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Nicholson, Ernest

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

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Ernest Nicholson here reviews discussions of the composition of the Pentateuch over the last two centuries. This book is far from being simply a history of critical interpretation, however. Nicholson employs the review of research as a tool for defending the Documentary Hypothesis against rival theories, especially those that have appeared in the last thirty years. The first three chapters survey critical investigations into the Pentateuch's composition from the early 19th century to the middle of the 20th century, highlighting the contributions of Julius Wellhausen, Gerhard von Rad, and Martin Noth (the works of the latter two represent "the climax of Pentateuchal research this century," p. 60). Nicholson concentrates on each scholar's conclusions and the influence they had on subsequent research. He gives virtually no attention to the wider intellectual and social contexts within which Pentateuchal criticism developed.

The remaining six chapters evaluate theories about the composition of the Pentateuch published in the last thirty years. Nicholson first reviews the redactional theories proposed by Rolf Rendtorff and Erhard Blum. He cogently criticizes as overly speculative Rendtorff's reconstruction of the stages by which formulas of promise to the ancestors developed to unite ever-larger complexes of traditions. He has greater respect for Blum's more detailed analysis of the entire Pentateuch as the product of two successive authorial/redactional layers, the first Deuteronomistic, the second Priestly. Nicholson concludes, however, that the texts credited by Blum to the Deuteronomistic redactor (K^D) in fact derive from different layers and periods and so cannot be ascribed to a single redactional school working throughout the Pentateuch. Nevertheless, he clearly believes that Blum casts the longest shadow of the recent critics and keeps returning to his work throughout the following chapters. Thus his discussion of P focuses on redactional theories leading up to and culminating in Blum's work.

Nicholson also reviews and critiques John Van Seters' depiction of J as an antiquarian, his and H.H. Schmidt's dating of J to the exilic period, and other suggested revisions of the theory about the four sources and their origins. But a literature review is not the best way to argue the case for one or another theory of the Pentateuch's composition. It requires Nicholson to focus primarily on scholars' conclusions, isolating only an occasional argument for more detailed analysis, and passes over much too briefly their criticisms of the methods and conclusions of the Documentary Hypothesis. Pointing out weaknesses in various contemporary theories does not in and of itself show that the Documentary Hypothesis provides a better alternative. Nor is Nicholson always even-handed in deploying his arguments: for example, he argues that contradictions within the Pentateuch weigh against the possibility of P being redactional (p. 210) without noting that exactly the same criticism can be made of the Documentary Hypothesis' supposition of a final redactor R. Indeed, the readiness with which he deploys the theory's various redactors (following Wellhausen) makes me wonder whether, in the analysis of particular texts, labeling one's approach a "source" theory rather than a "redactional" theory is more a matter of emphasis than a real distinction in method.

Nicholson does provide a positive presentation of the Documentary Hypothesis in his eighth chapter. Using R.N. Whybray's methodological critique as a foil, he defends in turn the usefulness of each of the three classical criteria for distinguishing the sources, more successfully in the case of the first two (style, divine names) than of the last (doublets in my judgment. The result, however, is a summary presentation of the best test cases for the Documentary Hypothesis in contrast to the previous discussion of the most difficult cases for other theories—the most one can expect from this kind of book perhaps, but still not an optimal way of investigating the composition of the Pentateuch.

On a few issues, Nicholson fails to uphold the high standards of summary and critique found through most of the book. His survey of attempts to date P earlier than the exile (pp. 218-20) is dismissive in tone and abrupt in its judgments. He also seems blind to the considerable methodological challenge posed by synchronic literary analysis to all forms of historical criticism. He deals with it under the heading of "the final form of the Pentateuch" in a discussion that moves from von Rad to Brevard Childs and concludes with Blum, with a brief and tendentious review of the works of D. Clines and Whybray along the way, the only purely synchronic analyses that he covers.

That brings up a larger point: this book's title, *The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century*, is misleading. The book addresses the Documentary Hypothesis of the composition of the Pentateuch in the (19th and) 20th century, but completely ignores many of issues that have shaped research on this literature in the last one hundred years. Nicholson does not mention debates over the influence of treaty forms on covenant texts, the history of Israel's laws and their relationship to other ancient legal traditions, studies of the archaic poetry in the Pentateuch and elsewhere, and most of the synchronic literary studies of Pentateuchal narratives, all of which have characterized Pentateuchal studies

during the century as much as have compositional debates. Absent from his bibliography and index are names G. Mendenhall, D. J. McCarthy, S. Paul, R. Alter, D. Daube, C. Carmichael, M. Fishbane, R. Westbrook, I. Knohl, T.L. Thompson, W.F. Albright, D.N. Freedman, T.W. Mann, and many others who have contributed insights on these issues.

The subtitle, *The Legacy of Julius Wellhausen*, is more accurate, but even on this theme one should point out that 20th century compositional debates largely failed to deploy their arguments within the context of theories of Israel's legal and religious history in the way that Wellhausen did. Thus Nicholson's narrower focus on compositional theories of the Pentateuch accurately reflects the restricted range of most of those theories in the last one hundred years, and as a result his analysis shares the same limitations. I suspect that Wellhausen's legacy will be fully realized and, perhaps, surpassed only when the insights of legal history, narrative analysis, comparative literatures of the ancient world, and other disciplines are harnessed along with inductive compositional analysis to create a broader analytical framework for understanding the Pentateuch.