

RBL 09/30/2000



Nicholson, Ernest

The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century: The Legacy of Julius Wellhausen

Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998. Pp. ix + 294, Hardcover,
No Price Available, ISBN 0198269587.

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For more than a century beginning in the mid-1800's, the Documentary Hypothesis represented a near-consensus among critical scholars who studied the composition of the Pentateuch. To be sure, adherents of the hypothesis disagreed with each other about the nature of the sources, especially P and E (were they redactional layers, supplements, or discrete sources?) and regarding the relative dating of the sources; and they debated the extent to which they could reconstruct the written or oral predecessors of the sources themselves. Further, an important minority among scholars (most of them fundamentalists or form critics) did in fact disagree with the Documentary Hypothesis and suggested alternative models. But the hypothesis in its broadest outlines commanded widespread respect, and it was assumed as the starting point for almost all discussions of the Pentateuch and the development of Israelite religion. In the last quarter of this century, however, this consensus has broken down. No longer can a biblical scholar begin a sentence with the word J and presume that another scholar will listen to the rest -- or that the other scholar will mean more or less the same thing even if she is willing to use that term. The verities enshrined in older introductions have disappeared, and in their place scholars are confronted by competing theories which are discouragingly numerous, exceedingly complex, and often couched in an expository style that is (to quote John van Seter's description of one seminal work) "not for the faint-hearted."

Thus the publication of this book is quite welcome. Nicholson does not merely survey the history of the field (for reliable and fairly up-to-date overviews students can turn to Alexander Rofé's *Introduction to the Composition of the Pentateuch* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999] and the first chapter of Joseph Blenkinsopp's *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* [ABRL; Doubleday: New York, 1992]). He reviews many studies in great detail and subjects their assumptions, their reasoning, and their treatment of sample passages to a close analysis. This well-written book is both crucial reading for Pentateuch specialists and an excellent aid for other biblicalists who

need to keep abreast of the revolutions and counter-revolutions that have taken place in Pentateuchal criticism.

Nicholson's goal is two-fold: to summarize the new theories and to defend the older consensus. In the first part of the book, he sketches the rise of the classical Documentary Hypothesis to its apogee in the work of Julius Wellhausen; then he describes the modifications of that theory under the influence of form criticism and tradition history which culminated in the studies of von Rad and Noth. In the longer second half, Nicholson examines the various attacks on the Documentary Hypothesis in the past quarter century, concentrating on the work of Rolf Rendtorff, Erhard Blum (both of whom describe the basic building blocks of the Pentateuch in new ways while rejecting the notion of discrete documents known as JE, P, and D), Norman Whybray (who views the Pentateuch as a literary unity built from motley older materials that cannot for the most part be reconstructed), and several scholars including Christoph Levin and John van Seters who retain the sigla of the Documentary Hypothesis but diverge from its main outlines in far-reaching ways (for example, by dating J-type material to the postexilic period and viewing it as dependent on Deuteronomy and related literature). In the last chapter he also addresses the work of synchronic readers who do not so much deny the Documentary Hypothesis as they move beyond it or ignore it.

This book, then, treats the gamut of modern Christian scholarship on the Pentateuch in the last two centuries, and this comprehensive approach proves extremely useful. Nicholson notes how the theories of the past quarter century often recall older ones, especially from the dawn of modern biblical studies in the generation before Wellhausen. Particularly helpful is frequent reference to three basic models of composition: documentary, supplementary, and fragmentary. A documentary model speaks of originally discrete texts that have been brought together to form a more complex work; in a supplementary model, an original base text has been expanded by a series of additions and revisions; a fragmentary model acknowledges that the Pentateuch is built from older texts but denies that they originally comprised extended (much less recoverable) narratives. These three paradigms greatly aid the reader in distinguishing among competing theories that in many respects resemble or modify each other. Thus many mid-twentieth century variations of the Documentary Hypothesis add an element of the supplementary model to the hypothesis, asserting, for example, that E was never an independent source but rather a series of additions to J. Similarly, these terms help the reader understand the relationships between older and newer contributions to Pentateuchal criticism.

