The Idea of Cultic Centralization and Its Supposed Ancient Near Eastern Analogies

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1. One God – One Cult

One God – One Cult: This is the central theological message and the main commandment of the Book of Deuteronomy: שמע ישראל יהוה אלהינו יהוה אחד (Deut. 6:5) and תעלה עלתיך ... במקום אשר יבחר יהוה (Deut. 12:14). The idea of cultic centralization is also a central issue in reconstructing the literary history of the Book of Deuteronomy as well as the history of Israelite religion. Therefore, it might be worthwhile paying some attention to this topic at a conference in Jerusalem, one of the two locations that are supposed to be "the place which He has chosen".[1]

It was Julius Wellhausen who first used the idea of cultic centralization as a criterion according to which it was possible to separate the history of Israel into two different epochs: the age of ancient Israel and the age of Judaism.[2] Wilhelm Martin Leberecht de Wette paved the way for this distinction. De Wette identified the law book of Josiah (2 Kings 22–23) with Deuteronomy and introduced the distinction between Hebraism and Judaism.[3] Wellhausen combined both aspects realizing that Deuteronomy must be used when one wants to distinguish both historical epochs within the biblical texts. Wellhausen's analysis is still valid today but seems to aim more at the literary level of the Hebrew Bible than at the history of Israel. From a historical perspective it is impossible to maintain that one epoch simply follows the other. The

English Translation PD Dr. Anselm C. Hagedorn (Berlin).

1 On this topic cf. Kratz (2007b).

2 Cf. Wellhausen (1905; 1914).

3 The famous dissertation of de Wette is now re-edited and translated into German by Mathys (2008), and translated into English by Harvey/Halpern (2008). For Hebraism and Judaism cf. Perlitt (1994).

texts from Elephantine and the continuing polemics against ancient Israel within the Hebrew Bible make it seem likely that both types of 'Israel', the historical one and the biblical one from which Judaism derived, existed – from a certain point onwards – next to each other.[4]

Both, de Wette and Wellhausen, arrived at their results with the help of literary-historical criticism, i.e. by using internal criteria. Next to such an approach we also find proposals that operate with extra biblical material, i.e. the so called external evidence. Behind such a preference often lays the intention to form-critically undermine any literary critical hypothesis.[5] Or one wants to confirm the results of literary-historical investigations and, subsequently, place the results on a new religio-historical basis.[6] Since the ground-breaking studies of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic school by Moshe Weinfeld from 1972, the discussion tends to focus on certain neo-Assyrian parallels.[7] Today these parallels are not only used to explain the literary history of Deuteronomy but also the origin of the Pentateuch as a whole and many other aspects of the biblical tradition.[8] Here, phrases like 'point of Archimedes' and 'peg in the wall' are used.[9] Thus, the external evidence seems to support a current trend in Hebrew Bible scholarship to date many of the texts, previously thought of having originated during Solomonic times, to the time of Josiah, even though we do not know anything more about Josiah than we do know about Solomon and the pre-monarchic period.[10]

Hopefully the 'peg in the wall' that has to hold all those hypotheses will be spared the destiny of the peg mentioned in Isa. 22:25. In the following I will subject those hypotheses to close scrutiny using the concept of cultic centralization in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic literature as a test-case. Thus, our contribution serves a double purpose: We will discuss the religio-historical place of the cultic centraliza-

4 Cf. Kratz (2007a).

5 Cf. Baltzer (1964) on whom see Perlitt (1969).

6 Already Oestreicher criticized the 'isolated method' of de Wette and Wellhausen who 'only knows of an inner-Israelite development' and postulated a 'universal perspective' (*weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungsweise*); cf. Oestereicher (1923), 9–10; id. (1930), 34.

7 Cf. Weinfeld (1992), 59–178; and also ibid., vii, where he notes the significance of Vassal Treaties of Essarhaddon (VTE) for de Wette's hypothesis.

8 Cf. Otto (1996; 1997; 1999; 2000; 2002 etc.); for the broader perspective cf. Otto (1999), 86–87; id. (2000), 237 n. 21; id. (2002), 13 n. 67, followed by Schmid (2008), 73–108.

9 Cf. Otto (1997); id. (1999), 8, 12; id. (2000), 10; id. (2002), 6.

10 Cf. Finkelstein/Silberman (2001), 14 and *passim*; for Hezekiah as Josiah's predecessor see Finkelstein/Silberman (2006). On the methodological incoherence of this position cf. Albertz (2005), 27–29.

tion and, at the same time, address the methodological question which heuristic value ancient Near Eastern parallels can have for the explanation of biblical texts.

