

# RECENT TRENDS IN BIBLICAL SOURCE CRITICISM

DAVID STERN

. . . 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.<sup>1</sup>

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*,<sup>2</sup> 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

*David Stern studied in Yeshivat Har Etzion, took Bible courses at the Herzog Teachers College, and majored in Jewish Studies at Yeshiva University. He taught Bible in a number of different contexts, and is currently pursuing a career in medicine.*

only part of the elephant, each man draws a different conclusion as to the identity of what he encounters."<sup>3</sup> According to the preceding remarks, not only are source critical methods subjective, but also account for only a fraction of the total evidence. Especially when analyzing a literary corpus "as bulky and complex as an elephant,"<sup>4</sup> a system which fails to consider all the evidence, and wherein "scholars shape the data into the configurations of their own imagination"<sup>5</sup> hardly warrants the label scientific.

While surveying many conflicting proposals for the nature of the hypothetical sources, Gerhard Larsson gives a more specific account of the methodological shortcomings. He says that

. . . there is no sound objective method for recognizing the different sources, there is also no real consensus about the character and extent of sources like J and E, [and] no unity concerning limits between original sources and the insertions made by redactors.<sup>6</sup>

Rather, as Greenstein says, "each scholar defines and adapts the evidence according to his own point of view."<sup>7</sup> Such an approach not only yields results which are, as Tigay highlights, "hypothetical (witness the term 'documentary hypothesis'),"<sup>8</sup> but, as David Noel Freedman declares, allows and encourages, "the pages of our literature [to be] filled with endless arguments between scholars who simply reiterate their prejudices."<sup>9</sup>

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."<sup>10</sup> After summarizing the different opinions,<sup>11</sup> Pauline Viviano says,

The more "sources" one finds, the more tenuous the evidence for the existence of continuous documents becomes, and the less likely 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.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup> As a result, some scholars denounce source criticism *en toto*,<sup>14</sup> 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."<sup>15</sup> 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."<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

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."<sup>18</sup>

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."<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> In fact, a statistical analysis of linguistic features in Genesis lead by Yehuda Radday and Haim Shore demonstrates that

. . . 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.<sup>21</sup>

## NOTES

1. D. Freedman, *Divine Commitment and Human Obligation: Selected Writings of David Noel Freedman*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1997) p. 160.
2. J. Tigay, *Empirical Models for Biblical Criticism*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985) p. 2. He says this despite the fact that his book attempts to demonstrate that other features of source criticism are methodologically sound.
3. E. Greenstein, "Formation of the Biblical Narrative Corpus," *AJS Review* 15,1 (1990) p. 164.
4. Ibid.
5. E. Greenstein, "Biblical Studies in a State," in *The State of Jewish Studies* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1990) p. 30.
6. G. Larsson, "Documentary Hypothesis and Chronological Structure of the Old Testament," *Zeitschrift für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 97 (1985) p. 319.
7. Greenstein, "Biblical Studies in a State," p. 31.
8. Tigay, p. 2.
9. Freedman, p. 153.
10. P. Viviano, *An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and their Application*. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) p. 43.
11. Ibid. pp. 43-44.
12. Ibid p. 44.
13. See Viviano, especially note 29; L. Walker, *A Tribute to Gleason Archer*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986); R. Whybray *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement* 53. (England: Sheffield 1987) and many others.