In most sections of the book, Nicholson first reviews a theory and then subjects it to a rigorous critique. He allows most of the theories to speak for themselves and does not simply tailor the summary of the theory to the critique. Consequently, the book genuinely helps make recent challenges to the Documentary Hypothesis more accessible even as it defends the older view. Nicholson's rejection of the newer models is clearly spelled out in

the nitty-gritty of each individual discussion. He exposes circular logic and arbitrary assumptions in the newer theories. Regardless of whether one agrees with Nicholson's judgements (certainly this reviewer does), his comprehensive analysis of modern Christian scholarship on the Pentateuch renders this book crucial to all further discussion; the book must be placed on reading lists for all graduate students and scholars. I emphasize "all," because the book may be especially important precisely for those readers who may wish to dismiss it. Some students and scholars nowadays, especially under the influence of synchronic approaches, reject a source critical approach altogether without acquiring any real appreciation of its argumentation and goals, and for them this book will be salutary. Others may be unthinkingly attached to the Documentary Hypothesis, and Nicholson clearly wants to expose those scholars to newer theories and rouse them from dogmatic slumbers. Finally, many specialists are already convinced by Blum, Whybray, or others, and they must confront Nicholson's forceful critique of these important figures. In short: read this book -- but caveat lector! Two problems, one minor and one major, mar Nicholson's presentation.

As the book's subtitle indicates, Nicholson closely associates the Documentary Hypothesis with one towering scholar. This is odd, since the first chapter of this book traces the flowering of this hypothesis in the generations preceding Wellhausen, who published his major works on the Pentateuch in 1878 and 1885. The basic division among P, E, J and D crystallized already in the work of Hermann Hupfeld in 1853, who refined the work of Karl David Ilgen. Wellhausen, like several of his contemporaries, contributed to and modified this theory but did not invent it. If anything, Wellhausen might be associated especially with the notion that P is late, since he devotes much of the *Prolegomena* to defending this thesis. But even this argument was first presented in detail by Karl Graf in 1866, who himself was elaborating a suggestion made by Edouard Reuss. Neither the basic outline of the Documentary Hypothesis nor the late dating of P is the innovation of Wellhausen, as Nicholson himself shows. Thus this book's subtitle and Nicholson's references to "the so-called 'Documentary Theory' formulated by Julius Wellhausen" are misleading. By describing the Documentary Hypothesis as specifically Wellhausian, Nicholson conflates various aspects of Pentateuchal criticism that ought to be treated individually. By recognizing, for example, that Wellhausen's older contemporary August Dillmann and precursors like Hupfeld also argue for the Documentary Hypothesis while taking a very different view of the dating of the sources, Nicholson would have encouraged a more precise evaluation of the source critical theory itself.

The second, and much more disturbing, problem involves the scope of this book. Nicholson almost entirely ignores the contributions of Jewish scholars to modern Pentateuchal criticism. In a shorter work, this might, perhaps, have been understandable. But in a work of three hundred pages which lavishes attention on important but nearly forgotten critics, this lacuna is objectionable. It is also surprising, since Jewish scholars have consistently addressed the issues at hand in original and distinctive ways. The most

important example of this absence involves the dating of P, a topic which bears not only on our understanding of the history and character of Israelite religion (which are not the concerns of this book) but on the nature of the P source and on the redaction of the Pentateuch as a whole (which are). Elsewhere Nicholson presents very detailed descriptions of views with which he disagrees before critiquing them. In contrast, the four pages Nicholson devotes to Jewish scholars who argue for an early dating of P are highly problematic. Yehezkel Kaufmann's magisterial study of Israelite religion provides the most important challenge to the Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis; his work may be characterized as an extended dialogue with the Prolegomena. Yet Nicholson mentions Kaufmann's name only in passing and nowhere summarizes his work. Jacob Milgrom's lifetime of influential writing on P and Israel Knohl's exciting contributions in recent years fail to merit attention. Nicholson does briefly discuss some of the scholars belonging to this school, but here the problems become more acute. He criticizes Moshe Weinfeld for failing to account for the history of the priesthood, apparently not realizing that Weinfeld depends on Kaufmann's comprehensive discussion of that question. According to Nicholson, Avi Hurvitz argues for an early dating of P by pointing to its use of many preexilic words and expressions. This line of reasoning, Nicholson rightly notes, does not constitute evidence that P was preexilic, since exilic and postexilic texts may have continued to use older terms. However, Nicholson's summary completely misrepresents Hurvitz's work; indeed, it attributes to Hurvitz a facile argument that Hurvitz specifically disavows. Hurvitz's point, rather, is that the Priestly source lacks any elements of late Biblical Hebrew, and that in every case where a linguistic opposition exists between preexilic Hebrew and late Biblical Hebrew, P utilizes the earlier form. Nicholson further cites the work of Robert Polzin as evidence against Hurvitz's major study of priestly language. Polzin maintains that P's syntax does in fact show elements of LBH. But Nicholson nowhere mentions that Hurvitz's study critiques Polzin's work on this point at great length (nor does Nicholson refer to further corroboration of Hurvitz's study in work by Gary Rendsburg and Marc Rooker as well as several subsequent articles by Hurvitz himself). The issue is not whether one finds the Hurvitz, Weinfeld, or what might be termed the Kaufmannian school convincing but whether Nicholson, who elsewhere takes such pains to summarize ideas before responding to them, shows this courtesy to Jewish scholars. (Indeed, in Hurvitz's case, the question is whether Nicholson is at all familiar with the views he attempts to refute.)

