

The Question of the Fathers (אבות) as Patriarchs in Deuteronomy¹

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ABSTRACT

In an involved argumentation that runs most influentially from Van Seters via Römer and Lohfink, the question of whether the “fathers” (אבות) in the book of Deuteronomy had indeed initially referred to the patriarchal trio of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has been under discussion since the 1970s. In this article, the debate is taken into review in the light of the author’s recently published position on the competition between traditions within post-exilic Israel as reflecting inner-Judean identity politics. His conclusion concurs with Römer’s theory, that editorial insertion of the patriarchs’ names next to the father references in Deuteronomy is probable.

A OH FATHER, WHERE ART THOU?

Within the scholarly discussions on the composition of the Pentateuch, the relationship between Genesis and the rest of the “Big Five” (Lombaard 2005:152) finds a particular point of focus in the patriarchs of Israel: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, so prominent within the opening book of the Bible, seem to have exerted very little influence on the rest of the Old Testament. Though this may in some way be understandable for other genres of literature in the Hebrew Bible, such as the Prophets (cf. Lombaard 2005:152-159) or the Psalms (cf. Lombaard 1998:59-70), it is certainly unexpected with Exodus to Deuteronomy. Hence, this relative scarcity of patriarchal references outside Genesis must be a factor for consideration in understanding the relationship of these five books to one another and the compositional history of the whole of this “mosaic of Moses” (Deist 1988).

The most direct impetus for a perennial recent debate on the connection between the term “fathers” (אבות) and accompanying reference to the patriarchs in the Old Testament books aside from Genesis, but most specifically in Deuteronomy² (though with implications for the remainder of the Pentateuch) lies

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² Deuteronomy constitutes a place of special importance within the Pentateuch. This is not only because it provides a kind of concluding summary to its preceding books when read from beginning to end, but also, because historically its Josianic kernel of Deut 12-26 provides what has oft been called the Archimedean point (at times in wholly different contexts by figures such as Otto 1997:321-339 and Du Plessis 1947,

in the words of Van Seters (1972:452, italics added; cf. Van Seters 1999:106, 135-136 & 1992:223-245):

... [A]n examination of all the references to the land promise in Deuteronomy *in which the fathers are named* reveals that these names are always in apposition to the term 'fathers' ... This is in contrast to the form of expression used in the JE corpus of the Pentateuch.... So if we were to regard the names of the patriarchs in Deuteronomy as later additions, then unlike JE, the construction would still remain in tact, but the 'fathers' would then mean the forefathers of the exodus generation.

Also based on the fact that references to "the fathers" in the Prophets refer not to the patriarchs, but simply to generations that have gone before, the conclusion follows that the references to the fathers in Deuteronomy were only later specified. These references were thus reinterpreted, on certain rare occasions, as being the patriarchs, thus *becoming* what Lohfink (1991:4, translated) would later call "stereotypical pleonasms". This was namely an exilic project, according to Van Seters (1972:459), as a conflation of identities of the carriers of the respective traditions of land promise to the fathers and of the patriarchs.

These views are related to five³ texts only among some 50 father references in Deuteronomy. The relative scarcity of such patriarchal specifications is thus precisely the trigger for interpretative curiosity here. These five texts are:

drawing on Eissfeldt 1934:188) for the dating of the compositional history of the Pentateuch texts. It is thus methodologically sound first to consider this question as it relates to Deuteronomy itself, before subsequently moving on to the rest the Pentateuch and the First Testament.

³ Most often, seven instances of these father references with patriarchal specifications are listed; cf. Braulik 1991:37-50, most particularly 47 (to which schema, interestingly, the unlikely source of Heinzerling 2009 finds an antecedent in the Goldberg 1908 booklet). I however exclude here Deuteronomy 9:27, because of the connection there of the patriarchs to the term עֲבֹרֵי and not אֲבוֹת, and the reference in Deuteronomy 34:4, where the three patriarchs are mentioned without reference to the fathers (cf. Römer & Brettler 2000:405-406; Skweres 1979:91). It seems therefore to me unwise to make too much of the seven-schema in the context of this debate, where the specific reference to the אֲבוֹת along with the express naming of the three patriarchs stand central. In addition, in a somewhat different context, Ruppert (2002:38-40), summarises additional complexities in this regard, namely on the possibility discussed in the literature (Hyatt 1955:130-136; Andersen 1962:170-188; Seebass 1966:84) that reference to the God of the fathers may be original in Pentateuch texts, with the explicit divine appellation of יְהוָה being a later addition to such verses. This matter too remains outside the immediate focus of this paper.

