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MODERN BIBLICAL CRITICISM

MODERN BIBLICAL CRITICISM, MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE, HAS WEAKENED AND almost destroyed the high view of the Bible previously held throughout Christendom. Thus it is necessary to look at the main lines of this criticism as it has developed in the last two centuries and then reflect on it from an evangelical perspective.

The Roots of Higher Criticism

Higher criticism of the Old and New Testaments along literary lines is not in itself peculiar to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Theodore of Mopsuestia, one of the most noted theologians of the Antiochian school, relegated a number of the psalms (such as 51, 65 and 127) to the age of the Exile. During the Middle Ages, Ibn Ezra, a Jewish scholar, claimed to have discovered a number of anachronisms in the Pentateuch. Even Martin Luther applied a form of literary criticism in his occasional pronouncements about the authenticity and relative value of the biblical books. Nevertheless, it was not until the middle of the eighteenth century, 1753, to be exact, that higher criticism was introduced on a scale and with a purpose comparable to our use of the phrase today.

In that year a scientist and physician in the French court, Jean Astruc, published a work on the literary sources of Genesis and set forth a method of biblical study which was to find widespread acceptance, first in Germany, then throughout Europe and the United States. Astruc observed that

in the Hebrew text of Genesis, God is designated by two different names. The first is Elohim, for, while this name has other meanings in Hebrew, it is especially applied to the Supreme Being. The other is Jehovah . . . the

great name of God, expressing his essence. Now one might suppose that the two names were used indiscriminately as synonymous terms, merely to lend variety to the style. This, however, would be in error. The names are never intermixed; there are whole chapters, or large parts of chapters, in which God is always called Elohim, and others, at least as numerous, in which he is always named Jehovah. If Moses were the author of Genesis, we should have to ascribe this strange and harsh variation to himself. But can we conceive such negligence in the composition of so short a book as Genesis? Shall we impute to Moses a fault such as no other writer has committed? Is it not more natural to explain this variation by supposing that Genesis was composed of two or three memoirs, the authors of which gave different names to God, one using Elohim, another that of Jehovah or Jehovah Elohim?¹

Astruc's statement is a primitive expression of the critical spirit, exhibiting characteristics that were soon to become representative of literary criticism at large. First, it reveals a break with traditional views, according to which Moses was the author of the Pentateuch. Second, it discloses a shift in the object of study, from the simple meaning of the words themselves to questions of the authenticity and integrity of the biblical books. Third, it displays a new method of procedure. By laying aside the testimony of history and tradition, at least temporarily, this criticism focuses on the style, vocabulary, syntax, ideas and features of the documents as the sole basis on which questions concerning authenticity and integrity may be answered.

At first Astruc's work received little notice. Yet within a few years it was picked up by some German scholars and others and was expanded to include the whole Old Testament. Johann Eichhorn applied Astruc's approach to the entire Pentateuch. Wilhelm De Wette and Edward Reuss attempted to bring the results into line with Jewish history. Reuss concluded that in the correct historical sequence the prophets are earlier than the law and the psalms later than both. The most popular and, in some sense, the culminating work in this field was the *Prolegomena* of Julius Wellhausen published in 1878. This work widely disseminated the four-stage documentary hypothesis known as JEPD (*J* for the Jehovah source, *E* for the Elohim source, *P* for the priestly documents and code, and *D* for the later editorial work of the Deuteronomist or Deuteronomic school). Wellhausen dated the writing of the law after the Babylonian exile and placed only the Book of the Covenant and the most

¹*Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 4, ed. James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912), p. 315.