

BIBLICAL CRITICISM

By Mark Paynter

Biblical criticism is divided into types, lower and higher criticism. Lower criticism is a textual criticism. Higher criticism is an examination of the “integrity, authenticity, credibility and literary of the various writings that make up the Bible.”¹

P S Karleen shows that higher criticism has come to have a dual meaning. Firstly the term refers to “That portion of biblical studies that attempts to assess compositional features such as date of writing, authorship, destination, sources used in writing (oral, written, etc.), and general literary form (including comparison with contemporary non-biblical literary features and styles); done constructively and with a high view of the integrity of Scripture, this area of study can make important contributions.”² Regrettably the term has come to have a negative connotation for when higher criticism is undertaken without a high regard for the inspiration of scripture it can have destructive tendencies. As can be seen in the “rationalistic approaches to the Bible over the last hundred years that tended to treat it solely as a human work, not as an integrated revelation from God”³

William MacDonald introduces us to the Pentateuch with these words.

“The first five books of the Bible are commonly called “the Pentateuch.” In ancient times books were in the form of scrolls rather than bound as pages of a “codex” (book form). These scrolls, called *teuchos* in Greek, were stored in sheath like containers. The Greek word for “five-roll” is *pentateuchos*, whence our word Pentateuch.”⁴

¹ McDowell page 397

²Karleen, P. S. 1987. *The handbook to Bible study : With a guide to the Scofield study system*. "This book is intended as a companion to the Scofield Reference Bible"--Pref.;Includes indexes. Oxford University Press: New York

³Ibid

⁴ MacDonald page 23

The assertion that Moses was not the author of the Pentateuch has its origins as far back as the "first two centuries A.D. The primary basis upon which the charge was made was the presence of passages supposedly written after Moses time."⁵

There are three schools of radical Pentateuch criticism, these are: documentary criticism, form criticism and oral tradition.⁶

MacDonald explains the significance of radical Pentateuch criticism.

"Since the whole OT, in fact the whole Bible is based on these first five books, the importance of the Pentateuch for revealed religion can hardly be overstated. If rationalistic, unbelieving scholars can undermine faith in the integrity and authenticity of these books, the origins of Judaism becomes lost in a sea of uncertainty. Christians should not think that our faith is unaffected by such attacks either, since the NT and our Lord Himself also quote the Books of Moses as true and trustworthy."⁷

McDowell sets ground rules for evaluating the Old Testament text. He recommends an approach to the Old Testament that is open and seeks to emphasize the harmony of the text, while at the same time interacting with the insight that has been thrown on the text from recent archaeological discoveries.⁸

⁵ McDowell page 402

⁶ See McDowell page 398-399 for discussion.

⁷ MacDonald page 24

⁸ McDowell page 408-411

INTRODUCTION TO THE DOCUMENTATION HYPOTHESIS

John C Hagee notes that although Genesis ends Three Hundred years before the birth of Moses and Moses is never specifically named as its author, throughout the Scriptures and most of church history there has almost always been unanimous acceptance of Mosaic authorship.⁹

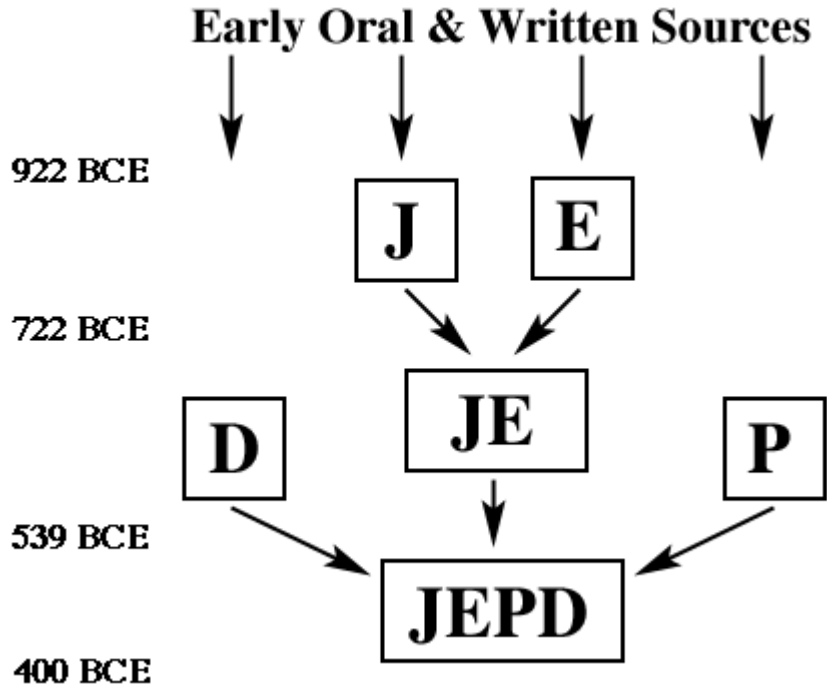
The documentary hypothesis denies that any one person wrote the Pentateuch. Most conservative Christians believe that one single author, namely Moses, wrote the vast majority of the Pentateuch. However during the nineteenth century a group of scholars seriously questioned, to the point of denying, the Mosaic authorship. As *the Nelsons New Illustrated Bible commentary* explains

