

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE VI.

MODERATE CRITICISM.¹

BY THE REVEREND G. S. GRIFFITHS, UPPINGHAM, ENGLAND.

THIS work may be fairly described as a plausible but somewhat misleading presentation, from the "Moderate" standpoint, of the modern critical view of the Pentateuch. It is written throughout in a clear and eminently readable style. The subject-matter is well-arranged, and the book is furnished with copious indices and an excellent analysis. Every page bears witness to the author's industry and literary skill. His general attitude towards the Old Testament Scriptures is one of profound reverence. He displays no sympathy with the extreme positions and reckless methods of some recent critics. His treatment of the subject is marked by seriousness and moderation, and the appearance of great fairness. Perhaps its most notable quality is its air of invincible patience. The picture which it suggests is that of a singularly patient teacher instructing a group of critical but rather stupid pupils, answering their questions, wrestling with their difficulties, disposing of their objections, and anxious always that every detail should be made plain. For these and other merits of the book the credit rightly belongs to the author himself. Its defects, on the other hand, are partly due to the limits within which the work is compressed, but chiefly to the essential weakness of the cause which it represents.

The author states the critical theory in the form of three

¹ *An Introduction to the Pentateuch.* By A. T. Chapman, M.A., Emmanuel College, Cambridge. Pp. xx, 339. Cambridge: The University Press. 3s. 6d., net.

Propositions: (1) The Pentateuch (he uses the term Hexateuch, but on grounds that are quite inadequate) contains passages of later date than the time of Moses and Joshua. (2) The Pentateuch is a composite work in which four documents (at least) can be distinguished. (3) The laws in the Pentateuch consist of three separate Codes which belong to different periods in the history of Israel; D being assigned to the reign of Josiah, and P to Ezra after the Return. The effective refutation in detail of these propositions and the various arguments by which they are here supported would require much more space than we can presume to occupy in this article. Besides, it is scarcely necessary in view of the work done by such writers as Green, Orr, G. L. Robinson, Wiener, and others. Several articles dealing fully with many of the most important points raised by Mr. Chapman have appeared in the BIBLIOTHECA SACRA during recent years. But the following observations of a general character may be permitted.

With the author's First Proposition as it stands no traditionalist would be inclined to quarrel. It is true that arguments against the Mosaic date of the Pentateuch based on the particular passages cited by Mr. Chapman have been sufficiently answered by many modern writers. But even if this had not been done, the passages in question would prove no more than that the text, which must have been copied and edited over and over again through a period of many centuries, had suffered certain modifications and additions in the process. Indeed, on the assumption that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, the presence of *post-Mosaica* in the text is not nearly so astonishing as their absence would have been. Certainly they are insufficient to outweigh the great mass of internal and external evidence on the other side.

In defending his Second Proposition the author (very prudently, as we think) does not attach so much value to the Astruc "clue" as the earlier critics did. He uses it merely to "confirm results obtained by other critical methods, or, as establishing a probability which is strengthened by further investigation." But in view of the fact that recent textual criticism has utterly discredited this famous "clue," it is difficult to see what can be *confirmed* or *established* by it. Seeing it has signally failed to establish itself, it would have been more discreet, not to say more candid, to have abandoned it altogether, and relied entirely on the "other critical methods."

The argument from *style* and *vocabulary* is set forth at some length. We are regaled with the customary lists of words and phrases supposed to be characteristic of the different alleged documents. Mr. Chapman is much more cautious in his use of these than many modern critics, but his analysis will only impress those who are ignorant of the following (among other) facts, viz., (1) That the literary affinities of P and E are so great that down to 1853 they were believed to be the work of one author. (2) That J and E are so similar in style that the most skillful critical dissectors admit the extreme difficulty — in some cases impossibility — of distinguishing between them. (3) That the literary analysis is by no means so independent of the Astruc "clue" as Mr. Chapman believes. (4) That the critical division into "documents" presupposes a considerable limitation of "style" in the case of each author. (5) That the critical theory requires for its support, not only the postulating of a number of "redactors" whose proceedings, according to the critical theorists (who appear to know them best), are characterized by an amazing inconsistency; but also a minuter

subdivision into "series" of documents (J¹, J², J³, and so forth). (6) That in any case the argument from style must be largely subjective; and that, in fact, critical writings show that it is so. And (7) that it is far from certain that in an ancient book such as the Pentateuch, treating of a great variety of subjects, differences of style are an infallible indication of diversity of authorship.¹

In his argument for the composite character of the Pentateuch, our author has not allowed sufficient weight to the numerous signs of unity which are manifest in the work in its present form. He ignores the fact (to which his own analysis bears witness) that not one of the alleged "sources" J, E, and P, as it is found in the Pentateuch, is complete in itself. Many instances might be quoted in which statements contained in one document presuppose statements which are only found in another, and are quite unintelligible apart from them, so that if the documents ever existed in a separate and complete form, missing parts of one correspond to the extant portions of the others. It is in this connection that the various "redactors" prove such useful allies to the "critics." But on what principle they pieced together these fragments from different documents, or, indeed, why they should take pains to do so at all, is not explained. If P, e.g., ever existed as an independent document, and was generally accepted as an authentic representation of the Mosaic history and legislation, why should it be deemed necessary to combine it in this "mosaic" fashion with JE?

