

# *Four Sources Of The Pentateuch*

We have briefly looked at the various ways in which scholars have discussed the Scriptures. Today I would like to carry over these methods from the discussion of the Gospels to the discussion of the Old Testament, because it was actually in the context of the Old Testament, and particularly the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) that these methods were first developed.

Despite the usual assumption that all scientific criticism of the Bible owes its origin to Protestant scholarship, it is good to report that the first steps in source criticism were actually taken by a Catholic priest. Richard Simon was born (1638) into a Protestant family, but became a Catholic and a priest of the Oratory. In 1678 (a date to conjure with) he published his *Histoire Critique du Vieux Testament*. He had read Hebrew sources – especially Rabbinic documents – and the large collection of Oriental manuscripts in the Oratorian library in Paris. As a man familiar with Patristic writings he found himself well equipped to furnish a critical and historical approach not only to the documents themselves, but also to the things people of all religious hues had been saying about them for three thousand years.

Simon was the first scholar to question the universal assumption that Moses was the author of the first five books of the Bible. He went on to examine the attributions of other works in the Old Testament, concluding with the examination of pseudonymous attribution (David as the author of Psalms, Solomon of Wisdom literature, etc). In his second and third volumes Simon laid down firm principles of textual criticism, and rules by which a more accurate translation could be assured.

The response of the Church to poor Richard was violent in the extreme; he came up on the radar of Bishop Jacques Bossuet, the most eloquent prelate and preacher in French Church history, who thundered anathemas at him from the pulpit of Beauvais Cathedral. His point was that the theology of the Bible was sacrosanct, and therefore nothing could be added to what it said from disciplines outside theology – for instance, grammatical or literary study. The circularity of this argument was hard to display without appearing disloyal, and Simon had to endure the placing of his great work on the Index Librorum Prohibitorum in 1682, a date which should live in infamy<sup>1</sup>. We should note above all Simon's realisation that several *unwritten traditions* must contribute to the first books of the Bible. That scholars should have been so aware of this fact so early is remarkable, especially given the fact that people like Bossuet were so insistent on the Bible as the Word of One God, He could not see that a theological position like that is not offended by any theory about the human composition of the work in question.

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<sup>1</sup> You might like to know that the spell-checker responded to my typing of these loathsome words by suggesting for Librorum *Librium*, and for Prohibitorum *Prohibit Rum*; you might like to know also that this lecturer made a pilgrimage last summer to the grave of Richard Simon in the Collegiate Church in Dieppe, to murmur a prayer of reparation for the wrongs done to him

However, Simon's work was well-received in other countries, and an English translation appeared in 1682, an appropriate response to his being indexed by the Vatican in that year.

Another Frenchman, Jean Astruc, made then very useful observation that Genesis contains two different divine names. and elaborated the theory that two different sources (which he usefully called A & B) must lie behind the book.

### **Excursus: the Complex Matter of Texts**

There are very useful accounts of the textual currents of thought which led to the way we now view the actual text of the OT; in particular, the freeing of Western ideas of Hebrew as some kind of favoured sacral language, as opposed to one of the group of Semitic tongues, so that study of Syriac, Aramaic and the other languages of the Middle East could cross-fertilize our dealing with the difficult places of the Biblical texts. Such study may seem very obvious to the likes of us; but Christian awe for the Scriptures has meant that the Western study of Scripture was remarkably blinkered until relatively recently.

If we examine closely the forms in which the Hebrew Scriptures exist, the complexity of the situation becomes a lot clearer. There were until recently no actual texts of the Hebrew Bible in any of its parts older than 895 AD (the so-called Cairo Prophets).

We know that a standardized consonantal text (ie a text with no vowel-signs) of the Scriptures was established about the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD; associated with the synod of Jamnia, it establishes the Jewish Canon of the Old Testament and its Hebrew text. It is known collectively as the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible; it was transmitted by scribes very faithfully into mediaeval times. This fidelity is well-attested in Christian circles, and we have no reason to doubt its reliability in Jewish ones. Since it was not usual to give any OT book a separate title or add the name of its copyist or the date, we can only isolate these factors by the use of palaeography (the study of handwriting and styles, etc). The accuracy of such dating is only reliable to within 50 years. At any rate it was clear until lately that no original text could be appealed to that came from within 1000 years of its composition.