2. Subversive Reception

It is scholarly consensus that those laws, which centralize the cult and the stipulations that shape the social and judicial laws in light of the cultic centralization form the basic layer of Deuteronomy.[11] The issue of cultic centralization serves as the motif for the re-working of the older Covenant Code in Exodus 20–23 in Deuteronomy and as the guiding principle for the reception process.[12] This insight provides us with a lucid criterion for any analysis of Deuteronomy. Next to the change in number (*Numeruswechsel*) and the literary dependence on the Covenant Code it is the centralization of the cult that decides the extent of the basic layer of Deuteronomy, the so called *Urdeuteronomium*.[13]

In addition to this analysis, Eckart Otto has proposed that the laws regarding centralization are preceded by an even earlier document that can be found in Deuteronomy 13 and 28 and which he calls – in deviation to traditional terminology – the *Urdeuteronomium*. According to Otto, who follows a proposal made by Paul-Eugène Dion and Hans Ulrich Steymans, this older *Urdeuteronomium* consists of an almost verbatim translation of a neo-Assyrian formulary. He finds this formulary in those texts that are generally classified as the Vassal Treaties of Essarhaddon (VTE) containing a loyalty oath that Essarhaddon imposed on his subjected rulers in favour of his successor Ashurbanipal.[14] In the supposed translation the neo-Assyrian loyalty oath was transformed

11 Neglecting any detailed analysis those laws are: Deut. 12:1–28; 14:22–29; 15:1–18; 15:19–23; 16:1–18 as well as Deut. 16:18–20; 17:8–13; 18:1–11; 19:1–13; 19:15–21; 21:1–9; 26:1–16. All other laws do not have a genuine relationship to the theme of cultic centralization. Cf. Reuter (1993); for a wider perspective Hagedorn (2005).

12 Cf. Levinson (1997). In the following I will assume an exclusive exegesis of the formula of centralization. On the problem cf. Reuter (1993), 65–67; Levinson (1997), 23–24 n. 1.

13 Cf. Kratz (2005), 114–133; see also Veijola (2004), 2–3. On the question of the criteria cf. Otto (1999), 10–14. Otto rightly refutes any correlation between Deuteronomy and the 2 Kings 22–23 as a basis for the literary analysis. Unfortunately he only takes the religio-historical comparison into account as an alternative; cf. Otto (1996), 3–4; id. (1999), 13–14, 15–90. Everything else, including the re-formulation of the Covenant Code, is therefore subsumed under this aspect.

14 Text in Parpola/Watanabe (1988), 28–58. On the question whether the documents are a vassal treaty or a succession oath of Essarhaddon cf. Liverani (1995) and Otto (1999), 15–32.

into a loyalty oath of the Judean people in favour of their god YHWH. Otto calls this process a 'subversive reception' and dates it – because of the external evidence, the proposed literary dependence and the supposed anti-Assyrian tendency of Deuteronomy 13 and 28 – to Assyrian times.[15] It is within this chronological and literary frame that Otto is also locating the concept and realization of cultic centralization in Judah. The religio-historical background of this concept and its supposed polemic and anti-Assyrian purpose is called the 'rationality of Assyrian cultic centralization'.[16]

Otto's hypothesis offers a closed and coherent system. Nevertheless, there are quite a number of objections that cause the 'peg in the wall' to wobble.[17] It has often been observed that the hypothesis cannot be reconciled with the literary evidence of Deuteronomy. The laws concerning cultic centralization are not connected to or fitted into the assumed frame of Deuteronomy 13 and 28. Rather, Deuteronomy 13 interrupts the original connection of the laws regarding centralization in Deut. 12:13–28 and 14:22–29.

Additionally, the covenant theology of Deuteronomy 13 and 28 does not mark the beginning of the legal and literary-historical development of Deuteronomy but rather its end. There cannot be any doubt that the covenant in Deuteronomy is inspired by the ancient Near Eastern contract pattern and here especially by the Neo-Assyrian loyalty oaths and their late Hittite predecessors. But, in contrast to the ancient Near Eastern examples neither the Assyrian nor the Judean king takes part in the covenant. It is only a covenant between the people of Israel and the God of Israel. If we had a subversive reception here such a reception would imply that the Judean king (Josiah) terminated his own existence (see Deut. 17:14–20).[18]

15 Cf. Dion (1978; 1991); Steymans (1995; 2003; 2006); Otto (1996; 1997; 1999; 2000; 2002 etc.).

16 Otto (1999), 351: "Wie der assyrische Gott Aššur an nur einem Ort kultisch verehrt wird, so auch der judäische Gott JHWH: Jerusalem steht nicht Aššur nach, und kein Lokalheiligtum in Juda unterminiert die Alternative zwischen dem Gott Aššur und JHWH." Cf. also ibid., 74–75, 350–351, 364–378, and id. (2002), 14–17, 161.

17 Cf. Veijola (2000); id. (2002), 289–298; Köckert (2000); Rüterswörden (2002); Aurelius (2003), 41 n. 77; Pakkala (2006); Koch (2008).

18 The oath from Arslan Taṣ cannot be used to show that 'the revolt against the Assyrian royal ideology via the covenant theology' is a specific aspect of Deuteronomy 13 and 28; contra Otto (1999), 85–86; (2002), 165–166. The covenant theology of Deuteronomy is neither directed against the god Aššur nor against the Assyrian king but explicitly against 'other gods' (Deut. 13:3, 7 etc.). It goes without saying that also a covenant with Aššur, Marduk or Ahuramazda is excluded here. On Arslan Taṣ see Koch (2008), 252–253 n. 23.

Finally, the direct dependence of Deuteronomy 13 and 28 on VTE has been questioned since such a linear and mono-causal process does not do justice to the complexity of the ancient Near Eastern literary tradition. Despite the fact that the late Hittite and neo-Assyrian as well as other (Aramaic) parallels provide the general background for the literary development of the Book of Deuteronomy, it is, however, not recommended to accept the hypothesis that a composition of Deuteronomy 13 and 28 is the predecessor and literary frame of the idea of cultic centralization within the original form of Deuteronomy.

