

Pentateuchal Criticism: No Clear Future*

NORMAN E. WAGNER

IN THIS YEAR of Canadian Centennial celebrations it is common practice for individuals and groups to pause and look back one hundred years to assess progress in their several fields of interest. In Old Testament studies this provides a most interesting prospect, for there was a major upheaval in basic assumptions one hundred years ago. This revolution, and it was just that, set the pattern in literary criticism of the Old Testament, and especially of the Pentateuch, for some time. In fact, the Documentary Theory is still sufficiently attractive to many scholars, while to others it serves as a point of departure, but a working point of reference just the same.

It is impossible to date with absolute certainty the emergence of the so-called Documentary Theory, since, like most theories, it was largely the product of its time. There are, however, two major factors which must be reviewed. The first of these is the question of literary origin and development. Prior to 1853, several alternative theories regarding the origin of the Pentateuch were commonly held. Some argued that many fragments had been merged with more or less concern for a unified product.¹ This theory took cognizance of the diverse nature of the sources involved. Other critics supported a supplementary theory which emphasized gradual growth.² According to this view a basic or core tradition was augmented or annotated at several junctures. The two approaches just noted placed the emphasis on different aspects, but both were able to accommodate unity and diversity.

Various modifications of these theories could be mentioned, but they did not substantially alter the approaches being used. It was not until just over a century ago that a major landmark was reached. In 1853 Hermann Hupfeld presented what came to be known as the new Documentary Theory, in which he argued for separate documents of considerable extent having been combined by several editorial redactors at distinct points in history. This meant that unlike former scholars who worked on the supposition of small fragments which were either combined with one another or added to an existing nucleus, critics were now considering extensive documents which originated quite independently of one another. Hupfeld's view was eventually accepted, but it would be misleading to regard this acceptance as having taken place without further debate. Friedrich Bleek, who was one of the foremost defenders of a supplementary theory, was

*This paper was read at the 35th Annual Meeting of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies, McGill University, Montreal, May 15-17, 1967.

1. E.g. Alexander Geddes and Johann Vater, both writing at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

2. Heinrich Ewald was a leader in this approach, although he later changed his mind.

always held in high esteem by Julius Wellhausen, who did so much to promote the new Documentary Theory. In fact, Wellhausen himself published a revised edition of Bleek's *Introduction* in 1886 and spoke highly of it.³ Furthermore, the important commentary on Genesis by F. Tuch appeared in its second edition in 1871, that is, almost twenty years after Hupfeld's work was published.⁴ Tuch's work is a well-presented case in favour of a supplementary theory and is still worth careful study today. Nevertheless, the documentary approach won the day and became the generally accepted theory for the future.

The second aspect of the problem—and one which overshadowed the question of literary relationship among the various sources—had to do with the chronological order and historical validity of the material. Hupfeld had not doubted that the material later to be called P was the most ancient and served as the basic source. Bleek and Tuch also worked under this assumption. If we were to use the terminology familiar to us today, we could designate the order accepted by them as: P, E, J. Serious doubts concerning this order began to appear in various quarters, but the two scholars who faced the whole question most thoroughly were Abraham Kuenen and Karl Graf. There is no need to debate at length which of these men deserves the credit for having been first in print with a revised system. Each has found a champion in recent publications.⁵ Graf's book of 1865 [listed as 1866] still did not suggest a complete change in sequence, but in a personal letter to Eduard Reuss, written on October 8, 1866, Graf indicated that he was prepared to accept Kuenen's view that the various sources were in reverse order. Graf's important dictionary article on the "Grundschrift," published in 1869, is likely to be regarded as the first and clearest early statement of that order of development which was soon to be almost universally accepted.⁶ Kuenen's influence is, however, not to be underestimated.⁷ A strong reaction against questioning the priority of the "Grundschrift" (or P) came from Riehm in 1868,⁸ and in a very significant study by Th. Nöldeke.⁹ Nöldeke identified the P material with precision, and it is interesting to note that, while the order was subsequently reversed, his assignment of material to P has remained standard to this day. In actual fact, while Nöldeke set out to defend the antiquity of P, his study had the opposite effect, in so far as his great insight in delineating P served as a valuable resource to other scholars for establishing P's lateness.

It was thus exactly one hundred years ago that the large step of reversing the order of sources really began. From that time onwards, it became the

3. F. Bleek, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, 5th ed. (Berlin: Reimer, 1886); cf. especially pp. 3f.