There is even great debate about the standing of our "five books of the Torah". What do the five divisions mean? What does their unity as a single work mean? Are the divisions customary ones, dictated by the convenient size of a scroll? Exodus and Numbers are the same length (16,713/16,413 words respectively); but Leviticus is only 11,950 words. Fr Blenkinsopp, who has written a recent introduction to the Pentateuch, surmises that the laws in Leviticus are isolated so that they can stand at the heart of the finished work, and his is only one of a host of suggestions made about the structure and intention of the whole Torah.

In 1948 the scene was transformed by the discoveries at Qumran, which give us actual documents dating from 250 to 175 BC: a dramatic outbidding of the previous oldest texts (895 AD). We have also identified texts of later books even than that: there are texts of Ecclesiastes, Daniel, and Ecclesiasticus which date from within 100 years of their composition. Over 190 Qumran manuscripts are known to have dated from this period. The editing process is ongoing and painfully slow. What little is known to us

comes out in penny numbers. Scholars tell us that the Qumran texts are notoriously fragmentary. They might at their best transmit the full text of only 10% of any particular book. What is of profound interest is their relationship to the traditional, Masoretic texts which have come to us through a far more complicated process, the copying of texts over centuries. The process is different in the case of every book, so what is known about an individual text can be separately studied.

This leads into the study of the OT in Greek; the LXX or Septuagint. This translation began in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC and was finished by about 130 AD. It comes to us in widely different amplified and edited forms, some with indications of different schools of interpretation. But obedience to the received text is pretty impressive. The Septuagint obviously has large modern editions, but the critical activity provoked by the many sources in its background means that the textual criticism is quite a minefield.

Studying the texts and their transmission is a whole trade, and not one in which I am qualified to speak. This study is wide open for further development.

### **De Wette and Deuteronomy**

De Wette (1780 - 1849) studied the books of Chronicles, and noticed that they present us with a picture of Jewish religion under the Monarchy that is totally different from that in the books of Samuel and Kings. Chronicles assume that a complete, fully-formed system of sacrifice, priesthood, and Levitical law had been set up by Moses, and that it was in being when Chronicles began, that is the beginning of the Monarchy. We know this not to be the case. It therefore became clear to de Wette that everything hinting at such a tidy solution within the Pentateuch must be a re-writing of history, probably after the monarchy had been destroyed by the Assyrians, even into the late Persian period or the early years of the Greek tyrants. It was at this point that his critical eye fell on the narrative traditions of the Pentateuch, which he concluded must have little or no historical value, and must be a general view of Israel's mythology.

In 2 Kings 22 there is a description of the finding of a book of the Law in the Temple during the reign of Josiah. Its discovery is said to have inspired a wholesale religious reform, which on examination proves to evoke very closely the spirit and detail of Deuteronomy. It may startle us, for instance, to discover in 2 K23:23 the statement

<sup>21</sup> The king gave this order to the whole people: 'Celebrate a Passover to Yahweh your God, as prescribed in this Book of the Covenant.'

<sup>22</sup> No Passover like this had ever been celebrated since the days when the judges ruled Israel, nor throughout the entire period of the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah.

<sup>23</sup> The eighteenth year of King Josiah was the only time when such a Passover was celebrated in Yahweh's honour in Jerusalem.

If this is true, it is clear that the idea of a consistent practice in such matters stretching back directly to Moses and the desert is untrue, and that the Deuteronomic law book (if that is what this is) dates from the time of Josiah (seventh century). De Wette decided that Deuteronomy was the most recent of the various literary groupings of the Pentateuch. He went on to suggest an early source of history, a later source stressing

the divine significance of the story of Israel, and a prophetic source. He was roughly suggesting three of the sources we now recognise as J, P and E.

Vital to realise is the fact that these researchers were busily studying nothing except the Biblical texts. They had no archaeology to help them, and we would now give no credence to theories constructed from within a twenty-first century reading of the Bible; the controls imposed by genuine historical knowledge is essential to our way of working. It's hard to imagine a world where there had been no digging in Mesopotamia, or Egypt, no-one had read cuneiform writing, Nineveh had not been unearthed, and no Akkadian literature had been read, and even the Roman Forum lay under thirty feet of soil. These men did tremendously well, but they were working comparatively in the dark.