Thus, we have to concentrate our investigation on the laws regarding centralization themselves and their relationship to what Otto calls the 'rationality of Assyrian cultic centralization'. Here, Otto depends on information gained from Assyriologists that the god Aššur – according to the sources available to us and with only one exception (during the reign of Tukulti-Ninurta I) – did not have an official temple outside the city of Aššur.[19] Undoubtedly, this is a fact but what does it tell us? Is this fact the 'peg in the wall' we are looking for?

Otto himself has to concede that, as far as the 'programmatic consequence' is concerned, 'the Deuteronomic, pre-Deuteronomistic conception of the sacrificial centralization moves significantly beyond the Assyrian concept'. The same is true for the 'aniconic trait of JHWH-religion' originating in Judah at the same time and equally 'reacting to the power of neo-Assyrian culture'. According to Otto this 'trait of JHWH-religion', too, was inspired by the god Aššur but was turned against him.[20] If we had, however, indeed a process of 'subversive reception' here this reception would have gone so far that its starting point can no longer be recognized. This, in turn, makes it very difficult to construct genetic dependencies from similarities.

If one wants to evaluate the proposed analogy, one has to look at the religio-historical context. The god Aššur always had his cultic centre in the city of Aššur. There was no need for his cult to become centralized, since it was always limited to a single place that was seen in competition to other (Babylonian) cultic centres established earlier. The main point of this rivalry was a question of status of the main god and the capital (i.e. the central cultic place), where the axis of the world was located.[21] Since the god Aššur originally did not have many significant features, he was concerned with acquiring attributes of other powerful

19 Cf. Otto (1999), 74–75, 350–351, referring to Mayer (1995), 61–67; id. (1997), 15–17; Maul (1997), 121–124. Cf. also Schmid (2008), 81, 106, who is speaking of an 'Assyrian import'.

20 Otto (1999), 75.

21 Cf. Maul (1997); on the temple of the god Aššur cf. Menzel (1981), Vol. I, 34ff.

gods as well as transferring the significance of their cultic place to his cultic centre of Aššur. The most prominent and brutal expression of this competition can be found in Sennacherib's campaign against the Marduk temple Esangila of Babylon and the rich echo of the events in the literary tradition.[22] Such campaigns are, however, the exception. Normally the rivalry is expressed in rivalling attributes, rites and myths for which Aššur competes with Marduk of Babylon and Enlil of Nippur. These processes cannot be labelled centralization. Rather, they are politically motivated transfers from one centre to another. As far as I am aware we do not know of any prohibition to worship Aššur (or any other god) outside the city of Aššur, although we have to concede that positive pieces of evidence are equally sparse.[23]

The Book of Deuteronomy is quite different. It deals with a deity that was worshipped at different places such as the official temple of the capital and the different local sanctuaries in the cities. The prohibition of any form of offering and the introduction of profane slaughter outside the chosen sanctuary (that is normally identified with Jerusalem, the capital of Judah) do not continue this long-standing tradition. In their original form the laws regarding centralization are not directed against other gods and their cultic places that compete with YHWH. Rather, they are directed against YHWH himself and his own local cultic centres 'in the gates'.

A rivalry between the YHWH of Jerusalem (Judah) and the YHWH of Samaria (Israel) and other manifestations of the same god at other places may have formed the background of the idea of cultic centralization (see Deut. 6:4–5). The rivalry with 'other gods' mainly of the land of Canaan, however, presupposes the first commandment and was only added later – as the supplements in Deut. 12:1–12 or Deuteronomy 13 show. The status of YHWH as the main god of Israel and Judah and the status of Jerusalem as capital of Judah was never questioned if one does not want to think of a rivalry with foreign rule and its capital and gods. Against it, however, the prohibition of sacrifice and the profanation and destruction of local cults would have hardly been a tried and tested measure.

Therefore, any comparison of the Deuteronomic law of centralization with the Mesopotamian concept of a capital lacks a valid point of

22 Cf. Vera Chamaza (2002).

23 Cf. Cogan (1974), 49–61, esp. 52–55; Pongratz-Leisten/Deller/Bleibtreu (1992). The fact that there are no extra-biblical attestations for a legal corpus focussing on priestly claims from Mesopotamia is further evidence that not only the Deuteronomic concept of centralization but also the form of it (i.e. a divine law mediated by Moses) is exceptional within the ancient Near East and needs to be explained.

comparison. The only comparative element is the concept of a capital but this is neither a Deuteronomic nor a neo-Assyrian speciality. The concept of a capital is attested in Aššur but also in Babylon and was most likely also prominent – despite the real political constellations – in Israel and Judah and the other small states in Syro-Palestine. As such, the concept represents the common idea that gods of the land ascend to main gods and certain places become capitals, an idea which necessarily includes some rivalry.[24] In all that we find one pre-requisite for the Deuteronomic law of centralization but the two concepts are neither identical nor does one concept simply derive from the other. Above all the common background does not explain any anti-Assyrian polemics, which Otto assumes behind the Deuteronomic programme of centralization.

In fact, it is not the pre-eminence of the city and the god Aššur that leads Otto and those who follow him to the assumption of anti-Assyrian polemics in Deuteronomy but the politics of king Josiah of Judah.[25] In doing so, Otto is trapped in the same circular argument that he rightly criticizes in other places.[26] Issues of methodology make it impossible, however, to simply correlate Deuteronomy with the report of Josiah's reform in 2 Kings 22–23. Such a correlation depends largely on the analysis of both, Deuteronomy and the chapters in 2 Kings, and both are hotly debated subjects. This is not the place to repeat the discussion but we have to remind ourselves that the picture changes depending on the literary reconstruction.

