

“YEA,
Hath God
Said...?”

John J. Mitchell

John J. Mitchell, formerly an instructor in Hebrew at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and is employed as a writer of Christian Education material for that church.

Old Testament “Higher Criticism”

The first question ever asked on the face of this globe is one that has been repeated ever since. In his attempt to subvert the human race, the Serpent approached the woman with a question (because she was the curious sort?). “Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?” (Genesis 3:1).

A simple question, did God say this or not? The Serpent’s opening gambit may be interpreted that way. But was there not a dangerous thorn hidden in the plain foliage of the words? To ask the question was to attack God’s character, to strike at his benevolence and veracity.

“Hath God said?” easily suggested more: “Yea, has God given you ALL of the trees? Has God, who claims to be generous, has he given you creatures all he might have?” So Eve heard it, and her greed aroused, she took the steps that led to destruction.

Despite its devastating effect in Eden--nay, because of it -- this question still plagues mankind. “Does God really expect me to be perfect? Would a loving

God deny me what I want?" How easy it is to doubt our Creator and even to despise his love!

PROLEGOMENA: GOD HAS SPOKEN

The Tempter never meant to suggest that perhaps God had not spoken about those trees. He knew God had, and so did Eve. In theologians' jargon, there was no problem of prolegomena, of determining whether God had actually communicated to man.

There is no such problem for us either. The heavens declare it, the earth shows it, and the Scriptures plainly testify that God has spoken. Nor does Scripture assert its own God-giveness in only one or two isolated "proof-texts"; it is the Bible's pervasive claim. For the Christian, this is truth, accepted from God's mouth even as any other biblical teaching is received.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM: EXACTLY WHAT GOD SAID

The Serpent knew God had spoken. Neither did the Tempter question the precise wording of what God said. He knew, and so did Eve.

But can we be so certain today? Are the copies of copies of the original inspired writings still faithful reproductions of God's Word? The oldest copies available to us vary amongst themselves. Which variant is right? It is the work of textual criticism to collect these variants, study them, and seek to determine what the original "autographa" must have been. Has such study been successful?

Textual scholars are agreed that what we now have is indeed a remarkably faithful preservation of the originals. Perhaps one in a thousand words is

doubtful; most of these involve insignificant details; many of the others have reasonable solutions. The uncertainties that do exist affect not a single important teaching of Scripture.

We can only conclude, with thanksgiving, that the God who first gave his Word to men has also preserved it for us.

HIGHER CRITICISM: HOW GOD SAID IT

The Serpent knew God had spoken, and what God had said; Eve was equally well-informed. Moreover, no question was raised as to how God had communicated to his creatures.

No doubt God spoke to Adam directly and audibly. But this is not so for us. It is true that the Bible is God's Word; but it is equally true that it is made up of the words of a variety of men. When "holy men of God spoke as they were moved (or "borne along") by the Holy Ghost," they were not (except in limited instances) acting as God's stenographers; they were not robots manipulated by an infinite computer. The words of Moses are his words, in his language, affected by his personality and cultural experiences. Though so "moved" by the Spirit that his words are also God's inerrant words, they are still the words of the man Moses.

How God worked to accomplish this is not explained. But since it is a fact, to understand God's Word we need to understand its human authors. Who they were, when they lived, what they knew, how they thought, all are important areas for study. This investigative study of the Bible's human authors is set forth in "Introductions" to the Bible, and is often called (unfortunately) "higher criticism" in distinction from textual or "lower" criticism of the text itself.

NEGATIVE CRITICISM: LET MAN JUDGE

The Serpent did not open with a frontal assault. "Yea, hath God said?" is a cleverly camouflaged innuendo. It says, "My dear Eve, you are a rational being, quite capable of determining what is 'true for you.' Judge for yourself whether you will accept God's say-so!" Even in its initial implication, the question suggested that Eve should "be as God, knowing good and evil" without reference to God's declarations.

