

The Growth of the Pentateuch, by Immanuel Lewy

Reviewed by James Brown From issue: July 1956

J, E, D, and P

by James Brown

The Growth of the Pentateuch. By Immanuel Lewy. Bookman. 264 pp. \$4.50.

This is a scholarly and closely argued attempt to provide an alternative to the documentary analysis of the Pentateuch associated with the name of the German critic of the last century, Julius Wellhausen, whose theory has been the orthodox view among Old Testament scholars. The Wellhausen school holds, in essence, that the first five books of the Bible as we now have them are not the unitary work of a single hand, but a combination of four distinct documentary sources, spanning a period of nearly five centuries and fitted together by several different redactors. The oldest of the four sources, J (dated from around 850 b.c.e.), is identified mainly by a preference for the name *Jahweh* as a designation of God, while those passages in which the epithet *Elohim* was preferred, Wellhausen attributed to source E (c. 750).

Of course, there were other grounds besides the use of different names for God that led Wellhausen and others to distinguish between the "Jahwist" and the "Elohists" hand. Questions of inconsistency between statements on similar matters could also be resolved by such an hypothesis: J lists eight plagues visited on Pharaoh, all more or less natural events, E has five, and attributes them to the staff of Moses.

It was at any rate thought possible to trace two coherent streams of thought and style connected with the two different designations of God. According to Wellhausen, J and E were combined around 600 b.c.e. by a redactor. A century later the Deuteronomistic Code, D, was added to this amalgam by another editor, and finally the J, E, and D sources were all fitted into the matrix of the Priestly Code, P, by yet another redactor, active at about 400 b.c.e.

Dr. Lewy taking issue with this analysis, suggests that there was only one original source, a basic J document of which the nucleus was composed in the Davidic era by the prophet Nathan, "a humane, enlightened and balanced literary genius," the advocate of a "bloodless spiritual worship," who wrote the book in order to instruct Solomon and others in wise and peaceful statesmanship. Nathan's version, Dr. Lewy argues, was then revised by the Jerusalemite priesthood, and commented on in later ages by annotators of different points of view who interpolated passages of their own. Among these commentators were the northern prophetic Elohist ("probably Elisha"), the southern priestly Elohist ("probably the priestregent Jehoiada"), a royal commission under Hezekiah, and, finally, the high priest Hilkiah who compiled the Priestly Code and incorporated it with the earlier work.

Dr. Lewy's theory, however, much as it differs from the Wellhausen analysis in detail, still suffers from the same radical defects. Like Wellhausen, he sees the Pentateuch as a book in the modern sense, whereas it now seems clear that the text is rather a setting down of various oral traditions, which would account in large part for its "formlessness." Moreover, as the liveliest contemporary school of Old Testament studies, the Scandinavian, has pointed out, it is doubtful that we can isolate the traditional sources on the grounds of such factors as linguistic or ideological preferences. (See my article "The New Old Testament" in commentary, April 1956.) These scholars would say that to approach the Pentateuch in this way is to bring to ancient texts a point of view which belongs rather to post-Renaissance science: what seem obscurities and contradictions to us are habits of mind natural enough at the Old Testament stage, and they cause trouble only to a Western logic deficient in its appreciation of Hebrew psychology, and unaware of the role of oral tradition in ancient culture. In speaking of ancient books, we must think not of "documents" but, in the words of the Uppsala Professor Ivan Engnell, of "units of oral tradition, complexes of tradition and collections of tradition, together with circles of traditionists and schools within which these traditions were handed on, often through several generations." Such strata as J and E may once have existed, but they were so early interwoven in oral transmission that it is impossible now to isolate them.

This position gives rise to a more likely theory of how the Pentateuch came into being than the Wellhausen analysis or Dr. Lewy's. It holds that Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers form a Tetrateuch that was composed in post-Exilic times on the basis of traditional oral material rather than of written sources, by the last transmitter of that material who set his stamp on the whole. The fifth book, Deuteronomy, is sharply distinguished from this complex—is seen instead as a kind of introductory section to the historical books Joshua through Kings, which together made up a chronicle of the history of Israel from the point of view of the Deuteronomic code. This chronicle, originally distinct from the Tetrateuch, was nevertheless written into the end of it. Later the whole complex was split up into our present books, but only after the original unities had been forgotten.

The Scandinavian theory has its difficulties, particularly in its tendency to play down the stylistic and ideological differences in the Pentateuch, as well as in the way it makes light of such sheer contradictions as we find in the two accounts of the Creation with their different order of events. It is a far cry from Dr. Lewy's methods and results, but all things considered, it provides an approach that may very well lead to a more satisfactory solution of the problems of Old Testament scholarship than any we have yet had.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

AGREE? DISAGREE? WRITE A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Let us know what you think! Send an email to editor@commentarymagazine.com

FOOTNOTES

Commentary

© Copyright 2009 Commentary. All rights reserved