Even if we take the anti-Assyrian measures employed by Josiah that are generally regarded as belonging to the basic layer of 2 Kings 22–23 and compare them – for argument's sake – with the laws regarding centralization in Deuteronomy we realize that both aspects are difficult to reconcile.[27] Neither the dismissal of the *kĕmearim*-priests and the removal of several Assyrian cultic symbols from the Temple in Jerusalem (2 Kings 23:5, 11–12)[28] nor Josiah's encounter with Necho that

24 Cf. Mayer (1997) for Ahuramazda who follows the neo-Assyrian and neo-Babylonian examples.

25 Cf. Otto (1999), 74–75.

26 Cf. Otto (1999), 7, 13–14 (with reference to Gustav Hölscher). One gets the impression that placing the 'covenant' and the covenantal document (*Bundesurkunde*) before the 'Law' in Deuteronomy 13 and 28 (Otto [1999], 74) is modelled on the scene of 2 Kings 22–23.

27 Cf. Uehlinger (1995) and the apt remarks by Otto (1999), 12: "Für eine Korrelierung mit einem Urdeuteronomium geben diese Maßnahmen wenig her"; equally Arneth (2001), 206, on the 'anti-Assyrian reform' in 2 Kings 23:4–15: "Von einer Kultzentralisation ist im ursprünglichen Textbestand (noch) nichts zu vernehmen."

28 Cf. Spieckermann (1982), 85–86, 245–256, 271–273, 293–294.

got him killed[29] have anything to do with the Deuteronomic concept of cultic centralization.

On the other hand, the laws regarding centralization of Deuteronomy as well as Josiah's move against the indigenous ('Canaanite') local cults distinctly lack the rationality of anti-Assyrian politics.[30] Already Theodor Oestreicher tried to solve this problem by separating the anti-Assyrian measures of Josiah from his move against the local cults and subsequently interpreted this move as simply being a momentary measure. According to Oestreicher, both aspects as well as the original version of Deuteronomy have nothing to do with cultic centralization. In his view the centralization is an invention of the Deuteronomists based on a misunderstanding.[31] It is quite obvious that such a hypothesis is simply a rationalization of the literary tradition from a universal perspective (*weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungsweise*) – a perspective with numerous problems. Nevertheless, such a hypothesis highlights the difficulties one encounters if one tries to subsume the earliest edition of the Book of Deuteronomy and the report of Josiah's reform in 2 Kings 23 under the aspect of Josiah's anti-Assyrian politics.

Here, it is quite common to assume that one can solve these problems by simply historicizing the statements regarding the high places in the narratives of Hezekiah's (2 Kings 18:4, 22) and Josiah's reign (2 Kings 23:5, 8–9, 13, 15, 19–20). The removal of the high places is then an expression of a Judean (anti-Assyrian) politics of centralization that simply took the historical realities (i.e. the devastation and curtailing of Judean territory after the events of 701 BCE and the assumed opposition of local and official religion) into account.[32] Due to economic, political and religious pressure local cultic places were defamed as being Canaanite (i.e. foreign), and therefore abandoned or deliberately not rebuilt.[33]

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29 It is difficult to decide whether Josiah approached pharaoh with hostile or friendly intent. Cf. Spieckermann (1982), 138–153; Cogan/Tadmor (1988), 291, 300–301; Würthwein (1994), 464–465.

30 Cf. Otto (1999), 75–76, followed by Arneth (2001), 208, simply ignores both aspects.

31 Cf. Oestreicher (1923), 56, 116–120; id. (1930), 32–42.

32 Cf. Jepsen (1956), 75; Gleis (1997), 177–181. Similarly Fried (2002), 461, who explains Deuteronomy 12 with the situation after 701 BCE but attributes the reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah in total to an exilic Deuteronomist. On the various pictures of Josiah and historical (re-)constructions in light of the Assyrian sources see Handy (2006).

33 Cf. Na'aman (1991), 57; id. (2002), 596–597. Halpern (1991), 27, thinks that the prophets were responsible for such a programme; Barrick (2002), 177–216, refutes any anti-Assyrian tendency and argues for a shift in internal Judean politics. For Albertz (2005) – although the historical evidence is lacking – the Josianic reform just must have happened in Josianic times since the dating of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History must not be too late.

Methodologically speaking such an approach is highly problematic, since it is, again, based on a combination of Deuteronomy 12 with 2 Kings 23 and fuses the literary level with the historical one. In addition, it is difficult to grasp that Judah would have transformed its despairing situation and the desolate state of its land caused by the Assyrian invasion into a religio-political or even theological programme.[34] Furthermore, it remains unclear who, by defaming the indigenous local cults as foreign cults, should have created an artificial antagonism to the YHWH cult of the capital only for economic profit or in order to fulfil the expectation of a 'subversive reception' and assimilate YHWH to the god Aššur. If Josiah is interpreted by employing any anti-Assyrian tendency it would have been more likely that we find an expansion of the local cults of YHWH rather than their defamation and abolition.[35]