REFERENCE IN DEUTERONOMY TO FATHERS SPECIFIED AS THE PATRIARCHAL TRIO		
Text	Special reference	Text quotation (with King James translation; because of the literal qualities of this translation – cf. Lombaard 2002:754-765)
1:8	Promise of land	רֹאֵה נָתַתִּי לִפְנֵיכֶם אֶת־הָאָרֶץ, בָּאוּ וּרְשׁוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע יְהוָה לְאֲבֹתֵיכֶם לֵאמֹר לְיִצְחָק וְלִיעֲקֹב לָתֵת לָהֶם וְלִזְרָעָם אַחֲרֵיהֶם: Behold, I have set the land before you: go in and possess the land which the LORD sware unto your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give unto them and to their seed after them.
6:10	Promise of land	וְהָיָה כִּי יְבִיאֲךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאֲבֹתֶיךָ לֵאמֹר לְיִצְחָק וְלִיעֲקֹב לָתֵת לָךְ עָרִים וְגִדְלוֹת וְשָׁבַת אֲשֶׁר לֹא־בָנִיתָ: And it shall be, when the LORD thy God shall have brought thee into the land which he sware unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give thee great and goodly cities, which thou buildedst not,
9:5	Promise of land	לֹא בַצְדִּיקוּתְךָ וּבִישׁוּר לִבְבְּךָ אָתָּה בָּא לְרִשְׁתָּ אֶת־אֲרָצָם כִּי בְרִשְׁעַת הַגּוֹיִם הָאֵלֶּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ מוֹרִישָׁם מִפְּנֵיךְ וּלְמַעַן הָקִים אֶת־הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע יְהוָה לְאֲבֹתֶיךָ לֵאמֹר לְיִצְחָק וְלִיעֲקֹב: Not for thy righteousness, or for the uprightness of thine heart, dost thou go to possess their land: but for the wickedness of these nations the LORD thy God doth drive them out from before thee, and that he may perform the word which the LORD sware unto thy fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
29:12	Covenant	לְמַעַן הָקִים אֶת־ךָ הַיּוֹם לֹא לְעַם וְהוּא יְהוָה לְךָ לֵאלֹהִים כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר־לְךָ וְכַאֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאֲבֹתֶיךָ לֵאמֹר לְיִצְחָק וְלִיעֲקֹב: That he may establish thee to day for a people unto himself, and <i>that</i> he may be unto thee a God, as he hath said unto thee, and as he hath sworn unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

30:20	Promise of land	לְאַהֲבָה אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשָׁמֹעַ בְּקוֹלוֹ וּלְדַבְּקֵה־בּוֹ כִּי הוּא חַיִּיךָ וְאַרְצְךָ יָמֶיךָ לְשִׁבְתָּ עַל־הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע יְהוָה לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וּלְיַעֲקֹב לֵאמֹר לְחַתֵּל לָהֶם: That thou mayest love the LORD thy God, <i>and</i> that thou mayest obey his voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto him: for he <i>is</i> thy life, and the length of thy days: that thou mayest dwell in the land which the LORD sware unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.
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B THE FATHERLY DEBATE IN OVERVIEW

Although he had been the most direct in formulating this concern, Van Seters was not the first to notice that some reflection may be called for on the connection between “fathers” and “Abraham - Isaac – Jacob” in, most particularly, Deuteronomy. For instance, based on a slightly earlier study (May 1941b:113-128), May (1941a:156) could express uncertainty on whether this connection was indeed primary. However, it was in the Römer work (1990) that this possibility had found its fullest expression, in the wide-ranging (though perhaps at times too much so, according to Lohfink 1991:8-11; cf. however Römer 1991:113) and thoroughgoing manner typical of German dissertations,⁴ with his findings and theories summarised in Römer 1990:266-271, 568-575; 2000:121-138. The central idea around which the more recent discussion runs is formulated by Römer (1990:268) as follows:

Daß die Deuteronomisten den Vätertitel anders verwendeten als die heutigen Exegeten. Die twba in den dtr Texten können eine Vielzahl von Generationen bezeichnen, aber gerade nicht die Patriarchen.

As Carr (2001:290-291), accepting Römer’s thesis, however points out, “early redactors” of Deuteronomy could certainly have understood the father references as patriarchal allusions and have then gone on to specify the names accordingly, thus leading all subsequent readers of these texts to (mis)understand the more original references in this newly construed way.⁵

Particularly the opposition between Lohfink (1991) and Römer (1990), on whether the father references in Deuteronomy were indeed initially expli-

⁴ I mean here in language and academic format; the dissertation, though started under Rendtorff in Heidelberg, was completed under De Pury in Geneva and was published in Switzerland too.