4. F. Tuch, *Commentar über die Genesis*, 2nd ed., rev. by A. Arnold (Halle: Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses, 1871).

5. Cf. S. R. Külling, *Zur Datierung der "Genesis-P-Stücke"* (Kampen: Kok, 1964), pp. 5-20; S. J. de Vries, "The Hexateuchal Criticism of Abraham Kuenen," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 82 (1963), 31-57.

6. *Archiv für wissenschaftliche Erforschung des Alten Testaments*, 1 (1869), 466-77.

7. Külling, *Zur Datierung der "Genesis-P-Stücke"*, pp. 13-15, admits this as well.

8. *Theologische Studien und Kritiken*, 1868, pp. 350-79.

9. Th. Nöldeke, *Untersuchungen zur Kritik des Alten Testaments* (Kiel: Schwes, 1869).

accepted theory to place the whole priestly-legal material, not at the beginning, but at the end, of Hebrew history. One could not longer speak of P, E, J—to use later terms—but instead J, E, D, P became the slogan for the future. It required only the genius of Julius Wellhausen to systematize and popularize this new view.¹⁰ By combining the new Documentary Theory with a whole new concept of religio-historical development, Wellhausen constructed such an impressive scheme that it is still prominent today—to the displeasure of some, to be sure. It is entirely in order to call the last two (or perhaps three) decades of the last century the golden age of the classical Documentary Theory. Further refinements were made and for many years to come scholars were confident that a solution had been reached and that only minor points would be modified in the future.

But what of 1967? It is no secret that classical Wellhausenianism has passed its prime. It is, however, just as obvious that no new system has yet emerged to take its place. Objections have been raised and modifications have been suggested, and perhaps that is all that can be expected. Our distrust of grandiose systems in general may not permit us to construct a more acceptable system to replace that of Wellhausen. Be that as it may, we owe it to ourselves to sketch the development since his time.

Once the broad outlines of the new Documentary Theory had been spelled out, the minute details had to be examined. One result was the further division and subdivision of the documents. Wellhausen himself had felt that J was composite.¹¹ Karl Budde, Hermann Gunkel, Rudolph Smend, Eduard Meyer, Johannes Meinhold, Otto Eissfeldt, C. A. Simpson, Robert Pfeiffer, and an all-but-forgotten French critic, Bruston, who wrote in 1885, are but a few of the critics who have made major contributions to this aspect of study. The arguments raised by these critics are not easily brushed aside. It is difficult to understand how a term such as J, for example, can be used today without further qualification. The other sources have also been regarded as composite, and we may note Cornill and Procksch as representatives of this view with regard to E, and von Rad as one who has subdivided P. We may not agree with this further subdivision, but it constitutes a major emphasis in recent years and should be considered before a conclusion can be reached.

With the further fragmentation of the sources, the question of the relationship, not only between the major documents, but also among their constituent parts, has once more become important. For example, is J² a supplement building on J¹ or is it entirely separate, perhaps originating in a different locale, and later merged with J¹ by an editor? Defenders can be found for both views.¹² C. A. Simpson somehow is able to accept both alternatives.¹³ What this development really does is to bring the old supplementary theory back into consideration; to this we shall refer below. In fact,

10. Wellhausen's best-known work is *Die Composition des Hexateuchs und der historischen Bücher des Alten Testaments* (Berlin: Reimer, 1889).

11. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 8, 207–8.

12. E.g. R. Smend, *Die Erzählung des Hexateuch auf ihre Quellen untersucht* (Berlin: Reimer, 1912); O. Eissfeldt, *Hexateuch-Synopse* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1922).

13. C. A. Simpson, *The Early Traditions of Israel* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1948).

after one hundred years of literary analysis Pentateuchal criticism is no longer simply a matter of chronological order and literary approach. Uncertainty abounds regarding both the nature and extent of the sources and their relation to one another.

