course, overrides a theme that appears repeatedly in the Deuteronomistic history: that David’s stalwart loyalty to the LORD secured the promise that he would always have a “lamp” in Jerusalem, a promise that counteracted the effects of any one king’s wicked deeds. In the case of Manasseh the scales tipped too far the other way to be overcome by David’s uprightness. Without explicitly saying so, the exilic author has negated the promise to David by means of his emphasis on the wickedness of Manasseh.

Equally explicable, from this perspective, is the modification we’ve noted in the story of the establishment of the monarchy in 1 Samuel, whose originally more positive tone about the promise of the monarchy has been cancelled out by a rewriting that declares the monarchy rejected by the LORD from the start and sets the demand placed upon kings as obeying the dictates of the prophets. Moreover, the subsequent story of Israel’s first king, Saul, which appears originally to have featured his successes and his compliance with Deuteronomic law, has also been rewritten from that later standpoint, with the prophet taking the king to task for failure to listen to the divine word through his mouth. This darker vision of kings and their failure to fall in line with the demands of prophets is likely allied with the sorts of changes we have seen the editor of the third edition of this history execute in revising the work after Jerusalem's fall.

So the story of the monarchy told by a writer in Josiah’s day, touting Josiah as the best ruler ever and extolling his singular obedience to the standards of the “law of Moses” is modified by an exilic author, who updates the story, attributing the fall of Judah and Jerusalem to events before Josiah’s day that sealed their fate.

And yet, this still doesn’t solve the problem we began with: the fact that Hezekiah and Josiah are each lauded as “the greatest king ever.” It’s clear why an author in Josiah’s day portrayed him that way, but how do we account for the like description of Hezekiah?

In my view (and that of other scholars), the only way to account for the high praise given Hezekiah is as the conclusion to an edition of the story of Israel prior
to the two we’ve already noted. This true “first edition,” so to speak, concluded with Hezekiah’s reign, much as the edition produced during the reign of Josiah hailed him as the consummation of its story. Indeed, Hezekiah’s deeds that merit his ranking as “best king ever” are detailed for us: “4 He removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole. He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan. 5 He trusted in the LORD 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. 6 For he held fast to the LORD; he did not depart from following him but kept the commandments that the LORD commanded Moses.”

Clearly his prime merit is the one placed first: “He removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole.” - This indicates why, for this author, Hezekiah stands as the pinnacle of the monarchy’s history.

If so, then it also suggests that integral to this “first edition” of the history was the pattern of assessing Judah’s kings that considers most to have done what is good in the sight of the LORD, but also noting that none of them demolished the high places. The prominence of the issue of the high places and the use of language about kings doing what is good or what is evil in the sight of the LORD indicates that the edition of the history produced at this time was already guided by an adumbration of the Torah of Moses. Part of the commendation given Hezekiah concerns keeping “the commandments that the LORD commanded Moses.” Even though Hezekiah is not portrayed as following a “book of the Law” as Josiah is, he is said to have observed the “law of Moses.” There is already some notion of a Mosaic law that is the standard for obedience.

Quite likely that “first edition” of the history also already incorporated the story of the northern kingdom, since the story of 1 & 2 Kings is structured around the pattern of a “synchronistic chronicle,” a fundamental building block of the Deuteronomistic History that we've noted previously – that is, a record interrelating the rule of northern and southern kings, as in this correlation of Hezekiah’s accession to the throne with the third year of King Hoshea of Israel. Subjoined to that is a note about Hezekiah’s age when he assumed the throne, as well as his mother’s name, after which stands the general evaluation of him as “doing what was right in the sight of the LORD.”

These three elements are characteristic of the lists of all kings throughout 1 & 2 Kings. And since the evaluation of good or evil deeds is written in a way that is dependent on the information drawn from the synchronistic chronology, that suggests that edition of the history produced around the time of Hezekiah gave an overview of Israel’s life during the full monarchical period. Moreover, since those evaluations often enough refer back to David and the promise made to David, it
must also have incorporated at least 2 Samuel, but also, in that case, 1 Samuel, as well, since that book relates what gave rise to David.

What’s more, given that the image of Samuel seems to be developed from his role as a “judge,” it is difficult to sever 1 Samuel from the book of Judges, which, in turn, gains its role as a sequel to the story of the people’s capture of land in the book of Joshua. Accordingly, it seems likely that this “first edition” produced versions of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, using stories and records available to the author(s). The subsequent editions of the Deuteronomistic History build upon and extend this fundamental story.