⁵ This is essentially my point too on Genesis 22 (Lombaard 2008:907-919), thus leading my thoughts to be closer to Römer’s here, as will become clear below.

citly, or later editorially related to the Abraham-Isaac-Jacob trio, is reviewed in Schmid 1999:75-77 (who himself remains unsure in this regard).⁶ As Schmid here points out, usually this argumentation is followed along the theological lines within the Pentateuch of the promise of the land and either the *conditionality* attached to it (Deuteronomistic theology) or not (patriarchal promises). Lohfink (1991:11) himself ascribes the background of their differences to their respective understandings of what a text really is. His over-arching argument is namely that the stereotypical pleonasms referred to above may better be ascribed to authorial technique (cf. e.g. Veijola 2005:18; Davies 2003:75; McConville 2002:63-64, 123-125) than to editorial inventiveness. This is argued by Lohfink (1991) with respect to each of the father-patriarch occurrences in Deuteronomy, with the stated intent to contest Römer's claims rather than to replace it with a competing theory. De (2005:284⁴⁷⁴) adds that for Lohfink, in this argumentation, the primary texts of reference / textual context for Deuteronomy is the pre-Priestly Pentateuch, whereas for Römer it is the Deuteronomistic History (cf. Römer & Brettler 2000:402). Methodologically speaking, though, it seems to me when comparing Lohfink (1991) and Römer (1990), that whereas the former is more interested in the text itself, also as a procedural point of control, Römer – like van Seters (1972:448-459) does and May (1941a:156) hints at – tries to read behind the text. Römer thus reads into the history which gave the text its shape, which reflects editorially in some way the human life that surrounds it, albeit of course “[n]ow we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror (to misquote here 1 Cor. 13:12 [NIV]).⁷ Nevertheless, the history of the text is such that it is at certain stages “updated” to reflect new social concerns (cf. Römer & Brettler 2000:406-407; Gosse 1993:459-472; Vogt 2006:152¹³²). It is to this kind of approach that I find myself drawn here. This is not something Lohfink is averse to; his approach seems however to accept a longer-term stability from an earlier date for the texts applicable here, whereas Römer sees these texts as more unsettled until a later period of time.

Other critics of Römer's thesis that the father references were not initially, but only later editorially related to the patriarchal trio, follow an approach not entirely dissimilar to his (i.e. Römer's), for example Schmidt (1992:1-27), who essentially departs from a different dating matrix for these texts. For Schmidt, then, the combination of patriarchal traditions with land promises made to the fathers would have occurred pre-exilic, and this forms the background to his interpretation of the relevant texts. This would place Schmidt somewhere between Lohfink, who regards such co-existence of traditions as more anciently established within the texts, and Römer, who regards a confla-

⁶ In the background here too lie the studies of Emerton 1982:14-32 (particularly pp 30-31), Winnett 1965:1-19 (particularly pp 13-14) and Hoftijzer 1956. Cf. Van Seters 1992:215-226 for a broader overview.

⁷ This is a divergence of approaches we are well aware of, in our own way, in South African biblical scholarship – cf. e.g. Le Roux 1993; Lombaard 2006:912-925.

tion of these traditions as more recent. Skweres (1979:88-94, 206-210) on his part, considers the question based on his understanding of early-Deuteronomic (i.e. pre-exilic) textual cross-referentiality, and thus prefers in all cases the less diachronic answers in favour of earlier authorial technique; hence the respective general affinity between his and Lohfink's works on this matter.

C CONCURRENT UNCONCURRING TRADITIONS

Trying to find a midway *within* traditional historical criticism (cf. Lombaard 2007a:61-70) between its atomising analytical instincts and its impulse to explain texts in broadly interpretative schemes rather than at the hand of individual texts (Albrecht 1996:62-64), I tried in a recent study (Lombaard 2008:907-919) to offer a new interpretation of the text of Genesis 22. The particulars of that interpretation aside,⁸ that study drew most directly on recent insights among Old Testament scholars into the competition within ancient Israel between carriers of different traditions. Rather than the kind of "history" provided by the Old Testament itself, and followed by non-critical Introductions of a patriarchal period, *followed* by an Egyptian sojourn and an exodus, *followed* by a taking of the land and a period of rule by judges, *followed* by a period of kings and then prophets, in very broad terms, much of this "history" was written (recalled, invented, for which as a collective term "imagined" may be employed from modern social sciences) concurrently. The traditions related to these "eras" were in the process of such memorialisation to serve certain interests, often competing interests, during the period of the 8th to 2nd centuries of their being collected / created, written down and edited. "Memories" and "stories" (together: accounts; *Geschichten*) thus served searches for identity, and for competing identities, within Israel, and are thus often "sites of struggle".⁹

