RECENT TRENDS IN BIBLICAL SOURCE CRITICISM

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... all hypotheses are working proposals until confirmed in detail, and ... many must be discarded while others will require drastic overhauling in the face of new evidence. There is a grave temptation to hold on to a hypothesis that has served well in the past, and the more serious temptation to bend data to fit, or to dismiss what cannot be accommodated into the system. The commitment must always be to observable or discoverable data, and not to a hypothesis, which is always expendable.¹

In the 19th century, scholars of the Bible posited the Documentary Hypothesis. According to this theory, the Torah subsumes a composite of literary works, or sources, instead of being the work of a single author. Proponents of this theory, the "sources critics," identify these sources by highlighting sections of the Torah that display different writing styles, ideological assumptions, word choice, particularly with regard to Divine names, and any number of other differences. Source critics attribute the sources to authors coming from different time periods and ideological backgrounds, and have named them "J" (for passages that use the Tetragrammaton), "E" (for passages that use Elohim), "P" (Priestly) and "D" (Deuteronomist). Until recently, this theory was considered the unshakable bedrock upon which any academic Bible study was to be proposed.

The mid-1980s and the early 1990s witnessed a resurgence of biblical scholars challenging, revising, and even rejecting the Documentary Hypothesis. First and foremost, scholars relinquished claims to a scientific methodology. In Empirical Models for Biblical Criticism,² Jeffery Tigay insists that "The degree of subjectivity which such hypothetical [source critical] procedures permit is notorious." In fact, he characterizes these procedures as "reading between the lines." Moreover, Edward Greenstein maintains that source critical analysis is analogous to the blind men and the elephant: "Each of five blind men approaches a different part of an elephant's anatomy. Perceiving

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only part of the elephant, each man draws a different conclusion as to the 
identity of what he encounters." According to the preceding remarks, not 
only are source critical methods subjective, but also account for only a frac-
tion of the total evidence. Especially when analyzing a literary corpus "as 
bulky and complex as an elephant," a system which fails to consider all the 
evidence, and wherein "scholars shape the data into the configurations of 
their own imagination" hardly warrants the label scientific.

While surveying many conflicting proposals for the nature of the hypothet-
ical sources, Gerhard Larsson gives a more specific account of the methodo-
logical shortcomings. He says that

... there is no sound objective method for recognizing the differ-ent sources, there is also no real consensus about the character and 
extent of sources like J and E, [and] no unity concerning limits be-
tween original sources and the insertions made by redactors.

Rather, as Greenstein says, "each scholar defines and adapts the evidence 
according to his own point of view." Such an approach not only yields re-
results which are, as Tigay highlights, "hypothetical (witness the term 
'documentary hypothesis')," but, as David Noel Freedman declares, allows 
and encourages, "the pages of our literature [to be] filled with endless argu-
ments between scholars who simply reiterate their prejudices."

The lack of a sound and rigorous methodology leads scholars to produce 
varying and even contradictory theories, which ultimately undermine the 
enterprise as a whole. In addition to Wellhausen's four sources J, E, P, and D, 
some scholars speculate about sources labeled Lay (L), Nomadic (N), Kenite 
(K), Southern or Seir (S) and the "foundational source" Grundlage (G). Not 
only do scholars multiply the number of sources, some, applying the same 
methodology, fragment J, E, P, and D into further subdivisions, and view 
these documents as products of "schools" which "shaped and reshaped these 
documents by further additions."

After summarizing the different op-
ions, Pauline Viviano says,
The more "sources" one finds, the more tenuous the evidence for 
the existence of continuous documents becomes, and the less like-
ly that four unified documents ever existed. Even for those able to 
avoid skepticism and confusion in the face of the ever increasing 
number of sources, the only logical conclusion seems to be to
move away from [Wellhausen's] Documentary Hypothesis toward a position closer to the Fragmentary Hypothesis.\textsuperscript{12}

In addition to being a victim of its own ambition, the Documentary Hypothesis suffered many challenges, from the time of its inception through contemporary scholarship. Scholars have contested and even refuted the arguments from Divine names, doublets, contradictions, late words, late morphology, Aramaisms, and every other aspect of the Documentary Hypothesis.\textsuperscript{13} As a result, some scholars denounce source criticism \textit{en toto},\textsuperscript{14} while others posit alternate hypotheses. However, one wonders if these hypotheses will not share the same fate as the ones they just disproved.