Another factor worthy of consideration is the way in which concern with other matters has played down the literary question. For example, Gunkel's work on oral tradition and on form-critical evaluation of the separate stories could be viewed as an alternative to literary analysis. Alt's analysis of patriarchal religion and Noth's work on Pentateuchal law are significant new approaches. Some of these emphases arise from a scholar's belief that to speak of literary criticism at all is no longer legitimate. Yet, in most cases it must be borne in mind that the work of these critics is grounded in a literary approach, even though from this stance they have moved further. Gunkel and Noth make constant use of documentary analysis and Alt, in fact, made much of the documentary evidence in launching his study of the God(s) of the Fathers.¹⁴

We have intentionally used the term "source," rather than "document," because it is sufficiently flexible to include both oral and written material (not necessarily in fixed unalterable form). One thing is certain: the questions raised by the sources themselves are still with us. We may deplore the simple evolutionary answers of Wellhausen and others, but rejection of their solutions does not provide an answer to the riddle of how this material reached its present form.

At this point, we shall attempt to suggest a few guidelines or generalizations which might serve to stimulate some oblique approaches to the problems involved, in the hope that progress can be made towards obtaining a clearer picture.

(1) One of the most disturbing features of much biblical scholarship today is the failure to accept the limitations of a particular aspect of research. It is very tempting to feel that one's private area of study holds all the answers. An expert on textual criticism can argue, for example, that unless the precise text is worked out, the scholar may be basing his conclusions on a misreading. A lexicographer can make out an equally good case for full understanding of a given word. An archaeologist can defend his field of study as basic to filling in the gaps in our understanding of a story or entire book. One could go on to speak of literary style, religious assumptions, psychological and sociological considerations, and so on. It is foolish to question the validity of any of these approaches, so long as they are based on a methodology which is sound and their necessary limitations are accepted. For instance, if an archaeologist should find a large staircase at Bethel, it would not prove that Jacob saw angels in a dream nor that the Jacob stories are basically historical. This may sound foolish, but too often the big gap between archaeological discovery and well-considered writing of history is bridged far too quickly. On the other hand, literary analysis does not lead

14. Cf. Albrecht Alt, *Der Gott der Väter: Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament*, III. Folge, Heft 12 (Leipzig: Staatliche Forschungsinstitut, 1929), pp. 9ff.

to historical reconstruction with any more certainty than does the archaeological find. Each discipline can make a contribution to our total understanding, but each must learn its place. This is not the time to attack the assumptions of any one discipline involved, but the problem is sufficiently acute to demand a great deal of attention.

(2) Through the years the terms Hexateuch, Pentateuch, and Tetrateuch have been used nearly synonymously, depending upon whether or not one chose to include Joshua and Deuteronomy in the discussion. This problem has been attacked by Martin Noth, who introduced the idea of a Deuteronomistic history work (Deuteronomy-Kings) and a remaining Tetrateuch.¹⁵ For the moment, however, it is our conviction that it is at the very beginning of the Pentateuch that the greatest problem exists. It has been assumed for far too long that the material in Genesis is continued in Exodus and Numbers. Now, it may be that a final editor—call him P if you wish—brought traditions together into the present order. Perhaps this was even done by an editor who preceded P. It is, however, not legitimate to assume, without further proof, that what one calls J or E in Genesis is from the same source as what is called J or E in Exodus. This point has been made in the past but is generally ignored.¹⁶ In a discussion of Eissfeldt's *Hexateuch-Synopse*, a critic could object to Eissfeldt's theory on the ground that beyond the Book of Genesis the suggested L source is very fragmentary.¹⁷ A much more reasonable conclusion would be that perhaps, when we get beyond Exodus 1 and 2, we are entering an entirely different complex of tradition. When one considers, on the one hand, the central role played by the Mosaic (and especially by Exodus) material in Israel's later literature and, on the other hand, the virtual silence concerning the Patriarchs in pre-exilic literature, a further reason is introduced which cannot be lightly brushed aside. The present writer is engaged in a thorough study of this aspect of the problem and can only state at this time that he finds it extremely difficult to unite Patriarchal-Exodus traditions at an early date.¹⁸

One must, therefore, reconsider both extent and terminology when speaking of Pentateuchal sources. Until one is convinced of the connection, it is surely illegitimate to use evidence from one part to bolster one's theory in another section. This applies equally to the individual books themselves. For example, the so-called E material in Genesis is generally viewed as having arisen in the North. This theory is based primarily on the observation that in the Joseph Story, the core of which attributed to E, a Northern point of view is manifested. Yet, when one turns to Genesis 20–22, the only block

15. Cf. M. Noth, *Ueberlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien: Schriften der Königsberger Gelehrten Gesellschaft: Geisteswissenschaftliche Klasse*, 18. Jahr, Heft 2 (Halle: Niemeyer, 1943).

