

First Assignment

Guy Paquin

RGB1005H online: Introduction to the Old Testament

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Question 1) Explain briefly the documentary hypothesis that accounts for the divergent materials in the pentateuchal narratives.

Lawrence Boadt in *Reading the New Testament: An Introduction*¹ describes how biblical scholars developed the “documentary hypothesis” in order to explain the many inconsistencies and repetitions in the first five books of the Bible or the “Pentateuch”. There are, for example, two different versions of creation in the first three chapters of Genesis. The “documentary hypothesis” or “source criticism” explains the existence of repetitions by arguing that the final version of the Pentateuch is based on a number of different written sources.

The Bible and tradition attribute the authorship of the Pentateuch to Moses. The Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch was first questioned in the seventeenth century when scholars started to apply the “scientific reasoning” to the Biblical text. Theologian Richard Simon and philosopher Baruch Spinoza noted that the material in the Pentateuch was full of repetitions and contradictions and lacked the style of a single author. Jean Astruc, a medical professor writing in the next century, was the first to provide a rationale for the repetitions. He suggested that Moses combined two different written texts. The two sources could be identified based on stylistic differences but mainly on the different terms used to refer to God. One source used the Hebrew word “Elohim” and the other source used the word term “Yahweh” or “Yahweh Elohim”. Source criticism explained, for example, the presence of two creation stories: the creation story in Genesis 1 uses the name “Elohim”; the creation story in Genesis 2-3 uses the name “Yahweh Elohim”.

¹ Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction*, 2nd ed., revised & updated by Richard Clifford and Daniel Harrington (New York: Paulist Press, 2012). [page numbe?]

Initially, scholars thought that there were only two sources, the “Yahwist” and the “Elohist”. However, biblical scholars soon identified a third source which became known as the “Priestly” source and consisted of genealogies, lists, rituals and laws and other writings of a cultic or liturgical nature. For example, the creation account in Genesis 1 with its majestic hymn-like style is considered to come from the Priestly source. Finally, the unique style of the book of the Deuteronomy with its long speeches and sermons led to the identification of a fourth source, the “Deuteronomist”. These four sources came to be known by their first letters: “J” (for German Jahve), “E”, “P” and “D” and this source theory is often referred to as the “JEPD” theory.

The four-source theory or “documentary hypothesis” is most closely associated with nineteenth century German biblical scholar, Julius Wellhausen. In his book *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (1878), Wellhausen tied the emergence of the four sources to critical junctures in Israel’s history. According to Wellhausen, J originated in Judah during the last years of the reign of Solomon or shortly after the northern and southern kingdoms split in 922 BCE, and was written from the perspective of the southern kingdom, i.e., to glorify Jerusalem and the kings of Judah. J sees God walking and talking with people, and stresses blessing. E is said to have emerged in the northern kingdom after the split, and preserves traditions associated with places in the north. E emphasizes the covenantal traditions (as opposed to the monarchy) and sees God as more distant. The two sources existed side by side until the northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians in 722 BCE and northerners fled south bringing the E document with them. At some point in the next century the two traditions were combined into one document. The D source is said to have emerged during the same period, i.e., during the seventh century. According to Wellhausen, the authors of D were priests and prophets who were concerned with the bad

religious practices of Judah. D consists of long sermons on the need for faithfulness to the covenant if the people are to receive the blessings of the Promised Land and has a moralistic vision of God. The fourth source, P, is a collection of cultic and legal traditions thought to have been compiled by a school of priests during the Babylonian exile (597-539). It offered a way for the people to honour the covenant with God independent of the external circumstances.

According to Wellhausen these four sources were finally combined to create the “Pentateuch” in its current form by a priestly school after the return from exile in 539.

It is now recognized that the classic formulation of the “documentary hypothesis” is too simplistic. Form criticism, which emerged in the early 1900s, focuses on the oral tradition underlying the written sources and shows how the written text incorporated traditional material (e.g., myths, hero sagas, laws) some of which is much more ancient and may actually date to the time of Moses. As well, the “documentary hypothesis” itself has undergone numerous modifications. For example, many scholars no longer believe there is a separate “E” source and there are ongoing debates about the origins of the J source. Some scholars see these controversies as evidence that the source theory is fundamentally flawed and should be discarded.² However, many believe that the “documentary hypothesis,” combined with the insights of form criticism, provide us with tools which help us to understand better how the beliefs and understandings of a particular faith community evolved and adapted in response to changing circumstances. The source theory thus reminds us that the biblical text is grounded in the experience of the living spirit of God present in history.

² Rolf Rendtorff, "What Happened to the 'Yahwist'?: Reflections after Thirty Years," *SBL Forum*, n.p. [cited June 2006]. Accessed January 22, 2015 Online:<http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=553> and the response by John Van Seters, "Some remarks of the paper by Rolf Rendtorff, 'What happened to the 'Yahwist'?'", *SBL Forum*, n.p. [cited June 2006]. Accessed January 22, 2015. Online: <http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=561>

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