Lastly, it is questionable whether the statements regarding the high places in 2 Kings 23 were ever part of the basic layer of the reform report or whether they were added at a later stage – taking up ideas from later literary levels of Deuteronomy – to transform the anti-Assyrian religious measures of Josiah into an inner-Judean cultic reform.[36] If we use the statements concerning the high places we are in danger of using the judgment of the exilic Deuteronomists to describe the mood of the assumed reform movement active under Josiah or even earlier to explain the origin of the Book of Deuteronomy and of the Josianic reform.[37]

In conclusion, we cannot but state that the idea of cultic centralization neither fits the rationality of neo-Assyrian politics nor any Judean anti-Assyrian political movement. In the light of Moshe Weinfeld's groundbreaking study it remains unquestionable that the Book of Deuteronomy is influenced by the language and social world of the neo-

34 Cf. Aurelius (2003), 32 (arguing against Jepsen [1956], 75): "Aber eine solche gewordene, nicht gewollte, geschweige denn einem Programm zufolge durchgeführte (Tendenz zur) Zentralisation wird noch keinem Geschichtsschreiber Maßstäbe für die Königsbeurteilungen, also für das theologische Urteil über die gesamte Geschichte der beiden Reiche geliefert haben."

35 Cf. Kratz (2005), 131–132; Aurelius (2003), 41–42.

36 Cf. Würthwein (1994), 457–458; Kratz (2005), 131, 169. Contrast Aurelius (2003), 44, who, nevertheless, is unable to detect in the statements regarding the high places any political calculation (contra Levin [2003]), nor economic advantage (contra Niehr [1995]), nor theological (contra Spieckermann [1982]) or anti-Assyrian (contra Otto [1999]) intention of King Josiah; cf. Aurelius (2003), 40–42. Also, any action against a YHWH-cult swamped with Canaanite influences does not make sense during Josianic times; contra Hardmeier (2000), 141.

37 Cf. Oestreicher (1930), 41.

Assyrian treaty literature and their Hittite and Aramaic predecessors.[38] However, it is significant that Moshe Weinfeld himself pointed to a very different religio-historical parallel when explaining the law of centralization in Deuteronomy and its realization under Hezekiah.

3. Cultic Reform and Centralization

Moshe Weinfeld himself did not refer to a neo-Assyrian analogy but to one from neo-Babylonian times.[39] Here, Weinfeld is thinking of the transfer of the gods from the Southern Mesopotamian cities to Babylon during the reign of Nabonidus shortly before the conquest of the city by Cyrus II. The events are reported in several documents from the circles of the Babylonian priests of Marduk.[40] This act is interpreted by Weinfeld as a politically and religiously motivated measure to bind the Babylonian cities under threat from Persian invasion to Babylon and to increase their military power. Simultaneously – in Weinfeld's view – this transfer fits well into Nabonidus' reform programme aiming at establishing the cult of the moon god Sîn as the main cult of Babylon. The later inner-Babylonian polemics of the priests of Marduk portrayed this as a sacrilege reversed by Cyrus II.

According to Weinfeld one has to understand the reform of Hezekiah along similar lines, i.e. a political and religiously motivated measure hoping to strengthen the central power in the light of Assyrian pressure and the siege of Jerusalem. Hezekiah was able to refer to the amphictyonic heritage. Weinfeld uses 2 Kings 18:22 as proof that such an act was criticized in Judah, where prophetic circles – especially the pupils of Isaiah – regarded such a measure as a heinous deed. On the other hand the cultic reform of Hezekiah that was supported by the priestly circles of Jerusalem was regarded as a pious act by the authors of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History (2 Kings 18:4–6). In contrast to Nabonidus, Hezekiah's reform, completed by Josiah, was successful.

38 On the condition of such influences cf. Nissinen (1996), 179–182; Steymans (2006); Rüterswörden (2002); the relevant essays in Witte et al. 2006 (303ff, 351ff, 379ff); Koch (2008). Since Hittite traditions were handed down via Syro-Hittite and Aramaic transmission to the 1st millennium BCE, one could assume the same for the Assyrian traditions which were handed down to Persian times via Median and Urartian transmission.

39 Cf. Weinfeld (1964).

40 See Chronicle of Nabonidus III:8–12, 20–21 (Grayson [2000], 109–110); Cyrus-Cylinder 9–10, 33–34 (Schaudig [2001], 550–556); Verse Account V:12–14 (Schaudig [2001], 570, 578).

Weinfeld, too, sees the point of origin of the idea of cultic centralization in a religio-political situation that can be explained against the background of ancient Near Eastern sources. In contrast to the hypothesis of a 'subversive reception' of Assyrian royal ideology, however, Weinfeld does not postulate any direct literary dependence. Rather, the polemic debate about cultic centralization is limited only to the individual culture concerned. Thus, the Nabonidus episode simply serves as a heuristic model to understand the Deuteronomic programme and its realization, reported in the Book of Kings, against the background of the cultural situation of the ancient Near East. An absolute chronology is, therefore, not deduced from such a religio-historical analogy. Following the scholarly consensus at the time Hezekiah, Josiah and the Book of Deuteronomy are dated to the neo-Assyrian period and are thus seen as predecessors to the neo-Babylonian analogy.

