

Interpretation of underlying literary sources of the Torah has been the traditional direction of Pentateuchal scholarship. In its most widely accepted form, the Documentary hypothesis, it has supplemented the old orthodoxy of Mosaic authorship in providing the framework for study. It remains, however, only a theory, neither free from limitations nor unchallenged, and perhaps seen most practically as a tool for study.

Genesis, as with the rest of the Pentateuch, does not reveal the identity of its authors. Tradition has ascribed the books to Moses, however apart from a few specific passages, the evidence of the texts themselves suggest otherwise and indeed that the writers are looking back the Moses's day.¹ The "new" tradition of authorship evolved over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reaching its final form in the synthesis achieved by Wellhausen. This proposed four documents combining to form the Torah; in order of decreasing age, the Yahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomist and Priestly writings. Around this new orthodoxy most subsequent criticism of the Pentateuch has proceeded.²

The strength of theories such as the Documentary hypothesis are at root a means of coming to terms with a document which, when taken as a single narrative, contains many jarring features. There are clashes of style, apparent mistakes and anachronisms, and seemingly pointless repetition. In the Flood pericope, for example, God instructs Noah on the procedure of loading the ark in Gen 6:18-22, and then gives a second set of instructions in Gen 7:1-5. There is not only repetition but the details given vary. It is possible from findings such as this to dissect out two versions of the flood story.³ In other cases the two versions of a story aren't edited

¹ Weiser, A. *Introduction to the Old Testament*. Darton, Longman and Todd, London 1961, 71-72.

² *Ibid.* 77.

³ Habel, N. *Literary Criticism of the Old Testament*. Fortress, Philadelphia 1971, 33-37.

together but appear separately, so, for example, we have two separate accounts of creation appearing consecutively with vastly different style and content.⁴ The Documentary hypothesis provides an explanation for problems such as these by postulating a collection of works joined into one, virtually a cut and past job with the seams showing.

If the work is seen as a collection by various authors or groups, then the viewpoint and time from which they were writing illuminates passages with further meaning. If, as Anderson suggests, the *primaeval* stories in Genesis are not what we mean by history but rather illustrate the “meaning of history”⁵ then it is surely the meaning given to it by the author of the source from which each story comes. The two version of the creation story already mentioned illustrate this. The first version in Gen: 1-2:4a is usually attributed to the Priestly source. This source manages to fit eight creative events into six days to leave a seventh day for the Sabbath.⁶ This could be understood as retrospective justification of the institute of the Sabbath, precious to the writers of the Priestly account, by projecting it as far back in time as possible, to creation itself.

While this hypothesis of the origin of the Pentateuch has provided the basis of scholarship in this field, it has not gone unchallenged, especially in recent times. If the Torah is interpreted as being made up of strictly literary sources, then objections come from those who dispute the scribal aspects of the theory, and of late, the advocates of studying the text in its received state.

It is assuming much at this distance in time to suggest separate documents of each source ever actually existed. There is a growing tendency to soften the insistence on

⁴ Weiser, A. 73.

⁵ Anderson, B.W. *The Living World of the Old Testament*. Longman, Essex 1978, 210.

⁶ Otzen, B., Gottleib, H., and Jepperson, K. *Myths in the Old Testament*. SCM, London 1980, 28-30.

separate literary sources and many now refer only to “strata of tradition.”⁷ The discrepancies from which the Documentary hypothesis spring do not necessarily require the actual written redaction from earlier sources, but could also perhaps be explained by oral transmission of various extant traditions.⁸ It is therefore possible that the separate sources neatly dissected and interpreted only ever existed in this form in our own time, and as such are of questionable relevance to our understanding of the Torah.

There is also a limit to the usefulness of the traditional JEPD scheme in explaining all the features scholars have found in the Pentateuch. One response has been to further subdivide, creating more sources of even less certain origin. The large variety amongst such proposals suggest we cannot really tie down fixed literary sources coming together at definite times in history and it may be more useful to accept the limitations of such a method, concentrating on viewing proposed strata of tradition as they relate to the whole received text.⁹

All the historical material of Israel’s past contained in Genesis had a history prior to any reputed development of separate sources. The stories of the patriarchs, for example, are thought to be made up of separate traditions, possibly belonging to different tribes, and reached the documents to which there are attributed only through much development and elaboration.¹⁰ The pretextual history of a source tends to be glossed over by a theory pertaining to literary sources and this imposes a limitation on the Documentary hypothesis.

⁷ Ibid, 26.

⁸ Anderson, B.W. “From Analysis to Synthesis: The Interpretation of Genesis 1-11,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97, 1978, 27.

⁹ Weiser, A. 80.

¹⁰ Fohrer, G. *Introduction to the Old Testament*. SPCK, London, 1970, 124-126.

The Documentary hypothesis has tended to de-emphasise the most reliable text available to it, that is, the received text in its entirety.¹¹ Dissecting the sources destroys the pattern into which the strata have been moulded. Genesis has been shown by Cohn to consist of genealogies introducing stories of increasing depth, which parallel the changing relationship between God and his creation.¹² Removing the genealogies, attributed to the Priestly writer, leaves the myths of creation and the stories about the patriarchs detached and the theme of increasing distance between God and his people is obscured.

The Documentary hypothesis has become the new tradition of biblical study against which variations and new theories are measured. The sources into which it divides the Pentateuch aid its understanding most usefully when they are regarded less as documents and more as strata of tradition, whether written or oral. In this perspective the Documentary hypothesis can be a tool to add depth to the story in its final form, rather than just an attempt to interpret each separate story.

¹¹ Anderson, B.W. *From Analysis to Synthesis*, 28.

¹² Cohn, R.L. "Narrative Structure and Canonical Perspective in Genesis," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 25, 1983, 3-16.

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