These problems have brought source criticism to a sad state. In Greenstein's words, "Many contemporary Biblicists are experiencing a crisis in faith . . . . The objective truths of the past we increasingly understand as the creations of our own vision."\textsuperscript{15} He continues, "all scholarship relies on theories and methods that come and go, and . . . modern critical approaches are no more or less than our own midrash."\textsuperscript{16} This "crisis," or "breakdown" to use Jon Levenson's characterization, has encouraged droves of scholars to study the Bible synchronically, a method which effectively renders source criticism irrelevant.

Among other advantages, the synchronic method of biblical study encourages scholars to detect textual phenomena which, upon reflection, seem obvious, but have not been recognized until recently. Levenson explains these recent detections as follows:

Many scholars whose deans think they are studying the Hebrew Bible are, instead, concentrating on Syrio-Palestinian archeology, the historical grammar of Biblical Hebrew, Northwest Semitic epigraphy, or the like – all of which are essential, but no combination of which produces a Biblical scholar. The context often supplants the text and, far worse, blinds the interpreters to features of the text that their method has not predisposed them to see.\textsuperscript{17}

This statement could not be truer when referring to source criticism, and to this end Larsson says, albeit in a harsher tone: "Source criticism obscures the analysis. Only when the text is considered as a whole do the special features and structures of the final version emerge."\textsuperscript{18}
The rediscovery of the Bible's special features and structures has proven to be extremely rewarding in its own right, and, in addition, it has recurrently forced scholars to revise and even reject source critical theories. Larsson states this latter statement quite clearly: "Many scholars have found that when the different [patriarchal] cycles are studied in depth it is no longer possible to support the traditional documentary hypothesis."\(^{19}\) Even the Flood narrative, traditionally explained as two independent strands (J and P) woven together, has been unified by scholars who perceive a literary structure integrating the various sections of the story.\(^{20}\) In fact, a statistical analysis of linguistic features in Genesis lead by Yehuda Radday and Haim Shore demonstrates that

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\text{. . . with all due respect to the illustrious documentarians past and present, there is massive evidence that the pre-biblical triplicity of Genesis, which their line of thought postulates to have been worked over by a late and gifted editor into a trinity, is actually a unity.}^{21}\]

NOTES

4. Ibid.
8. Tigay, p. 2.
11. Ibid. pp. 43-44.
12. Ibid p. 44.
18. Larsson, p. 322.
19. Ibid.

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**SEARCHING THE 36-YEAR INDEX OF THE JEWISH BIBLE QUARTERLY**

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JEWISH BIBLE QUARTERLY
Biblical criticism is an umbrella term for those methods of studying the Bible that began in the Enlightenment and lasted into the twentieth century before transforming into contemporary versions with differing views. Historical biblical criticism originally embraced two distinctive perspectives: the concern to avoid dogma and bias by applying a non-sectarian, reason-based judgment, and the reconstruction of history according to contemporary understanding. Scholars used the grammar, structure Biblical criticism is an umbrella term covering various techniques used mainly by mainline and liberal Christian theologians to study the meaning of Biblical passages. It uses general historical principles, and is based primarily on reason rather than revelation or faith. Form criticism is an analysis of literary documents, particularly the Bible, to discover earlier oral traditions (stories, legends, myths, etc.) upon which they were based. Tradition criticism is an analysis of the Bible, concentrating on how religious traditions have grown and changed over the time span during which the text Biblical criticism is an umbrella term covering various techniques for applying literary historical-critical methods in analyzing and studying the Bible and its textual content. The word “criticism” is not to be taken in the negative sense of attempting to denigrate the Bible, although this motive is found in its history. In later times, higher critical methods were deployed in conjunction with the contemporary philosophical trends to de-historicize Scripture. This history of applying critical methods in an attempt to pull down Scripture has meant that the value of higher critical methods has been, and still is, a matter of controversy among evangelicals.