“Some of these scholars have suggested that the Pentateuch, including Genesis, was compiled at a later date, perhaps in the sixth century B.C. According to this analysis, anonymous editors used at least four documents to piece together the Pentateuch. These four documents were identified by tracing the divine names, such as *Elohim* and *Yahweh*, through the Pentateuch, and by tracing certain variations in phraseology and word choice. These four documents are called the J document, which uses *Yahweh* for God, the E document which uses *Elohim* for God: the P or priestly document, and the D or Deuteronomic document.”¹⁰

The following diagram provides a diagrammatical presentation of the documentary hypothesis.

⁹ John C Hagee page 1

¹⁰ Earl Radmacher, Ronald B Allen, and H Wayne house page 2



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The anonymous writer of the Internet document on which the diagram was extracted points out that there are some differences between the four strands of tradition.

J Jahwist	E Elohist	P Priestly	D Deuteronomist
Stress on Judah	Stress on northern Israel	Stress on Judah	Stress on central shrine
Stresses leaders	Stresses the prophetic	Stresses the cultic	Stresses fidelity to Jerusalem
Anthropomorphic speech about God	Refined speech about God	Majestic speech about God	Speech recalling God's work
God walks and talks with us	God speaks in dreams	Cultic approach to God	Moralistic approach
God is YHWH	God is Elohim (till Ex 3)	God is Elohim (till Ex 3)	God is YHWH
Uses "Sinai"	Sinai is "Horeb"	Has genealogies and lists	Has long sermons

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<http://204.29.171.50/framer/1000/default.asp?realname=Google&cc=NZ&lc=en%2DNZ&frameid=1565&providerid=112&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww%2Egoogle%2Ecom%2F> 23 February 2002

MacDonald provides a concise summary of the history of the development of the documentary hypothesis when he states

“In 1753 Jean Astruc, a French Doctor, set forth the theory that Moses compiled Genesis from two documents. Those passages that used the name *Jehovah* for God came from one source, and those using *Elohim* another. These supposed sources he labeled “J” and “E” respectively.

Later, liberal scholars developed the theory much further, eventually putting all their supposed sources much later than Moses. Other proposed documents were “D” (“Deuteronomic”) and “P” (“Priestly”). The Pentateuch was viewed as a parchment of sources built up between the ninth and sixth centuries B.C. Popularly, the hypothesis became known as the “JEDP theory”.

Several things made the hypothesis attractive to nineteenth century scholars. First of all it fitted well with Darwin’s theory of evolution, which was being applied to many other fields than just biology. Next, the anti-super naturalistic spirit of the day found delight in trying to put the Bible down on a merely human level. Thirdly, the humanistic trends that replaced divine revelation with man’s efforts dovetailed with the theory.

In 1878 Julius Wellhausen popularized the documentary hypothesis in a clever and deceptively plausible way.”¹³

McDowell explains what is at stake in the documentary hypothesis and why this issue is so vitally important.