### **Wellhausen: Source and Form Criticism**

Now we must turn our minds to the spectacular and very influential work of Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918). A thorough German scholar in many fields including pre-Islamic Arabic studies, Wellhausen synthesised the work of many predecessors in applying what we know of Jewish *history* to the Hebrew Scriptures. Treating not just the Torah, but what he called the Hexateuch (including Joshua with the Pentateuch), he posited four actual *documents* behind the scripture we now see as one thing. They are (in chronological order) J, E, D, and P.

J and E        Based on the naming of the deity as JHWH or Elohim,<sup>2</sup> these sources have been combined by an editor he called "Jehovist" into a coherent narrative. To these two sources Wellhausen added a source he called Q for "Quattuor", which he alleged held together four descriptions of the Covenant. Because of the priestly material it contains, this source has come to be known as

P                characterised by the ritual law called "the Holiness Code" (Leviticus 17 - 26) which Wellhausen thought proceeded from the influence of Ezekiel.

D                The Deuteronomic source came into existence independently of the other sources and is later than JE. Wellhausen detected considerable knowledge within it of the JE sources, but not of the P; He therefore thought the correct sequence for his four sources was JEDP, the end result being the publication of the Pentateuch in its final form at the time of Ezra - the fifth century BC.

The startling result of all this is that Wellhausen suggested that, rather than standing at the beginning of the story of Israel, the ritual and legal system that we call the Law of Moses (Torah) actually stands at the headline of Judaism - the religion of Israel after the Babylonian Exile.

Behind Wellhausen's research lay a good deal of *parti-pris* attitude. He believed that JE represented natural religion, near to its humane roots in daily experience. He saw in what followed the deadening hand of organisational religion, stifling what he thought was the free spirit of ordinary humans in favour of a professional, clerical

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<sup>2</sup> Though this guideline is not always exclusive, and therefore not always reliable

orthodoxy which excluded humanity and exalted formalism and religiosity. Instead of a living, breathing popular faith, Judaism becomes a deadening authority-structure. It was Wellhausen's view that the same could be said of the Christian Church, which did a similar hatchet-job on the inspiration of Jesus of Nazareth; all of which suggests that he was proceeding to impose a Hegelian pattern on the whole religious history of Israel and Christianity alike.<sup>3</sup> What is very unfortunate is that we can easily perceive in him a share of that dislike of Judaism which was to bear such vile fruit in the succeeding century. No scholar ever writes or thinks completely outside the currents of thought of his time.

There were great fights over Wellhausen: in England professors and even one Bishop<sup>4</sup> were deposed from their chairs for sympathising with him. But the theory gained inexorable ground in the academic world. The only dissidents were Jews (unsurprisingly, since the prejudicial view of Judaism seemed more and more inseparable from it). Meanwhile, scholars have been busy dividing and subdividing the sources, multiplying the alleged different waves within each into more and more sections, each delineated by letters and numbers, not only for the proposed individual sources, but for several different sets of redactions: as Fr Blenkinsopp wryly notes, "producing a veritable alphabet soup of algebraic signs". His judgment is that

If the demand for absolute consistency is pressed, the sources tend to collapse and to disintegrate into a multiplicity of components or strands.<sup>5</sup>

It is here that Hermann Gunkel arrives on the scene. He was content to leave the alphabet-makers to their games, and decided instead to characterise each identifiable unit within the text of Genesis, and to assign it a literary type based on a supposed oral original lying behind the literature. For instance, he took the story of the Patriarchs and labelled it as *saga*. The term originates in the discussion of mediaeval Icelandic prose narratives, perhaps incorporating more ancient oral traditions. He was doing something very influential and creative, but he was also a bit of a berserker, going very much on his personal instincts and emotions in establishing his varieties of literature. As Fr Blenkinsopp remarks,