It is an advantage of this hypothesis that it does not only take the rivalry between the different capitals into account but also the relationship between capital and hinterland. In doing so, the neo-Babylonian parallel is much closer to the Book of Deuteronomy than the neo-Assyrian material surveyed above. For neither the Assyrian nor the Babylonian concept of a capital city is able to explain sufficiently the concept of centralization in Deuteronomy or the polemics against the high places in the Deuteronomistic History. Another advantage of the material presented by Weinfeld is that both, the biblical and the neo-Babylonian concept is part of a specific situation in which unusual measures are employed to cope with a difficult situation. In both cases, Weinfeld assumes a process of innovation within the framework of an extensive cultic reform that needs to be explained historically.

Despite these obvious advantages, Weinfeld's religio-historical analogy also poses a series of questions, which make it unlikely that we have the desired 'peg in the wall' here. The main problem is the exact meaning of Nabonidus unusual action during the last days of the neo-Babylonian empire. The tendency of the sources is mostly polemical what makes their interpretation difficult. As is the case in the Book of Kings one is faced with the difficult task to discern the historical motifs behind the polemics.

Weinfeld's explanation is heavily influenced by the views put forth by the Babylonian priesthood that expounds a theology centred on Babylon. Since the priests of Marduk lump Nabonidus' actions together with other deeds to denounce them as an offence against Marduk and his cultic place, one gets the feeling that the action has indeed something to do with his religious policy. A centralization of the cults in the

name of the moon-god Sîn, however, does not seem to fit Nabonidus' politics of religion and expansion, which was actually more concerned with decentralization.[41] Neither his stay at Teman nor the building project of Ehulul at Harran, pursued by Nabonidus in the last years of his reign, point to a concern with centralization. The accusation of the so called 'Verse Account' (V:18–22) that Nabonidus changed the temple of Marduk at Babylon into a temple of Sîn does not imply a concentration of all cults in one single place but simply fits his religio-political plan to supplant Marduk with Sîn as highest god and to declare the temples of other gods to places of residence for Sîn.[42]

Furthermore, Weinfeld's proposal is not the only possible explanation. Already Mordechai Cogan has pointed to parallels to the behaviour of Nabonidus showing that the dislocation of gods was a protective measure against enemies and served at the same time as reassurance of divine protection.[43] This explanation was excluded by Weinfeld[44] but has recently been revived by Paul-Alain Beaulieu who was able to use newly discovered sources.[45] The documents show that – next to the divine images – cultic personnel, too, was ordered to Babylon and we learn of a lively exchange of goods to support the gods now housed at Babylon. Beaulieu is further able to detect signs that the dates of the transport of the gods and the personnel were connected with the religious policy of Nabonidus in favour of the god Sîn. Only the polemics of the priests of Marduk distorted the true intention to Nabonidus, namely the protection of the gods, in favour of a portrait of Cyrus as the faithful servant of Marduk. Thus, Nabonidus' action was defamed retrospectively as a cultic abomination and an offence happening against the will of the gods brought to Babylon, triggering the wrath of the lord of gods (Marduk).

No matter how we evaluate the process, it is not easy to reconcile it with the Deuteronomic programme of cultic centralization and with the Deuteronomistic portrait of Hezekiah and Josiah. It is possible to understand the election of a cultic place for the main god of the empire against the ancient Near Eastern background, but it is impossible to do so for the flip-side of the coin. In Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History the election of the cultic place is intrinsically linked to the prohibition of cultic deeds and the profanation of slaughter "in your

41 Cf. Beaulieu (1989); Na'aman (2006), 158–162.

42 Cf. Schaudig (2001), 21.

43 Cf. Cogan (1974), 30–34, esp. 33 n. 67, against Weinfeld (1964); see also Cogan/Tadmor (1988), 219.

44 Cf. Weinfeld (1964), 205, and also Galling (1964), 33.

45 Cf. Beaulieu (1989), 219–224; id. (1993).

gates" (Deut. 12:13–18) and with the violation and removal of the "high places" (2 Kings 18:4, 22 and 2 Kings 23:4ff). This aspect cannot be equated with the transfer of the gods and their cultic personnel to Babylon under Nabonidus. Beaulieu has shown that such a measure does not imply any violation or removal of cults in Babylonian cities at all. At the same time, a restitution of these and other defunct cults under Cyrus II does not imply that these cults had previously been forbidden by a higher authority in favour of the capital. Centralization on the basis of the Mesopotamian concept of a state capital and the abolition of local cults in favour of a single legitimate cultic place are simply not the same.

There is, however, a certain similarity on a literary level between the biblical picture of the Hezekiah's and Josiah's reforms and the inscriptional evidence of Nabonidus' cultic reform, his self-presentation in his monumental inscriptions and the later polemics of the priests of Marduk who attribute the violation of cultic places and idolatry to him.[46] These similarities, however, are not too insightful. Nadav Na'aman and others have pointed to similar ancient Near Eastern sources that deal with royal cultic reforms and that contain both, reports of forceful interventions and of restitutions of destroyed cultic centres.[47] It is hardly surprising that the topos of a royal cultic reform and – up to a certain point – also the pattern of representation in texts that all originated in the ancient Near Eastern realm are comparable. But as far as the motivation and aim are concerned the analogies contain significant discrepancies.

All examples are in agreement that the reform "is the attempt to elevate a particular deity to the headship of the pantheon and exalt his status throughout the kingdom."[48] The same can be said of Deuteronomy and the literary presentation of Hezekiah's and Josiah's reforms in the Book of Kings for which the antagonism between YHWH and the 'other gods' is crucial. None of the ancient Near Eastern analogies, however, with the exception of Akhnaten, mentions the destruction of other cults as part of the reform and has the king praise himself for it. The case of Sennacherib might be instructive here: the destruction has a specific aim but is universally condemned in later sources as a cultic violation.