Indeed, the last phrase of the sterling endorsement of Hezekiah, “or among those who were before him,” is quite awkward syntactically in Hebrew, suggesting it was likely added by a scribe. That conclusion is also encouraged by the conspicuous conflict it creates with an assertion just two verses prior: “He did what was right in the sight of the LORD just as his ancestor David had done.” Asserting that Hezekiah was David’s equal, but then contending that he exceeded any king before him creates a contrast. The report that no succeeding king measured up to Hezekiah implies, of course, that the author wrote at least within the reign of Manasseh, although it is uncertain if the report of Manasseh’s reign was included in this “first edition.” So the first edition of the DH likely concluded with the end of what we know as the end of 2 Kings 20.

Of course, Campbell raises the question of whether we have enough evidence to suggest this sort of literary activity during Hezekiah's reign. However, a collection of aphorisms in the book of Proverbs is said to have been copied by "the men of Hezekiah" (Prov 25:1), while the stories about the interaction between Isaiah and Hezekiah in 2 Kings 19–20 attest interest in narrating events of the conflict with Assyria during his reign. Even if there is not a surplus of evidence of literary activity during Hezekiah's day (or shortly after), there is enough to make the creation of an edition of the Deuteronomistic History in that era plausible.

Let's return to the final edition of this history for one last question: Is the final edition of the Deuteronomistic History a counsel of despair: Israel's world has disintegrated because of their disobedience, leaving them without hope? There are some indications that this is not the case.

The Deuteronomistic History concludes with the following report: “In the thirty-seventh year of the exile of King Jehoiachin of Judah, in the twelfth month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, King Evil-merodach of Babylon, in the year that he began to reign, released King Jehoiachin of Judah from prison; he spoke kindly to him, and gave him a seat above the other seats of the kings who were with him in Babylon. So Jehoiachin put aside his prison clothes. Every day of his life he dined regularly in the king’s presence. For his allowance, a regular allowance was given him by the king, a portion every day, as long as he lived.”
That is a strikingly abrupt ending. Campbell considers this report ambiguous, open to more than one reading. And yet, we should note that it is more than simply a final accounting for how Jehoiakhin was faring in exile. Not only is King Jehoiachin released from prison, but he is even given “a seat above the other seats of the kings who were with him in Babylon.” – I.e., among the kings of various nations living in exile in Babylon, Jehoiachin enjoys top ranking. Nowhere does the author say, “Doesn’t this bode well for the future,” but that question seems implied; why else such an abrupt ending for the work?

Indeed, there are reasons to question whether this is a mere report of what happened. Why should Jehoiachin have been given this favored position in exile? The author gives no clue as to what might have motivated the Babylonian king to elevate Jehoiachin. The report stands on its own, with the reader allowed to draw his/her own inferences. Given what we have seen of these author's willingness to reshape history to their purposes, it seems likely that this is the author hinting at how this story can unfold from here on: not as a tale of further disaster, but as a threshold to a new beginning.

Moreover, let’s recall Moses’ words to the people in the introduction added secondarily to the book of Deuteronomy: “26 I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that you will soon utterly perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to occupy; you will not live long on it, but will be utterly destroyed. 27 The LORD will scatter you among the peoples; only a few of you will be left among the nations where the LORD will lead you. 28 There you will serve other gods made by human hands, objects of wood and stone that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell. 29 From there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul. 30 In your distress, when all these things have happened to you in time to come, you will return to the LORD your God and heed him. 31 Because the LORD your God is a merciful God, he will neither abandon you nor destroy you; he will not forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them.”

In these words, and others like them scattered elsewhere in the Deuteronomistic History, those who had lived through the devastating events of 586 could take courage. If they repented and turned to follow the commands of the LORD, he would hear and restore them. The author of the final edition of the Deuteronomistic History provided an explanation to help his readers understand what (in his view) had gone wrong with Israel, but also a summons to find the LORD’s mercy and hope for a new day.

So, taking the broad view of Deuteronomy through Kings, what did its authors mean to write? What sort of history is this anyway?

We began the semester with Huizinga’s definition that “History is the intellectual form in which a civilization renders account to itself of its past.” That,
in essence, is what these three historians are attempting to do. While they are agreed that one must make sense of Israel’s history in light of the demands of Deuteronomy, they do so from different vantage points. The first did so in light of Hezekiah’s innovations that gave prominence to the temple, while the second did so in light of Josiah’s allegiance to “the book of the Law” that had been discovered in the temple as it underwent refurbishment. The final author wrote in light of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586, explaining for his people why this great tragedy had occurred and pointing a way out. Each of them wrote, however, in large part to describe the vicissitudes of his people’s life in terms of fidelity to or rejection of the demands of Deuteronomy. They were attempting to render account to Israel of its past, with a view to its present circumstances.

Before leaving the Deuteronomistic History, I want to provide for you, at the outset of next session, a schematic overview of what I’ve suggested about the way the Deuteronomistic History developed as a work. From there we can move on to the Torah, where we will discover a work written with much the same goal in mind: helping people who had gone through the destruction of their city, country, and abandonment in exile, to find their way by understanding their ancestor's lives and themselves.