

# MOSES AND THE PENTATEUCH

## A NEW APPROACH TO AN OLD PROBLEM

**M**ANY parts of the 'Bible de Jérusalem' have already appeared, but after the publication of *le Deuteronomie*<sup>1</sup> and *le Lévitique*,<sup>2</sup> the advent of *la Genèse*<sup>3</sup> was awaited with special interest. This was due not only to the importance of its subject matter—besides an introduction to the book of Genesis, it was to contain one to the Pentateuch as a whole—but also because the undertaking was entrusted to Père de Vaux, O.P., the capable director of the 'École Biblique'. Could the delicate task of giving a good, original and prudent answer to the many problems connected with the Pentateuch in general, and with Genesis in particular, have been placed in more competent hands? He is already known to readers of *SCRIPTURE* by his translation of 'The Books of Kings'.<sup>4</sup> Some may be acquainted with his articles about 'The Hebrew Patriarchs and recent Discoveries'.<sup>5</sup> Those who passed some time at the 'École Biblique' are not surprised that Professor H. H. Rowley, D.D., of the University of Manchester, in his book *From Joseph to Joshua*<sup>6</sup> acknowledged his great esteem for the sober judgment of Fr de Vaux. His experience in, and his knowledge of archæology, especially of Palestine and the Middle East, provides him with the additional qualities necessary for this charge. The way in which he has acquitted himself of this task, with special reference to the problem of Moses and the Pentateuch prompts me to entitle this article 'A New Approach to an Old Problem'. The importance of this particular question is sufficient justification for devoting a special article to it.

A few preliminary remarks about the edition would not be out of place. Most readers will already be acquainted with the external form of the 'Bible de Jérusalem'. Every book has to be revised by two scholars. One treating it from an exegetical point of view and the other paying attention to the style of the work. It is for this reason we find on page 4 the names of Abbé Robert, P.S.S., professor at the Institut Catholique

<sup>1</sup> *Le Deuteronomie*, H. Cazelles, P.S.S., Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris, 1950. See especially 'La composition du livre' (13-16); cf. *SCRIPTURE*, 1951, IV, 301, the view of Fr C. Lattey, S.J.; cf. also Mgr M. J. T. Barton, *Clergy Review*, 1952, 221-23. The latter displays a different attitude.

<sup>2</sup> *Le Lévitique*, H. Cazelles, P.S.S., Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris, 1950. See especially 'La date' (15).

<sup>3</sup> *La Genèse*, R. de Vaux, O.P., Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris, 1951.

<sup>4</sup> *Les Livres des Rois*, R. de Vaux, O.P., Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris, 1949. See *SCRIPTURE*, 1950, IV, 215-16.

<sup>5</sup> 'Les Patriarches Hébreux et les découvertes modernes', *Revue Biblique* 1946, 321-48; 1948, 321-47; 1949, 5-36. To mention only articles closely connected with our subject.

<sup>6</sup> Oxford University Press, London, 1950. See *SCRIPTURE*, 1951, IV, 316-18.

at Paris and M. Marrou, professor at the Sorbonne. The author must take into account any suggestions offered by these two scholars. Further revisions may follow, a sign that the publication is taken as seriously as possible.

This procedure is carried out before the official *imprimatur* is given by ecclesiastical authority, and the *nihil obstat* of the Order or Congregation if the author is a religious. The *imprimatur* to *La Genèse* by Fr de Vaux, is given at Paris where the book was printed, and the *nihil obstat* at Jerusalem on 14th June 1951 by Frs Vincent and Couroyer, and at Rome by Fr Ceuppens on 15th August of the same year. On behalf of the Order, the Vicar General, Fr Gomez, gave permission on 18th October for the book to be printed. From all this it can be seen that more than usual attention was paid to the orthodoxy of the book.