So it is with us. Outright rejection of God's Word does not often undermine the faith of a believer. Such attacks have been made, from Pharaoh to Pilate, from Celsus to Goethe and on to the "God-is-dead theologians." Such attacks are truly dangerous when they are coupled to an appeal to man's supposedly autonomous judgment.

Criticism, textual or "higher," can be valuable in understanding the Bible. But when it also asks the Serpent's question, appealing to human reason apart from God's truth, criticism becomes destruction. It has become the Tempter's wedge between the creature and the Creator.

EARLY OLD TESTAMENT CRITICISM

"Yea, hat God said?" is actually, "Yea, man can and must be the ultimate judge!" All negative criticism begins with this conceit, and nowhere is this plainer than in the area of Old Testament criticism.

Early Christian Era. The new Christian faith was bound to attract dissent. Pagans sneered at the anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Old Testament. Human self-conceit displayed itself in the nearly universal Mediterranean belief in ultimate dualism of good and evil, spirit and matter, mind and body.

Since the Old Testament was so obviously more materialistic than the spiritual New, it was often rejected entirely -- and its God openly derided as corrupt, impotent, stupid and immoral.

Though this dualism did affect some branches of the church, generally the Ante-Nicene fathers resisted and refuted the attacks, upholding the divine authorship of the Bible as a whole.

Through the "Dark Ages." Pagan attacks continued, with Neo-platonists confidently denying that Daniel could have been written before the second century B.C. This is the conceit of the "universal negative," the delusion that human reason can infallibly decide what is impossible.

Within the church, negative criticisms were entertained by the men at Antioch. They listed "discrepancies," wondered about the Mosaic origin of the Pentateuch, denied the inspiration of Solomon's Song and of parts of Job. As the church entered the "Dark Ages," biblical scholarship was left to the Jews and Arabs. These scholars professed to find "contradictions," supposed that Ezra had written the Pentateuch, dated Isaiah 40—66 well after that prophet's own day. Almost every negative criticism heard today was first voiced a thousand years ago!

NEGATIVE CRITICISM AND THE REFORMATION

With the Renaissance, men returned to the ideals of Greek antiquity -- including the sufficiency of man's reason to judge all things. In parallel, though born of different parentage, the Reformation sent men back to the Scriptures as God's infallible authority for man.

These two forces combined to redevelop the study of the Bible's original languages. The invention of printing made

God's Word available to anyone who could read it. God's sovereign grace was rediscovered and proclaimed anew. Yet with this rebirth of truth there grew up an increasing skepticism and rejection of any authority outside of man himself. The old dualism, never entirely dead, enjoyed a resurgence. Among some Anabaptists particularly, Old Testament "legalism" was derided in favor of New Testament "freedom" -- a dichotomy often resulting in licentiousness. To be sure, the opposite extreme could be seen in the Puritan goal of an Old Testament-style theocracy both in England and New England. But bifurcation of the Bible was so much accepted at last that any calumny of the Old Testament could gain a receptive hearing.

As the Reformation stabilized in the period of seventeenth-century creed writing, the negative spirit reasserted itself openly. Moses, the human author of Old Testament law, was a favorite target.

THE DOCUMENTARY HYPOTHESIS

Bible scholars had long been aware that certain details in Moses' books might have been added by a later hand. (Most notably, these "post-Mosaica" include Deuteronomy's account of Moses' death.) Ezra was often given credit for these, and in some cases was thought to have written all the five books of the Pentateuch either as a restoration of Moses' work, a compilation of Mosaic fragments, or as the primary author.

But it was a deeper question that gained attention in the early eighteenth century, the question of Moses' "sources." In 1689, Campegius Vitringa had suggested that Moses used earlier documents. In 1711, H.B. Witter noted that Genesis 1:1-2:4 used Elohim as the divine name, while the "parallel" account in Genesis 2:5-3:24 used Yahweh (or Jehovah), thus

"proving" the existence of two separate source documents.

However, it was Jean Astruc, a French medical doctor, who developed the documentary hypothesis. His criteria for distinguishing documents included the differing use of divine names, "parallel" accounts, and the placing of events out of proper chronological order. Passages employing Elohim (i.e., God) he called document A; those using Jehovah were B; in addition he found documents C through N! Astruc was surprised and pleased at the ease of distinguishing the original documents.