46 On the relationship between self- and outside-perception of Nabonidus cf. Kuhrt (1990) and Kratz (2002).

47 Cf. Arneth (2001), 206–216; Na'aman (2006); cf. also Handy (1995) and on him Barrick (2002), 132–143, who mentions *memorial inscriptions* such as the Mesha stele as parallels.

48 Na'aman (2006), 163.

Thus, neither Weinfeld's nor any of the other analogies provide a convincing reason for the intention to limit any sacrifice to YHWH to Jerusalem and why the other local sanctuaries ought to be profaned, defamed as foreign cults, and subsequently be destroyed. The specific differences of the biblical reports are not simply 'the book' that provides the basis for the reform.[49] The decisive difference is what this book, the Book of Deuteronomy or the Torah of Moses respectively, prescribes and what Hezekiah and Josiah, generally following the example of ancient Near Eastern kings, actually have done on the basis of this book. Here, we have to concede, that "while its theological significance seems clear enough, its exact nature and practical significance as an official governmental action in Josiah's Judah are not."[50]

Finally, literary-historical findings do not support the neo-Babylonian analogy put forth by Weinfeld. As has been the case with Josiah (2 Kings 22–23) also Hezekiah's reform (2 Kings 18:4–7a, 22) was used to find (or invent) historical evidence behind the literary account that fits the historical realities of 701 BCE and can be supported by archaeological evidence.[51] Both arguments, however, are quite uncertain. Hezekiah's anti-Assyrian policy does not necessarily point to a cultic reform, and the factual crisis of Judah does not make the cultic critique of 2 Kings 18:4, 22 a religio-political programme of a Judean king. Additionally, archaeological evidence is sparse and difficult to relate unambiguously to a cultic reform. For these and other reasons Hezekiah's reform has long been regarded as literary fiction of the Deuteronomists and seems to be secondary within the Deuteronomistic reworking.[52]

Further doubts arise in regard to Weinfeld's main evidence, namely the speech of Rabshake in 2 Kings 18:22. As far as the context is concerned, the passage is found within the context of three legendary accounts of the Sennacherib episode and labelled 'Source B_1' (2 Kings 18:17–19:9a) by scholars.[53] This source is undoubtedly older than the version in 2 Kings 19:9b–35, called 'Source B_2' that is a supplement and

49 Cf. Na'aman (2006), 166–167. For a differentiated view of the role of this book see Ben-Dov (2008).

50 Barrick (2002), 183; cf. also ibid., 171 ("except the closing of the bamoth").

51 Cf. Handy (1988); Finkelstein/Silberman (2006), 269–275; see above nn. 32 and 33.

52 Cf. Spieckermann (1982), 170–175; Camp (1990), 274–287; Na'aman (1995; 2002); Gleis (1997), 149–163; Fried (2002); Aurelius (2003), 30–33; and even Arneth (2006). On the secondary character of the verses in question see Würthwein (1984), 410–412, 421.

53 Cf. Cogan/Tadmor (1988), 240–244; Camp (1990), 38–52, 108ff.; Gallagher (1999), 143–159; and similarly Würthwein (1984), 404–406, 414; Hardmeier (1990), 13–14, 116, 119.

not an independent tradition.[54] Both versions are preceded by 'Source A' (2 Kings 18:13–16) that expands on the short note in 2 Kings 18:7b – either within the frame of an older annalistic source or as part of the Deuteronomistic basic stratum in 2 Kings 18–20.[55] Usually the end of the narrative in 2 Kings 19:36–37 is attributed to 'Source B' but these verses do not only provide the closure for B but for the whole passage in 2 Kings 18:13–19:37 thus including 'Source A'. Since A is older than B, we can assume that originally 2 Kings 19:36–37 – framed by 2 Kings 18:1–3, 7b and 20:20–21 – only formed the closure of A before B was inserted and was finally expanded by the Isaiah-legends in 2 Kings 20.[56]

All this means that Weinfeld's main evidence in 2 Kings 18:22 is handed down as part of a relatively young literary context, in which it is also secondary.[57] The passage stands in a certain contrast to the positive (presumably secondary or at least re-worked) evaluation of Hezekiah's piety in 2 Kings 18:4 and is most likely later than it. No matter how we evaluate 2 Kings 18:22 – as an original element of the text or a secondary addition; as part of an independent narrative or literary supplement to the Book of Kings –, the verse presupposes the centralization of the cult and thus Deuteronomy 12 and most likely also the Deuteronomistic demand for abolishment of the high places as well as the positive ending of the narrative in 2 Kings 19:36–37.

Within the frame of the narrative, however, 2 Kings 18:22 does not want to contradict 2 Kings 18:4. Rather, the verse wants – at a later stage and in its own words and with slightly different accentuation – to align the context in 2 Kings 18:21, 23 with the theological characteristics of the frame in 2 Kings 18:4–6. The cultic reform of Hezekiah placed in the mouth of the enemy rectifies the stigma of the trust in Egypt and in doing so provides the true reason for the factual refutation of the enemy and the deliverance of Jerusalem.[58] Undoubtedly, the Sennacherib

54 On this question cf. Gallagher (1999), 156.

55 Cf. Würthwein (1984), 406–409, and Camp (1990), 62–107, for an attribution to an annalistic source, Jepsen (1956), 36, 54, 62, and Noth (1957), 76 n. 6, for an attribution to a Deuteronomistic basic stratum.