¹² Ibid

¹³ MacDonald page 26

“The documentary hypothesis calls into question the credibility of the entire Old Testament. One would have to conclude, if their assertions are correct, that the Old Testament is a gigantic literary fraud. Either God did speak to and through Moses or we have to acknowledge that we possess a *belleslettres* hoax.”¹⁴

M Easton argued that the evidence for Mosaic authorship was conclusive on the basis that

“(1.) These books profess to have been written by Moses in the name of God (Ex. 17:14; 24:3, 4, 7; 32:7–10, 30–34; 34:27; Lev. 26:46; 27:34; Deut. 31:9, 24, 25).

(2) This also is the uniform and persistent testimony of the Jews of all sects in all ages and countries (comp. Josh.8: 31, 32; 1 Kings 2: 3; Jer.7: 22; Ezra 6: 18; Neh.8: 1; Mal.4: 4; Matt.22: 24; Acts 15: 21).

(3.) Our Lord plainly taught the Mosaic authorship of these books (Matt. 5:17, 18; 19:8; 22:31, 32; 23:2; Mark 10:9; 12:26; Luke 16:31; 20:37; 24:26, 27, 44; John 3:14; 5:45, 46, 47; 6:32, 49; 7:19, 22)...

(4.) From the time of Joshua down to the time of Ezra there is, in the intermediate historical books, a constant reference to the Pentateuch as the “Book of the Law of Moses.”¹⁵

To what has been said above one must not forget that Moses was in a position where he could write the Pentateuch as McDowell comments

“Moses was in a position to write the Pentateuch. He was educated in the royal court of Egypt, which was highly advanced academically. He had firsthand knowledge of the geography of Egypt and the Sinai, with plenty of time—forty years in wandering and forty more years beyond that—to compose his work. At the same time that Moses lived, there were uneducated slaves working in the Egyptian turquoise mines writing on the walls, thus demonstrating the extent of writing in Moses’ day.”¹⁶

DOCUMENTARY PRESUPPOSITIONS

As McDowell points out the problem with the scholars of the documentary hypothesis view is not their academic ability or scholarship but the presuppositions that they start with. To adequately

¹⁴ McDowell page 394

¹⁵ Easton, M. 1996, c1897. *Easton's Bible dictionary*. Logos Research Systems, Inc.: Oak Harbor, WA

¹⁶ McDowell, J. 1997, c1993. *Answers to tough questions : Skeptics ask about the Christian faith* (electronic ed.). Thomas Nelson: Nashville

discuss the documentary hypothesis we must not begin with the conclusions but the presuppositions that are the foundation of the hypothesis. The more the presuppositions are based in fact, the stronger the possibility that the conclusions will be correct and vice versa. The first step in evaluating presuppositions is to objectively evaluate their conformity to reality. Therefore overtime the presuppositions must be evaluated by fresh archaeological evidence.

One of the problems of the documentary hypothesis is that the scholars who hold that view have placed priority on their subjective analysis of the documentary evidence rather than interacting with what McDowell refers to as “the more objective and verifiable information provided by archaeology.”¹⁷ More conservative scholars have increasingly questioned the subjective nature of the documentary hypothesis scholars.

The first presupposition of the documentary hypothesis is that of anti-supernaturalism and has already been refuted in this essay.

One of the major presuppositions of the documentary hypothesis has been their insistence on a natural view of both Israel’s history and religion. McDowell comments “An evolutionary understanding of history and an anthropocentric view of religion dominated the nineteenth century. The prevailing thinkers viewed religion as devoid of any divine intervention, explaining it as a natural development produced by man’s subjective needs.”¹⁸

John Blanchard comments.

“The theory has often been put forward that religion evolved slowly over many millennia, beginning with very primitive ideas and gradually developing into today’s concepts. Wrapped up in this theory, and an important element in the thinking of many atheists, is the idea that monotheism (belief in one God) is a comparatively recent refinement. In the nineteenth century, two anthropologists, Sir Edward

¹⁷ McDowell page 413

¹⁸ McDowell page 417 cites Archer, Gleason L Jr A survey of Old Testament Introduction . Chicago:Moody Press, 1964, 1974

Tyler and Sir James Frazer, popularized the notion that the first stage in the evolution of religions was animism (which involved the worship of spirits believed to inhabit natural phenomena), followed later by pantheism (the idea that everything is divine), polytheism (belief in a multitude of distinct and separate deities) and eventually by monotheism.