The book opens on page 7 with a general introduction (18 pages) to the Pentateuch. Information is given about its name, contents and history of Pentateuchal criticism, forming as it were, a *status quaestionis*. The author then gives us his own views under the heading of the composition of the Pentateuch, the characteristics of the different traditions (not documents!) the dates and environments of their origin, and Moses and the Pentateuch. The introduction is brought to a close with two pages of special interest about the meaning of the Pentateuch. The next thirteen pages are devoted to a special introduction to Genesis. They treat of the composition of Genesis (in detail as far as possible), the plan and purpose of the book, its doctrine, Genesis and history, its place in the life of the Church, and finally a few words about the text and versions. After these short and clearly arranged introductions, we come to the actual text. It covers 181 pages and has about 600 notes. These latter vary from explanatory notes, psychological remarks, e.g., about how the storytellers aimed at holding the attention of their listeners and readers, to mere references to parallel passages.

The main question confronting Fr de Vaux was the problem of the literary composition of the Pentateuch. There are two ways of dealing with this problem. The first is by means of the external evidence. 'What does tradition tell us?' The second way is by making use of the internal evidence: the study of the texts, style, ideas and vocabulary of the different passages. Thus we are often able to distinguish literary works on merely internal grounds, e.g., a work of Dickens from one written by Thackeray. Tradition supplies us with the first certain witness of the existence of the whole Pentateuch in the preface to the book of Ecclesiasticus (about 132 B.C.)<sup>7</sup>, but no reference is made to the author. From the beginning of our Christian era, however, we have evidence to show that the composition of the whole Pentateuch was attributed by the Jews to Moses. Philo, Josephus, and the New Testament are our

<sup>7</sup> See de Vaux, o. 1, 7.

witnesses. With great care Fr de Vaux classifies the texts of the New Testament where Moses is mentioned; 'the law of Moses'; 'Moses is read'; 'Moses said'; 'Moses wrote'. Special reference is made to John v, 45-47, in which Christ invoked the testimony of Moses against His adversaries, 'for he wrote about me'. It was not until the end of the Middle Ages that any serious doubt was brought to bear on this Jewish tradition to which Christ and His Apostles had acceded.<sup>8</sup>

It was due to the study of texts from a literary point of view, beginning in the sixteenth century, that serious doubts arose about the possibility of one author having written the whole Pentateuch. At first writers upheld the authorship of Moses, arguing that he had made use of old documents, and that later additions had been made to the work. As a result, attention was drawn to the composite character of the book. This trend of thought continued until finally the critics, paying no attention to the external evidence of tradition, but basing their arguments on the text itself, put forward the theory that the Pentateuch had been composed from four main documents. These were indicated by the letters P (Priestly code), E (Elohistic), J (Jahvist), and D (Deuteronomy). Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Wellhausen, making use of the results of literary criticism, deduced the following conclusions: The whole Pentateuch was composed of four documents, J, E, D, and P. He gave what he considered definite dates at which the different documents were written. J and E were the oldest. J was written in Judah in the ninth century, E a little later in Israel. After the destruction of the Northern Kingdom, the two documents were joined together (J E), and Deuteronomy, which was connected with the reform of Josias, was added after his reign (J E D). After the exile, the Priestly code, laws as well as narratives, attributed to the time of the captivity or after, was incorporated in J E D and formed the scheme and frame of the whole compilation. Wellhausen applied the same theory to the book of Josue, as he thought it to be of the same structure. Hence he spoke of the Hexateuch.

It is obvious that, if this theory is true, the documents and composition of the Pentateuch had nothing to do with Moses, whether we place him in the fifteenth or thirteenth century and the value of the Jewish-Christian tradition from the beginning of our era, is reduced to nil. What made the matter so dangerous was that these documents did not go back to the facts they narrated. A gap of several centuries existed between them. They were consequently represented as projecting into the past the religious, social and politico-geographical circumstances of the time in which they were written. What had started as pure literary criticism was now used as a means to bolster up a false theory. This theory, which took no account of the supernatural, tried to explain the

<sup>8</sup> See de Vaux, *o.* 1, 9.

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in which they were handed down. It therefore does not matter so much that the redaction of the Pentateuch is of a later date, as the oral tradition bridges the gap between the documents and the facts related in the Pentateuch.