Nicholson's tendency to confine himself to Christian scholarship is evident elsewhere as well. In discussing synchronic approaches to the Pentateuch, he entirely neglects the pioneering work of Martin Buber, Meir Weiss, Edward Greenstein, Robert Alter, and Michael Fishbane. Some of these scholars should have interested Nicholson, because they combine literary and source critical approaches in a manner that differs from the canon critical method of Brevard Childs, whom Nicholson does discuss. The absence of Umberto Cassuto is even more surprising, since it displays the same confluence of synchronic perspective and the fragmentary model which Nicholson finds in Whybray's work. The defense of the classical Documentary Hypothesis among some Israeli scholars

(Jerusalem may be described as the last bastion of Wellhausian source criticism, though not of Wellhausian dating) is relevant to Nicholson's thesis but is nowhere mentioned. At the same time, harbingers of more recent continental theories appear in the writings of Matitiahu Tsevat and Alexander Rofé (especially in the latter's monograph on the Balaam stories), but Tsevat's essay on common sense and hypothesis in biblical studies and Rofé's many studies of the Pentateuch are also passed over in silence. The omission of any three or four of these scholars in the discussions to which they are relevant would be understandable; the absence of all of them is revealing.

This fairly consistent tendency is not merely a matter of affirmative action or quotas. Rather, it is problematic because Nicholson's failure to attend to the views of Jewish scholars means that certain ideas regarding the composition of the Pentateuch are not seriously engaged. (In addition to the dating of P, we might note, *inter alia*, that Nicholson seems to presume that all classical source critics believe that D knew JE. Menahem Haran's interesting -- and to my mind strong -- argument that D knew E but not J receives no attention.) Moreover, Jewish scholars at times employ unique perspectives that enrich the field, and the near-total absence of these perspectives diminishes this book. (An exception is the work on empirical models pioneered by Jeffrey Tigay along with several scholars from Jerusalem, which Nicholson does discuss at length.) If there are no Jewish perspectives in the field, then Christian points of view will appear to be natural, when in fact they are socially constructed within an academic guild whose Christian nature may not be evident to its members. For example, the historical reconstructions of Graf and Wellhausen draw deeply on a legacy of Pauline anti-Pharisaism *cum* antirabbinism. This does not mean that their reconstructions are necessarily wrong or that the late dating of P is itself tainted by anti-Semitism (after all, profoundly Jewish scholars such as Rofé and Baruch Levine accept a late dating of P), but it does mean that we should read the work of Graf, Wellhausen and those who depend on them with caution. The alternative point of view evident in the work of Kaufmann and his followers helps make clear this aspect of the Graf-Wellhausen school. (Of course Kaufmann's work draws as deeply on precisely the opposite ideological predilections, a circumstance which draws attention to the role of religious polemic, conscious and unconscious, in biblical studies; in light of this role, the need for a variety of perspectives that temper and challenge each other is even more evident.) Further, Jewish scholars have tended to be especially interested in the exegetical dimension of supplementation, redaction, and scribal revision; one thinks of Samuel Sandmel (whom Nicholson does discuss), Fishbane, Rofé, Milgrom, and Knohl. Attention to inner-biblical exegesis within the long process of pentateuchal redaction can lead scholars in particular directions that might otherwise have been neglected. This emphasis encourages scholars to recognize that the dividing line between higher and lower criticism is amorphous, and hence that textual criticism is an important tool for source criticism. Further, it broadens our sense of how to describe relationships among sources. Similarly, Jewish scholars have tended to employ history of exegesis as a tool both for source criticism (e.g., Knohl) and against it (Cassuto). The list of these distinctive contributions could go on, but the point is clear.

The study of the Pentateuch has been a central concern of Jews as well as Christians, and Nicholson does his readers a disservice by neglecting the former. In light of the book's importance, this disservice is all the more unfortunate.