The evidence of modern archaeology is that religion has not evolved “upwards”, but degenerated from monotheism to pantheism and polytheism, then from these to animism and atheism, a finding confirmed by the Scottish academic Andrew Lang in *The Making of Religion*: ‘Of the existence of a belief in the Supreme Being among primitive tribes there is good evidence as we possess for any fact in the ethnographic region.’¹⁹ In *History of Sanskrit Literature*, the Oriental expert Max Muller, recognized as the founder of the science of the history of religions, came to the conclusion. ‘There is a monotheism that precedes the polytheism of the Veda; and even in the invocations of the innumerable gods, the remembrance of a God, one and infinite, breaks through the mist of idolatrous phraseology like the blue sky that is hidden by passing clouds.’²⁰ In *Religion of Ancient Egypt* Sir Flinders Petrie, universally acknowledged as one of the world’s leading Egyptologists, claimed, “Whenever we can trace back polytheism to its earliest stages, we find that it results from combinations of monotheism.”²¹ In *Semitic Mythology*, the Oxford intellectual Stephen Langdon, one of the greatest experts in this field, said “In my opinion the history of the oldest civilization of man is a rapid decline from

¹⁹ Blanchard page 26 cites Andrew Lang, *The Making of Religion*, Longman & Green page 18

²⁰ Blanchard page 26 cites Max Muller, *History of Sanskrit Literature* page 559

²¹ Blanchard page 26 cites Flinders Petrie, *The Religion of Ancient Egypt* Constable page 4

monotheism to extreme polytheism and widespread belief in evil spirits. It is in a very true sense the history of the fall of man.”²²

Blanchard argues that studies in Anthropology reflect traces that at one time there was almost universal belief in monotheism and that overtime man fell from that view. This conforms with what Paul said in his Epistle to the Romans (Roman.1: 18-25)

Another basic presupposition of the documentary hypothesis is that Moses could not have written the Pentateuch because no one knew how to write in Israel when Moses was alive. However there is abundant evidence to suggest, “In the time of Moses language was highly usable as a vehicle of literary expression, and most likely had been for centuries.”²³

McDowell concludes his analysis of the Documentary Hypothesis scholars presuppositions by saying

“We must regard all six of the documentary presuppositions we have examined as invalid. Anti-supernaturalism must be rejected on the grounds that it claims to have absolute truth regarding the existence of God or the extent and nature of His intervention in the natural order of the universe, i.e. either His existence or His divine intervention as ruled out as an *impossibility* on an *a priori* basis.

Another of these presuppositions (an *a priori* distrust of the Old Testament record) must be rejected because it flies in the face of An accepted cannon of criticism that has stood the test of time, having guided literary and historical scholars since the time of Aristotle.

The remaining four presuppositions, the evolutionary view of Israel’s history, the priority given to source analysis over verifiable

²² Blanchard page 26 cites Stephen Langdon, Semitic Theology ,Vol 5 in Mythology of All Races, Archaeological Institutes of America Page 17

²³ McDowell page 431

methodology; the legendary view of patriarchal narratives; and the assumption that there was no writing in Israel during the Mosaic age) have all been soundly refuted by archaeological discoveries.”²⁴

McDowell points out that if one accepts the conclusions that the scholars of radical higher criticism derive from these presuppositions one has to conclude that:

- 1 The Old Testament is legend or myth not history.
- 2 Israel’s religion is not the result of divine revelation but is totally natural.
- 3 Therefore both the history and religion of Israel are fraudulent.

If one accepts these conclusions, then we must question the whole basis of Christianity. Fortunately, as we have seen the arguments of radical higher criticism are not tenable in the light of the archaeological discoveries of the last one hundred and fifty years.