One problem left unsolved by Gunkel is the rather fundamental one of how to determine the oral basis of a literary work. He operated partly by intuition and partly by making certain assumptions about the nature of early Israelite society. On this latter point he seems to have been misled by the analogy with European and especially Germanic antiquity. The social setting of the storyteller entertaining his audience around the fire on a winter night is perfectly fitting for the peasant culture of the Black Forest, but rather less so for early Israel. There is also the need to distinguish between narrative formed as a result of oral composition and transmission, and a literary work incorporating oral traditions. The Kalevala epic of Finland is full of oral folklore material, yet it is a

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<sup>3</sup> Wellhausen resigned as a trainer of Christian ministers for this reason, and became a purely academic scholar

<sup>4</sup> John William Colenso of Natal, dep 1869

<sup>5</sup> Blenkinsopp, op cit p 14

literary work composed by Elias Lönnrot in the 1830's and 1840's. Failure to keep in mind this distinction has bedevilled discussion of oral tradition in the Old Testament context since Gunkel's time.<sup>6</sup>

Thus was born *formsgeschichte*, form criticism. We shall be investigating the more scientific developments of it in weeks to come.

Gerhard von Rad took as the foundation oral tradition (and text) of the Hexateuch the simple statement set out for the Israelite farmer at the harvest festival, to be found in Dt 26:5-10:

<sup>5</sup> In the presence of Yahweh your God, you will then pronounce these words: "My father was a wandering Aramaean, who went down to Egypt with a small group of men, and stayed there, until he there became a great, powerful and numerous nation.

<sup>6</sup> The Egyptians ill-treated us, they oppressed us and inflicted harsh slavery on us.

<sup>7</sup> But we called on Yahweh, God of our ancestors. Yahweh heard our voice and saw our misery, our toil and our oppression;

<sup>8</sup> and Yahweh brought us out of Egypt with mighty hand and outstretched arm, with great terror, and with signs and wonders.

<sup>9</sup> He brought us here and has given us this country, a country flowing with milk and honey.

<sup>10</sup> Hence, I now bring the first-fruits of the soil that you, Yahweh, have given me." 'You will then lay them before Yahweh your God, and prostrate yourself in the presence of Yahweh your God.

You will notice that this text - which von Rad identifies as a *credal statement* - does indeed tell the story of Israel from Jacob (wandering Aramaean) to the believer's present; however, it omits the massive presence in the Hexateuch of the whole business of Sinai and the whole of the Mosaic Law. He concluded that the legal traditions of Sinai emanate from a different source from the tradition of the saving deeds of God. He decided that the traditions embodied in this creed belong to the festival of Pentecost (Shavuot) which began at Gilgal in the time of the Judges: the Sinai traditions he identified as coming from the feast of Tabernacles (Succoth) at Shechem, in the central highlands of Israel. Who united these separate traditions? Von Rad thinks that the Jahwist did it during the time of the united monarchy (before the death of Solomon, therefore) and that he also added the primeval history in Genesis 1 - 12, as the preface to his story of the Patriarchs, from the promise to Abraham up to the occupation of the land. So he thought the whole of the Pentateuch began as oral traditions associated with the tribal sanctuaries and their various festivals, and that these traditions enshrined and transmitted and amplified the oral deposit, which became time-honoured *and therefore immutable*. This accounts well for the feeling that sometimes obtrudes, that the editors have been less than careful in sewing the different sources together harmoniously. The great figure in von Rad's mind is the Jahwist himself, envisaged as a bright star of Solomon's court, a characterisation that has received much acceptance among scholars. However, the fashion has shifted to a far later dating for the actual text, many scholars opting for a post-exilic or

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<sup>6</sup> Op cit p 15

Deuteronomistic authorship of the whole Pentateuch; one argument is that since there are no internal or external references to the alleged documents J, E, P and D, it is useless and impossible for us to reconstruct them.

The arguments never end, and the depth of scepticism sometimes seems to be the prize scholars most want to acquire. From our point of view, it seems important to use what has been written and suggested by the wisest of critics as a way to open up the meaning of the Scriptures as the source of our pastoral life; as material for preaching, and as inspiration for prayer. One of the least explored areas in the field is actually the simple homiletic one of responding to the theology and narrative by receiving its religious insight, in a spirit of prayer.