Based on this kind of approach to the texts of the Old Testament, I can find myself thus in substantial agreement with the position of Römer (1990:393; cf. pp. 573-574 & 2000:121-138), when he writes: "Die Traditionen von Abraham, Isaak und Jakob berichten die Anfänge Israels in einer mit der dtr Darstellung konkurrierenden Art und Weise." Whereas Lohfink (1991:101-102) would thus see these two tradition complexes in Deuteronomy as longer-spanning, more harmoniously co-existent foundational concepts, I understand post-exilic Israel to be an intensely competitive arena for identity politics, between the carriers of different traditions (tradents). This would on the one hand

⁸ Important there too was the multiple referentiality of the patriarchs – that the name of a patriarch could include reference to more than one antecedent figure – proposed, without influence, with regard to Jacob by Noth (1948:86-111; cf. Ruppert 2002:25) and by me with regard to Isaac (Lombaard 2008:907-919).

⁹ Usually this kind of terminology is employed to indicate latter-day interpretative exercises, usually related to social justice issues. Here, though, that phrase is meant to indicate similar struggles in the period of the coming into being of these texts too, then not insomuch as *taking* meaning from the texts as *giving* meaning to the texts.

include the respective patriarchal tradent groups competing with one another (Lombaard 2008:907-919), which opens the door more easily to see, on the other hand, here in Deuteronomy, competition between patriarchal tradents as one group and Deuteronomistic theologians as another. One may well postulate as social background competition in Persian-period Judea between once exiled “Deuteronomists” and still resident, that is, never exiled “patriarchalists” (cf. Römer 2008:5-6; 2000:132-138).

Accepting such a situation opens the strong interpretative possibility that the father–patriarch texts in Deuteronomy reflect an attempt at a meeting of minds of these tradent groups; a “political” coming together of these two broad strands of tradition, reproduced textually in these few verses. The fact that all these textual occurrences are to be found outside pre-deuteronomistic Deuteronomy’s core chapters of 12-26 (cf. Rofé 2002:1-13, McConville 2002:18-51; Christensen 2001:lvii-lxxix for recent summaries of the composition of Deuteronomy), strengthens the possibility that this editorial work occurred later, rather than earlier. Within post-exilic Judea, such textual emendations would have the rhetorical effect that the promises of land (generally) made to the fathers in these verses, which would initially refer *only* to the exiles’ fathers (*presented* here as the Exodus generation who are in need of a theologically sanctioned homeland, but *referring* to the Babylonian exile generations), are then reapplied. The promises are thus now rhetorically expanded to include Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; more accurately: to embrace the tradents who found their core identities in these three patriarchs. This could only have been a post-exilic dynamic.

This argument I propose of course offers no final proof of the May - Van Seters – Römer theory on the addition of the patriarchal names to the pertinent father texts in Deuteronomy. It does however add another consideration, drawing on the sensitivity currently dawning within historically inclined Old Testament scholarship that the Bible texts reflect intense social contestation. Within such a framework (or network of interaction between text and text originators), the addition of the patriarchal names to the father texts in Deuteronomy may well have been more than authorial technique with a view to writerly¹⁰ sensitivities (of which we are also becoming more aware: cf. Otto 2007a:19-28, summarised in Lombaard 2007b:351-365); it may also reflect editorial reproduction of the social processes of the time – texts echoing events and thoughts (cf. Römer 1991:116), to which hypothesis is our only access (Le Roux 2001:444-457). The resultant stereotypical pleonasm in the Deuteronomic father – patriarch verses were created in an evidently formulaic way, perhaps “not fully appreciating the significance of this terminology” (May

¹⁰ This term is from the hermeneuticist Thiselton (1992:98), where it indicates that an author at times intentionally writes so as to entice readers to assign further meaning to what is meant by the immediate words.

1941a:158, reaching this conclusion by a wholly different route than was followed here). Its intended consequence would have been greater social cohesion, though, executed with enough rhetorical finesse in these Deuteronomy texts that some two and a half millennia later we find ourselves still intrigued by it.

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