As a conclusion to this section of the introduction dealing with the history of literary criticism, Fr de Vaux agrees that it is very difficult to give the actual state of the question. No longer is there any common opinion among the exegetes. Due to these reactions, the documentary theory has indeed received a serious blow and at the moment there is no new theory of such imposing character to take its place. Fr de Vaux concludes that to-day the trend is to take 'a less bookish solution and one which is more according to living realities'. In the light of this reaction perhaps we may quote the questions answered by the late Fr Voste, O.P., the Secretary of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, in his letter to Cardinal Suhard on 16th January 1948. In this letter, says Fr de Vaux, the Secretary of the Biblical Commission admitted the existence of sources and a progressive growth of the Mosaic laws and historical narratives due to the social and religious circumstances of later times, and invited the Catholic exegetes to study these problems without prejudice.

Under the guidance of Fr de Vaux, we thus put before our readers the actual state of the problem, considering it both in a general way and also from the point of view of the Church.<sup>9</sup> The possibility of putting forward new solutions to old problems is due, in great part, to the encyclical of our present Holy Father the Pope, 'Divino afflante Spiritu' published in 1943. A passage of this encyclical quoted in the letter to Cardinal Suhard, certainly gives to the faithful sons of the Church to whom is committed the privileged but difficult task of studying the Sacred Books, the courage to tackle again and again old and still unsolved problems. The reader will not mind my quoting this passage. 'But this state of things is no reason why the Catholic commentator, inspired by an active and ardent love of his subject and sincerely devoted to Holy Mother Church, should in any way be deterred from grappling again and again with these difficult problems, hitherto unsolved, not only that he may refute the objections of the adversaries, but also may attempt to find a satisfactory solution, which will be in full accord with the doctrine of the Church, in particular with the traditional teaching regarding the inerrancy of Sacred Scripture, and which will at the same time satisfy the indubitable conclusions of profane sciences. Let all the other sons of the Church bear in mind that the efforts of these resolute labourers

<sup>9</sup> See de Vaux, o. 1, 11—13. The very nature of this article urged me to follow closely the exposition of Fr de Vaux. I emphasized the existing gap of several centuries and added the religious aspect of Wellhausen's theory, placing at the same time the decision and the letter of the Biblical Commission in their historical and psychological background.

in the vineyard of the Lord should be judged not only with equity and justice, but also with the greatest charity; all moreover should abhor that intemperate zeal which imagines that whatever is new should for that very reason be opposed or suspected.<sup>10</sup>

Fr de Vaux<sup>11</sup> first considers what we called the internal evidence. The composite character of the Pentateuch cannot be denied. Proofs are the numerous 'duplicates, repetitions and discordances'. Putting aside as insufficient the reasons brought forward to deny these phenomena, he quotes a number of examples taken specially from the book of Genesis. Having studied these examples attentively, we must accept that, in spite of their similarity in substance, there are differences in style, vocabulary, in the manner of representing God and His relations with men, or in other words, a difference in literary form and mentality. Arguing from the special characteristics thus discovered, we are forced to accept four main-lines running through the whole Pentateuch, and Fr de Vaux specifies J E and P in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers and D in Deuteronomy. Because of its literary character and mentality he connects Deuteronomy with the books Josue, Judges, Samuel and Kings, in all of which the influence of D continues. In reference to its subject matter, the book is closely connected with the work and history of Moses, and therefore it was added to the Tetrateuch (four books) in place of the original conclusion, the death of Moses. We find traces of this conclusion in Deuteronomy xxiv. For Fr de Vaux, however, these four main-lines do not mean written documents which came into being between the ninth and fifth century without any real connection with the past. In accepting proximate dates of their essential composition—he is not as definite on this point as Wellhausen was in his time—J since the reign of Solomon, E a bit later, P during the exile and after the return and D at the end of the seventh century, he affirms that they had already had a long history before these dates. By calling these main-lines 'traditions' he sides with the reaction of the Scandinavian scholars mentioned previously. This is not just a way of avoiding the gap between the facts and the time that J, E, D and P were written down—the gap, in fact, disappears—but it is the only way of explaining how these main-lines in the Pentateuch, identical in their substance, have characteristic differences, and at the same time, presuppose a situation which is not the one of their time of composition, but of the time about which they claim to speak. They go back to oral and written traditions and their differences come from the fact that the same old tradition was handed down in different circles and in different places. Fr de Vaux then agrees that J is a tradition formed in Juda, that E probably comes from the Northern

<sup>10</sup> Encyclical Letter of our Holy Father Pope Pius XII, on the most opportune way to promote Biblical Studies, Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, 1943, 22.