Others tried the same trick. Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (in 1783) distinguished basic documents that he called J and E, after the divine names. His successor, Karl David Ilgen (in 1798), found seventeen documents by three different authors, two Elohist and one Jehovist -- and managed to assign some of Astruc's Jehovah portions to his second Elohist! Apparently the distinctions were not so easy as Astruc thought. None of these men denied the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. Yet they did allow human reason a dangerously large role in biblical criticism. The mixed results point to the subjective nature of the criteria they employed to "distinguish" the documents. So unstable a theory could not hope to maintain itself for long.

EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY CONFUSION

Even the chaos of the early documentary theory seemed stable by comparison with what followed. The door was opened, and rationalistic -- and usually negative -- criticism of the Old Testament soon followed.

The Fragmentary Hypothesis. In 1800, the Scottish Roman Catholic, Alexander

Geddes, opened the new attack. The Pentateuch was compiled from many fragmentary sources, some perhaps dating from Moses, and put in its basic form by a redactor (a sort of free-wheeling editor) in the time of Solomon. Two series of fragments, based on the divine names, might be supposed, but not two documents. The redactor also edited Joshua and thus produced the Hexateuch and not merely a Pentateuch.

Though Geddes' church repudiated his views, others accepted them. In 1805, J.S. Vater professed to find thirty-eight fragments, some from as late as the exile. A.T. Hartmann (in 1831) put the redactor's work after the exile and held that many of the narratives were myths. W.M.L. De Wette (in 1806) dated Deuteronomy in Josiah's reign and all the rest of the Pentateuch afterward, a view that gained wide acceptance.

The Supplement Hypothesis. De Wette also held that the redactor had one document (called E for its use of Elohim) to which fragments were then added -- a document-plus-fragments theory. In 1830, Heinrich Ewald accepted the E-document with supplements, but also proposed a parallel J (or Jehovah) document, from which a later redactor took excerpts into E. Frederick Bleek (in 1836) thought it was the author of Ewald's J document who did the redacting, with the author of Deuteronomy making further supplements about the time of Josiah.

Unfortunately for this form of the supplement theory which was widely accepted, the E document often showed dependence on the prior existence of details in the J document. The inconsistencies soon forced further theorizing, but outright negation of the Scripture's own testimony had clearly been given scholarly standing. "Yea, hath God said?" had become, "No, whoever said it first, it couldn't have been God."

The Crystallization Hypothesis. It had been Ewald whose form of the supplementary hypothesis had succeeded in overturning the fragmentary theory. But Ewald changed his mind, and beginning in 1840 his *History of the People of Israel* set forth a new composite view. He supposed an E document, a J, Deuteronomy, plus numerous fragments. Various redactors combined these parts into a crystallized whole, the process being done about 500 B.C.

By giving independent fragmentary status to any portion that did not seem to fit into a document, Ewald escaped many of the earlier difficulties. But the subjective nature of such a process is quite apparent.

A Modified Documentary Hypothesis. One hundred years after Astruc, the cycle of criticism returned to a theory of documents. In 1853, Hermann Hupfeld asserted that the J portions of Genesis were a continuous document, not merely supplements. The E portions he combined into two documents. These three were merged by a redactor -- who was held accountable for any inconsistencies left over. Deuteronomy was added later.

This view was the starting point for later theories. Hupfeld's four documents are usually designated as P (for the priestly, Levitical parts in which Elohim is used), E (for the second Elohist), J (for the Jehovist), and D (for Deuteronomy, which was usually accepted as a unit in itself).

Astruc had imagined a Moses equipped with scissors and paste, using earlier memoirs plus his own experiences. A century later, the critics had settled on an unknown redactor, equipped with scissors, paste, bad eyesight and a lot of material out of the wastebasket. "Yea, hath God said?" had become, "Who knows? We do know it wasn't Moses, that the New Testament was mistaken,

and that some unknown scribe completed the work."