56 Cf. Kratz (2005), 169; for the ending of 'Source A' cf. Lewy (1928) followed by Cogan/Tadmor (1988), 241.

57 On the dating of the narrative of 'Source B' to the late period of the monarchy (after 597 BCE) cf. Hardmeier (1990), 169–170. Exegetical reasons for such an evaluation are provided by Hoffmann (1980), 149–150; Würthwein (1984), 421; Gleis (1997), 154–155.

58 Cf. Hoffmann (1980), 149–151; on the different interpretations of the passage cf. Machinist (2000).

narrative and 2 Kings 18:22 breathes an Assyrian atmosphere.[59] This, however, is simply a fictitious argument within the narrative (*erzählfiktives Argument*) and neither a historically reliable reminiscence of oppositional circles during the neo-Assyrian period nor the view of a party during neo-Babylonian times when the narrative was written.[60] Via the detour of enemy polemics and its refutation – quite common in victors' propaganda – the Deuteronomic-Deuteronomistic ideals are powerfully confirmed. It would be rather short-sighted were we to use the atmosphere of a biblical statement for a precise and historical location of the text itself.

4. Conclusion

The result of the religio-historical comparison is quite ambivalent. On the one hand it became obvious that the Mesopotamian concept of a capital as well as other ancient Near Eastern ideas serve as a prerequisite for the origin of the Deuteronomic idea of cultic centralization and its application within the Book of Kings. On the other hand it is not possible to demonstrate a direct dependence on the ancient Near Eastern analogies and thus to date the biblical concept accurately. A religio-historical comparison is important and illuminating but cannot provide the desired 'peg in the wall'.[61]

Here, the main difference is that the concept of cultic centralization in Deuteronomy does not only mean an increase in status of the capital but is intrinsically connected to a radical intrusion upon the local cults 'in the gates' or 'on the high places' of Judah. Every analogy proposed cannot provide a proper explanation for that. Not because the different situation of the sources do not allow it but simply because Deuteronomy itself 'significantly moves beyond' ancient Near Eastern analogies.[62] Thus, we have to note that the concept of cultic centralization "is so special and singular in the world of the ancient Near East that there

59 Cf. Gallagher (1999), 160–254, esp. 190–191; Spieckermann (1982), 346–347; Oded (1992), 121–137. Assyrian propaganda continues under Cyrus; cf. Beaulieu (1993), 243.

60 Cf. Hardmeier (1990), 398–399.

61 This is also true for the formula *l^{e}šakkēn š^{e}mô šām* and its ancient Near Eastern parallels thoroughly investigated by Richter (2002). It is all but scholarly consensus that this expression belongs to the oldest form of the centralization formula; cf. Reuter (1993), 130–138; Kratz (2005), 122 n. 29. And even if it belonged to it the ancient Near Eastern parallels would not allow us at all to date its usage in Deuteronomy to the 7th century BCE or even earlier.

62 Cf. Otto (1999), 75.

must be special reasons for it."[63] Therefore, together with Moshe Weinfeld we have to pose the question: "What was it that prompted the institution of this peculiar reform?"[64]

Answering this question is not at all easy and we have to evaluate the different possibilities quite carefully. Since reasons of foreign policy such as the destruction of the Judean hinterland may have played a role but were hardly responsible for a programmatic destruction of the Judean local cults and the repeated polemics against their continuation we have to look for inner Judean causes.

Here, I see two possibilities that have been debated and it is difficult to reach any certainty.

> "Either the idea of centralization and the no less unusual 'Hear, Israel' in Deut. 6.4f., which is directed against the local differentiation of Yhwh, is a reaction to the downfall of Samaria and is meant to bind the northern Israelites, who have lost a political and religious home, to Judah and Jerusalem. Or the programme is a reaction to the downfall of the kingdom of Judah, the loss of the political and ideological centre of pre-exilic Judah connected with it, and the deportation, and has the purpose of warning against the decentralization threatened as a result […] creating a substitute for the one place of worship chosen by Yhwh."[65]

When I tend to favour the latter possibility I take into account that it is difficult to explain why Judeans and Israelites had given up their own local sanctuaries. Nevertheless, I would like to stress again that there are equally good reasons to accept the first possibility outlined above and that Deut. 6:4–5 emphasizes the common bond between Israelites and Judeans, a bond first stated by the prophets.

Either way, the idea of cultic centralization remains a valuable criterion for a relative chronology of the history of the literature and theology of the Hebrew Bible, whereas the proposed ancient Near Eastern analogies represent the religio-historical presuppositions to the idea of centralization but cannot be regarded as direct examples. An absolute dating as well as a classifying of the different periods of the history of the literature and theology of the Hebrew Bible remains an object of historical weighing in the light of but not with the exclusive proviso of the ancient Near Eastern sources available.

63 Kratz (2005), 132.

64 Weinfeld (1964), 203, similar ibid., 204: "Our question is, then, what was the primary motivation for the action taken to centralize the cult and for the law validating this act?"

65 Kratz (2005), 132; cf. also Aurelius (2003), 40–44.

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