16. Cf. e.g. Aage Bentzen, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 5th ed. (Copenhagen: Gad, 1959), vol. II, pp. 20–24.

17. Cf. R. H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948), p. 159.

18. The literature on this subject is not extensive; see however Willy Staerk, *Studien zur Religions- und Sprachgeschichte des Alten Testaments*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Reimer, 1899), and Kurt Galling, *Die Erwählungstraditionen Israels: Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 48 (Giessen: Töpelmann, 1928).

of material in the Abraham cycle designated as E, reference is made only to Abraham's life and activities in the deep South of Palestine. In either case the designation E may be reasonably appropriate, but it tends to encourage a false impression, namely, that these separate blocks of E material are of common origin. We must, therefore, re-examine the relationships among parts of Genesis itself. Not only does the primeval history (chapters 1-11) differ from the patriarchal stories, as many have noted,¹⁹ but even in the case of the patriarchal stories themselves there is some question as to their common literary origin, to say nothing of their diverse oral background. Jacob and Abraham appear in quite different roles in extra-Pentateuchal literature, while Isaac and Joseph play no significant roles at all. When one considers as well the very complicated question of the origin of the twelve tribes and their connection with Jacob-Israel, it ought to become clear that simply to speak of J and E as if they had identical origins is a gross oversimplification, and that the problem needs a new approach.

(3) If some move is made to redefine the limits of the sources in question, it becomes clear that the whole issue of literary origin must be re-examined. This of course has been advocated since Gunkel's commentary of 1903, but it has had little effect. The disturbing thing about Gunkel's own work is that, after putting forth a programme for a more realistic approach to the Pentateuch, he proceeded to incorporate the arguments of many of the purely literary critics; in fact, his own solutions were often unrelated to his proposed method. Apart from its concentration on the smaller component parts, Gunkel's final solution is not very different from that of other critics, many of whom lacked his appreciation for the literature involved. Many voices have been raised concerning the artificiality of the "scissors and paste" techniques of classical documentary criticism. One positive reaction to that criticism has been the so-called oral-tradition approach of several Scandinavians, but on the whole the scholarly world has done little to provide workable alternatives. One cannot simply ignore the efforts of Eissfeldt, Pfeiffer, Simpson, and others, and withdraw into a non-committal position, speaking of a J and an E in sweeping generalities, on the ground that literary critics have dissected and fragmented individual verses beyond all recognition, and that as a result the situation is so chaotic that solution is impossible. Fragmenting separate verses is in itself no sin. The real question has to do with an acceptable, comprehensive methodology. If the method itself is sound, and its assumptions appear to be realistic in the light of current studies in all the relevant areas, one may not prejudice the outcome in advance by deciding how minute the analysis may become. In general, it seems that the greatest scope for a new approach is in the replacement of the concept of uncreative editors or redactors by a more realistic approach. Without commenting on the details of the work, the present writer wishes to say that he is greatly impressed by an instructive article by Sandmel, called "The Haggada within Scripture."²⁰ In this article, Sandmel describes the

19. E.g. B. D. Napier, *From Faith to Faith* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955), p. 71.

20. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 80 (1961), 105-22.

growth of Pentateuchal material as a midrashic process of periodic augmentation and annotation. In a sense, Volz and Rudolph advocated a similar approach when they argued for J as the only real "source," E being regarded as a later annotator.²¹ Similarly, Winnett presented a study of the Mosaic tradition along these lines, in a volume which deserves a far more serious reception than it has yet received.²² In this connection it is instructive to heed the following comment from the monumental work on world literature by H. M. and N. K. Chadwick, published in 1936:

Although we know that this view is contrary to the general opinion of Biblical scholars, we find it difficult to escape from the suspicion that the growth of the Hexateuch may have had something in common with that of the Mahābhārata. In both cases the nucleus consists of a story or stories, preserved at first by oral tradition, and frequently showing variant accounts of incidents. . . . In both cases the stories received in course of time voluminous accretions of didactic matter, both moral didactic and antiquarian didactic—represented in the Hexateuch by D and P respectively.²³

The emphasis of study will then turn away from merely literary speculation or obscure historical allusions to a thorough attempt to get at the reason for further additions or new interpretations. In this way, a real bridge can be built to the results of form-criticism as well.