Hengstenberg's Refutation. It must not be supposed that no answers were made to this destructive criticism. Not alone, but preeminent, was the work of Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg, professor at the University of Berlin and one of the foremost Old Testament scholars of any age. In 1847, his *Dissertations on the Genuineness of the Pentateuch* appeared in English. In it he carefully answers the varied attacks made on the integrity of the books of Moses. The critics' one document-distinguishing criterion with any show of objectivity was that which appealed to the use of the divine names. Hengstenberg showed that this usage was not due to different authors, but to different theological considerations in the context. Thus, Elohim is used exclusively in Genesis 1:1-2:4 since it is God the omnipotent who is in view. In Genesis 2:5 ff., Jehovah is found since here God is condescending to deal with man personally. These rebuttals by Hengstenberg are still valid today. If they had been heeded, Old Testament study would have shown more positive fruit; ignored, the result has been sterile, negative, destructive.

THE DEVELOPMENT HYPOTHESIS

The instability of early nineteenth-century theories called for a better hypothesis. Though actually a documentary theory, the one that took the field is usually called the development hypothesis.

Graf-Keunen-Wellhausen. In 1866, Karl Heinrich Graf noted that the Levitical legislation (Hupfeld's P document) presupposed Deuteronomy. That book in turn presupposed portions of J, particularly Exodus 21—23. J himself had combined

his work with an earlier E; D was added later; and a post-exilic scribe added P. Hupfeld's order had been P E J D; Graf's was E J D P, later modified to J E D P (the order accepted today as the "assured result" of critical study).

In 1869, Abraham Keunen independently advanced a similar view. But it was Julius Wellhausen's writings that carried the field. He proposed two independent documents, J and E. J merged the two. In Josiah's time, D was composed and its author made further modifications. P was Ezra's contribution, the whole being reworked by a later redactor.

Hegel and Darwin. What made Wellhausen's theory so attractive was the underlying philosophical basis -- or bias! It was Hegel's dialectical method, with its ever-onward-and-upward optimism, applied to Israel's history. In this view, Israel's religion grew out of polytheistic myths (the Genesis narratives), gradually achieved centralized worship in the days of Josiah (Deuteronomy), and became increasingly ritualized (the Levitical legislation of P), with a still later reaction among the writing prophets in favor of a universal, ethical theism. The appearance of Darwin's *Origin of Species* and its success in making evolution "scientific," immeasurably helped the acceptance of Wellhausen's very similar theory. "Yea, hath God said?" was plainly, "No, man said it -- and man will continue to evolve upward until he becomes divine."

William Henry Green. Many believing scholars challenged the frank anti-supernaturalism of Wellhausen's view. Not least was Princeton Theological Seminary's chief Old Testament scholar. Green's *The Unity of the Book of Genesis* (1895) painstakingly examined every detail of the critical hypothesis. The theory would make both Deuteronomy and the P document be frauds, falsely claiming Moses as author. Since Christ quoted these with

approval, either he was "a child of his times" (i.e., ignorant) or was also a fraud. Deuteronomy, supposedly preceding P, actually shows frequent dependence on material in P. Basically, however, the theory must be rejected for its anti-supernatural -- and thus, unscientific! -- bias, putting a "natural" evolution of Israel's religion in place of the Bible's uniform testimony to God's direct revelation of himself in Israel's history. Nevertheless, even so able a refutation largely fell on deaf ears. The critics were "wise in their own conceits."

TWENTIETH-CENTURY DEVELOPMENTS

The evolutionary or development hypothesis has not been seriously shaken since. In 1891, S. R. Driver's *Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* presented a carefully drawn rendering of the theory to the English-speaking world, which had been rather cool to the German schools. In 1941, R.H. Pfeiffer's *Introduction to the Old Testament* restated the theory in modified form and provides even yet a major text-book in many seminaries.