<sup>11</sup> For the second part of this article see de Vaux, o. 1, 13, 14, 17, 18-21.

Kingdom, although this is not certain, D refers to the customs of the Northern Kingdom and P comes from the priests of the Temple of Jerusalem.

Though accepting J, E, D and P as having been composed approximately between the end of the tenth and the fifth century, however, we do not admit that they originated then. As has been stated already, they existed long before this time. They started from much older oral or written traditions, and gradually grew and developed into the form in which we now have them. As a matter of fact J and E are parallel traditions and give essentially the same history : they have a common origin. They presuppose political and social circumstances and a geographical and historical frame which is that of the time in which the facts they relate, happened.<sup>12</sup> Their common origin goes back to the time of the formation of the people of Israel.

The same can be said, with reservations however, about the legislative sections. We find in all of them the same juridical principles, the prescriptions of the same religion, the rules of the same cult, adapted of course to the different circumstances of the different periods, but throughout it is the same civil and religious law of the people. Their first origin goes back to the time of the formation of the people. Because of their very nature, the development of the laws is, of course, much greater, yet these sections contain old elements. In this matter also, oriental texts help in proving the antiquity of some parts. Thus the civil law of the Code of the Covenant Exodus xxi—xxiii bears a striking resemblance to the Babylonian laws, promulgated long before the Exodus, and to the Assyrian laws promulgated shortly after the Exodus.

The conclusion is that the essential contents of the Pentateuch, the substance of its traditions, and the kernel of its laws go back to the time of the formation of the Chosen People, and it is precisely at this time that Moses is the central figure. It was he who guided them during the time of the oppression in Egypt, he who formed these semi-nomads into an organized people during the wandering in the desert, he who established the religion and gave the first laws. He was their great leader in things religious and political at the time of their formation. The old traditions before his time and the events in which he played such an important part grew into the national epic, having him as the great historical figure, through whom God had given to Israel its religion and laws. It was the religion of Moses which determined their faith and it was the law of Moses which ruled their life. Later adaptations could not be made unless they preserved the same spirit and thus were covered by his authority.

It is in this way that Fr de Vaux explains the external evidence of the tradition. He says that it is this historical function of Moses which

<sup>12</sup> See the articles referred to in note 5.

the tradition expresses by connecting the name of Moses with the Pentateuch, and this tradition stands firm. The early tradition, however, is much less explicit when it refers to the redaction of the Pentateuch. The words 'Moses wrote' are to be taken in a general sense and never refer to the whole Pentateuch. In the Pentateuch itself these words are applied to some particular passages and there is no reason to doubt a certain literary activity on the part of Moses. Never, however, shall we be able to determine how great this first edition was, nor what texts came from his hand. The tradition attributing the whole of the Pentateuch to Moses is fundamentally correct: the first origin of the traditions composing the Pentateuch is Mosaic. These traditions grew and developed in different circles and different places, but throughout that growth they maintained the same spirit, the same Mosaic character.

Fr de Vaux agrees that, in the literary analysis, much is still hypothetical. But we need this analysis to make it possible to put a text in its own tradition and see it against its own background, conditions necessary for the proper understanding of a text.

Thus we have seen the essential lines of Fr de Vaux's solution. He utilized the scientific works of many scholars of the past and present, but he did it in a personal way. He drew his arguments from archæology and from the study of the civilizations around Israel. He took into account the witness of tradition. But for a great part the solution is based on the contents and phenomena of the texts themselves. In this way he came to a solution which certainly has the advantage of taking into account both the sound results of literary criticism and the external evidence of the early and recent tradition. As a result of historical circumstances, this solution may at first surprise readers by its novelty. Only those familiar with the texts of the books and the difficulties they create are able to rate the proposed solution at its true value. I would invite those who are not so familiar to read with care, the author's translation, paying attention to the numerous footnotes, and I am sure that it will bring them to a right appreciation of the proposed solution.

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