One may note in this connection the following comment by Curt Kuhl:

In many instances a later pen has glossed or interpreted the original text with his own additions, or tried to bring it up to date for his own age. Nowadays less and less attention is paid to the question of authenticity, which previously played a large part in Old Testament research. A new conception has arisen concerned with finding out what was the purpose behind these additions and with understanding the composition as such. Why did the redactor arrange the parts as we now find them—sometimes so unreconciled and so contradictory that the transitions and breaks are immediately recognisable? Was this really mere literary incompetence? Or is there a definite purpose behind it? We are touching here on a problem on which little work has been done but which may well put a better complexion on the activities of the redactors, previously such objects of derision. The individual books and collections have not only a pre-history but a posthistory.²⁴

(4) Finally, we must make a few brief comments on the chronological order of the various sources. We began this study by noting that a century ago the long-held order of the sources was completely reversed. Apart from shifts in relative dating, pushing J back a few centuries or modifying the context in which D appeared, the basic order still endures. Even with the subdivision of sources, this over-all scheme has still been preserved. For example, if J is considered composite, scholars will still argue that J¹ and J² were merged prior to any contact with E, and so on. Once more, we feel

21. Cf. P. Volz-W. Rudolph, *Der Elohst als Erzähler: Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 63 (Giessen: Töpelmann, 1933).

22. Cf. F. V. Winnett, *The Mosaic Tradition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1949).

23. H. Munro Chadwick and N. Kershaw Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature*, vol. II (Cambridge: University Press, 1936), p. 751.

24. C. Kuhl, *The Old Testament: Its Origins and Composition* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1961), p. 299.

that it is just at this point that a major problem lies. In the light of the comments in the preceding sections, it must be clear that the traditional concept of large literary documents must give way to something more realistic. We would suggest successive revisions or editions, which were promulgated at specific times and under specific conditions. Could it not be, then, that a particular emphasis might be encountered on more than one occasion? While it may be that a very early tradition bears a Yahwistic stamp, is it not possible that several centuries later another thorough Yahwistic edition was attempted? One need think only of Genesis 16: 11ff., where the writer is at great pains to give a Yahwistic interpretation to a narrative which originally dealt with an El tradition. With this idea one might compare the studies by Whybray on Hebrew Wisdom literature in which he has shown conclusively how earlier, secular wisdom material was given a distinctive Yahwistic setting at a later time.²⁵

In a footnote on an article dealing with Psalm 82, Julian Morgenstern wrote the following:

For many and to me very cogent considerations I can not share in the opinion of practically all biblical scholars that the several J strata of Gen. 1-11 must necessarily be pre-exilic by virtue of their being indisputably a part of J. The assumption that all strata of J must be under all conditions pre-exilic and that the entire J school of writing came to an end with the Babylonian Exile or, as most scholars hold, even somewhat earlier, previous to the rise of the Deuteronomistic school, is altogether gratuitous. There is not the slightest reason why the two schools may not have existed side by side for quite some time, and even have persisted into the post-exilic period, and even why the J school of thought and literary style should not have continued to express itself in the eschatological and apocalyptic writings of the third and second centuries B.C. and thereafter. At any rate, for compelling reasons I must assign the J strata in Gen. 1-11 to the universalistic period of Jewish thought and practice, 516-485 B.C., the period when the influence of North-Semitic religion and mythology pervaded Jewish thought, literature and religious practice.²⁶

While Morgenstern refers especially to Gen. 1-11, there is no reason to confine these comments to that section alone. In fact, Winnett has given a few brief reasons for suggesting wider application to all of Genesis of the idea of a late-J revision.²⁷ The arguments advanced are not all of equal weight, but their cumulative effect must be seriously regarded.

No attempt has been made in this brief paper to establish a new theory for solving the riddle of the origin of the Pentateuch. It is hoped, however, that some of the comments will stimulate others to consider alternative approaches, so that the current chaotic situation, which is discouraging to all serious students, can be viewed realistically, in order that this important area of the Old Testament may be fully appreciated.

25. Cf. R. N. Whybray, *Wisdom in Proverbs* (Naperville: Allenson, 1965).

26. J. Morgenstern, "The Mythological Background of Psalm 82," *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 14 (1939), pp. 93f.

27. Cf. F. V. Winnett, "Re-examining the Foundations," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 84 (1965), 1-19.