FORM CRITICISM

The aim of form criticism is to “discover the original literary forms in which the traditions of the New Testament were written down.”²⁵ By doing so the form critic hopes to be able to identify what prompted the early church to write in the particular manner they did. The form critic divides the Gospels into various literary forms and then attempts to discover the “specific life”²⁶ situation that prompted the writing. Form criticism developed in post World War I Germany. The leading form critics were “Martin Dibelius, Rudolf Bultmann, and Vincent Taylor.”²⁷

²⁴ McDowell page 449

²⁵ McDowell page 549

²⁶ McDowell page 550

²⁷ McDowell page 550

Blomberg comments

“The earliest form critics based their study in several foundational presuppositions. All agreed that the teachings of Jesus and the narratives about his life, which comprise the Gospels, were transmitted orally over a considerable period of time before they were ever written down. They believed that these units of material for the most part circulated independently of one another. They affirmed that the closest parallels in the transmission of the gospel traditions could be found in the oral, folk literature of other ancient, European Cultures... They concluded that comparison with these parallels made it highly likely that the final form in which the Gospels appeared could not be trusted to supply a reliable account of what Jesus actually said and did. Rather one had to work backward and remove various accretions and embellishments which had crept into the tradition and so try to recover the original, pure forms. These forms, they believed, were originally short, streamlined and unadorned, and very Jewish in style and milieu.”²⁸

Form Criticism may be considered to be part of the trend over the last few centuries to challenge the “historical, orthodox Christian”²⁹ faith in the Jesus of history as depicted in the Gospels and substitute Him with what liberal scholars have termed the “Historical Jesus”.

“The great problem with the quest for the historical Jesus which ends in the discovery of a Jesus who is divorced from history... is that a Jesus who can be imagined, dreamed up like any fairy tale or legend, is a Jesus who has no more power to change lives than does a Johnny Appleseed or a Paul Bunyan.

Almost two thousand years ago, real men with dirt under their fingernails met a real Jesus who challenged them to follow Him. Real women and real children also met and followed this Jesus. Many lost their lives for following Christ and refusing to recant their testimony of what this Jesus had done and said when He walked among them...

²⁸Joel B. Green, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Page 243 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992).

²⁹ McDowell page 559

The verdict of millions throughout the ages, whether simple peasants or brilliant, unbiased professors, has been that Jesus lived, died and lives again to change the lives of those who will accept Him as He really is
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F. F. Bruce concludes his assessment of Form Criticism with these words.

“The radical positions to which form criticism often seem to lead are the positions of certain form critics and not necessarily those of form criticism. Form criticism is of value not only because it provides a fresh classification for the study of our Gospel material, but also because it underlines (a) the inadequacy of documentary hypotheses alone to account for the composition of the Gospels (b) the universal tendency in antiquity to stereotype the forms in which religious interaction was given and (c) the fact that no discernable stratum of Gospel tradition knows any Jesus but the Messiah, the Son of God.

Form criticism is not without its problems, however (a) In spite of protestations to the contrary, form criticism has almost always been used to denigrate the value of the Gospel accounts as far as Jesus is concerned. It almost universally proclaimed to be primary evidence for the church, but not for Jesus himself. (b) It is the universal human tendency to structure traditional material according to identifiable forms, why are there no “pure” forms available in the NT? Nothing seems to satisfy the theoretical criteria that define the forms. (c) Form Criticism relies far too heavily on modern parallels that on inspection turn out to be highly questionable (d) Form criticism turned out to be inadequate to explain all the complexities of the synoptic material and sub sequentially was supplemented by Redaction Criticism, which in turn was supplemented by Structuralism, Rhetorical Critics, and a host of other emphases. Trying to comprehend all that the NT text is trying to say by examining the form alone, in the end, proved to be too narrow a base on which to build an understanding of the synoptic material. “31

Form criticism has far too often been used by Scholars, who start out with a wrong premise, namely that the historical Jesus is not portrayed in the Gospels. When this is done form criticism becomes a descent into negativity and futility, which leads nowhere. The Gospel accounts, on the other hand, do portray an historical account of the real Jesus, who was born of a virgin women, who lived an extraordinary virtuous life, who died the death of an ordinary criminal and who rose from the dead to authenticate His claim to be the Son of God in the full sense of the term.

³⁰ McDowell page 569

³¹ F F Bruce page 461-462

The major assertion of form criticism was that the “New Testament writings do not portray a historical picture of Jesus.”³² The assertions of form criticism are easily rebutted when one considers the methodical care and approach that the Gospel writers took to develop their accounts of the Life of Jesus (Luke 4:1-4). John himself claims to have been an eyewitness of the events he wrote about (John 21:24-25 and 1 John 1:1-4). Throughout the ages every attempt to destroy the historical reality of Jesus have proved futile.³³

³² McDowell page 551

³³ McDowell page 558