Two world wars and assorted organized slaughters did upset the easy optimism of earlier liberalism. Just as Darwin's theory was modified by the addition of macro-mutations, so now Israel's development is seen as one of widely-spaced and abrupt surges forward. Nevertheless the basic evolutionary viewpoint, and even the order of J E D P in Pentateuch-Hexateuch composition, is generally accepted today. (In addition, negative criticism has attacked other books of the Old Testament, notably that of Isaiah who has been split into two, three or more pieces.) To be sure, variations have appeared, some of which are noted here. *New Documentary Subdivision.* The chief

new development seems to be the fragmenting of the four basic documents. Some profess to find both a J¹ and a J², a P^a and a P^b, or a P with many P-fragments. Even Deuteronomy has been dissected with fragments extracted. Names like Smend, Eichrodt, Eissfeldt, Loehr and von Rad are associated with this modern fragmentation. Apparently the cycle is being repeated.

Form Criticism. More valuable in some ways is the approach set out by Hermann Gunkel in 1901. From study of comparative religions, one learns that every culture had its early "sagas" of a mythical sort. This literary form is obvious in Genesis, and the individual units ought to be studied separately. Gunkel thought that in time additional details were added until finally the source documents evolved. Applying his method to the Psalms, Gunkel decided that these literary units were of the type used in cultic ritual at a late date.

Several recent Scandinavian writers, following a similar view, have found the unit form in ancient oral traditions. These were the catalysts around which the documents crystallized. And the cycle moves on!

In general, today's Old Testament criticism is in a state of uneasy equilibrium, focused on Wellhausen, but restive there. Where it will go next is anyone's guess. But having denied God's voice in the first place, it can only continue to negate that voice.

THE UNFELT EFFECTS OF ARCHAEOLOGY

If the rather gloomy survey of Old Testament criticism given here is to be changed by human effort, the most likely source of such change lies in the nearly overwhelming richness of material coming from recent archaeological research.

These discoveries, from all over the Ancient Near East, have cast their light on almost every page of the Bible.

The "School" of W.F. Albright. In his *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (1940), William Foxwell Albright presented much of the fruit of a lifetime in Semitic studies. Though not a conservative in the sense of accepting the Bible's own estimate of itself, nevertheless Albright has taken the data from archaeology seriously and frankly. In sum, his studies show that these discoveries elucidate and "confirm" the essential historicity of the biblical narratives. Repeatedly, the critics' bland (blind?) assumptions that this or that detail must be of late origin has been shown to be in error. Though Albright also holds to the essence of the development hypothesis, he pushes the dates of composition well back toward their traditional Mosaic times.

Studies of Covenant Forms. To mention only one area opened up by Albright's students, that of the Hittite covenant-treaties is most intriguing. Remarkable parallels exist between certain Hittite treaty documents and the form followed both in Deuteronomy and portions of Exodus. But this Hittite treaty style had passed into oblivion throughout the Near East well before the beginning of the first millenium B.C. On any reasonable basis, Deuteronomy -- as a unit -- ought to be dated well before 1000 B.C., well back into Moses' day!

So far, these evidences from archaeology have either been ignored or allowed to interfere with the accepted view in only minor details. It remains for some believing scholar to marshall this material, apply it to the critical hypotheses, and finish them once for all. A start on such a work has just appeared in K. A. Kitchen's *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (London: Tyndale, 1966), a book crammed with bibliographical notes and exciting reading from beginning to end,

refuting the destructive critics at every turn.

What is the sincere Christian to think of his Old Testament? The great weight of modern scholarship bluntly affirms that it is a human product, full of errors both of ignorance and of fraud. But having begun by assuming that man can judge of such matters and that God cannot reveal himself in verbal communication, the critics have shut themselves off from the one theory that still makes sense.

"Yea, hath God said . . .?" Yes, he surely has, for "all Scripture is God-breathed, and is profitable" for the child of God! On that sure testimony we can safely rest, and actively seek in God's Word what we need in "doctrine, reproof, correction," that we might be "thoroughly equipped for every good work."

BRIEF BIBLIOGRAPHY

In addition to various works noted in the article, the following may also be helpful:

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