Mr. Chapman admits that "unity of purpose" is shown in the Pentateuch. He denies, however, that this fact indicates unity of authorship. He evidently believes that it may

¹ For the contrary view, see H. M. Wiener, *Origin of the Pentateuch*, p. 90.

be credited to the "redactors." But there is one striking mark of unity present in the Pentateuch which cannot properly be attributed to redactors however skillful they may have been — and the alleged redactors of the Pentateuch by all accounts were far from skillful! It may be noticed in the delineation of character. The chief personages in the history are well-defined, and the representation of them is consistent throughout. There are not three Jacobs or three Josephs appearing with different characteristics according as they are described by J, E, or P. It is the same Moses who is depicted in all the documents. This unity of representation is not artificial but organic. It is not confined to the author's comments upon his characters, which indeed are very few: it reveals itself naturally and spontaneously in the course of the narrative, in the actual incidents recorded. This phenomenon points to the substantial unity of the "sources" rather than to the harmonizing efforts of redactors.

The author's Third Proposition deals with the most important point of all, viz., the *dating* of the documents. He points out that in each document there is embedded a code of laws, and these codes enable him to discover the respective dates at which the documents were produced and published. He argues in favor of the sequence JE, D, P, on the two familiar lines: (1) comparison of the Codes with each other, emphasizing discrepancies and variations which appear to confirm his theory, while ignoring those differences which imply the priority of P to D; (2) comparison of the Codes with the history (or rather, with the Wellhausen version of the history), in the course of which he endeavors to show a "development" which reaches its climax in the system of P. His "test cases" are the laws concerning slavery, and the

regulation of worship. On these two selected battlefields we may commend him to the tender mercies of Mr. H. M. Wiener.

In common with most writers of the Moderate school, Mr. Chapman ignores the logical issues of the theory he expounds. The validity of the Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis depends, of course, on the quantity and weight of the evidence which may be adduced in its favor. But if that hypothesis be sound, then certain conclusions, usually termed "Rationalistic," as to the origin and development of the Hebrew religion, the inspiration of the Old Testament, and, ultimately, the character of Christianity itself as a Faith which has its roots deep down in the soil of the Mosaic dispensation, logically and inevitably follow. This is not merely admitted, but insisted upon by conservative writers and by most of the chief leaders of the modern critical movement. This fact taken alone is no refutation of the "critical theory." If, on other grounds, the truth of that theory can be demonstrated, the conclusions to which it points must be accepted. But it seems to us that they ought to be fully and frankly set forth in a book which is designed for the instruction of the rising generation.

It is a weakness of the Moderate party that while they accept the Wellhausen analysis, they appear to reject the religious theory on which it is partly based, as well as the estimate of Judaism and Christianity to which it leads. In this particular, Mr. Chapman's work shows no advance on that of his predecessors in the same field. He draws a distinction between the literary form of the Pentateuch—to which, mainly, he applies the critical method—and its contents, the greater part of which he believes to be very ancient. But his efforts to show that acceptance of the critical

analysis is consistent with a belief in the general trustworthiness and divine inspiration of the Pentateuch, though manifestly sincere, are by no means convincing.

He briefly mentions the fact that the "critical theory" is regarded with suspicion by many because of its association with rationalistic speculations and assumptions concerning miracles, prophecy, and the origin and growth of the Hebrew religion, and because of the avowed rationalism of some modern critical writers. But he does little to allay that suspicion. His reply is that such speculations and assumptions have nothing to do with higher criticism; that each argument should be judged on its merits; and that the strength and value of an argument does not depend upon the character of him who produces it. The reply is true in substance, but it only affects those cases in which rationalistic preconceptions are made the *basis* of the critical theory, and even here it is not relevant. It is true that rationalistic views of miracles, prophecy, etc., have nothing to do with genuine higher criticism whose province and methods are strictly literary; but they seem to have very much to do with the Pentateuchal criticism, the results of which are cordially accepted by our author and set forth in his book. He himself (p. 34) admits (as, indeed, he is bound to do) the inadequacy of the literary method (i.e. "higher criticism"; *vide* p. 21) alone. "To determine when the different documents contained in the Hexateuch were written is a *historical* investigation rather than a *literary* one." And it is precisely in the historical methods of the Wellhausen school that rationalistic views are not merely *associated* with the critical theory: they are part of the foundation on which it rests. Be it remembered that the *date* of the Pentateuch is the important point. But while literary criticism *may* demonstrate the composite character of the work and resolve it

into its original "documents," compositeness (even if it could be proved, which we doubt) is in itself no evidence of very late date. Nor (as we have seen) do the *post-Mosaica* and the linguistic *criteria* afford any sure support for the theory of post-Mosaic date. This is shown, e.g., by the fact that *literary* criticism (before it was reënforced by *historical* criticism) was unanimous in proclaiming P to be the earliest of the "sources": but the critics are now agreed that P is the *latest*. Genuine higher criticism is unable to establish the critical *dating* of the Pentateuch. And as it is the *date* that is important, it is irrelevant to say that speculations about inspiration and miracles have nothing to do with higher criticism. It would have been more to the point if Mr. Chapman could have said that rationalistic assumptions have nothing to do with modern *historical* criticism; but that is precisely what cannot be affirmed in view of the writings of Graf, Vatke, Wellhausen, Kuenen, and other acknowledged "founders of criticism."

Again, it is generally true that the force of an argument is independent of the orthodoxy of the critic. The fact that Wellhausen (e.g.) is a "rationalist" may not affect the cogency of his reasoning on many points; but when it is observed how prominent a part subjectivity plays in his literary analysis, and how frequently his rationalistic preconceptions are made an essential part of the basis of his theory, surely, devout believers may be excused if they regard the theory itself with some measure of suspicion.

But if Mr. Chapman's "reply" were sufficient to dissipate this suspicion, there still remains the other aspect of the connection between Rationalism and Modern criticism, viz., those cases in which the critical process leads inevitably to rationalistic conclusions. Let it be repeated that it is the *date* of

the Pentateuch that is important. On this depend its historical value and its divine inspiration. The Pentateuch professes to be the record of a Divine revelation communicated to Moses to be by him imparted to the Israelites. That revelation includes the spiritual truths which they were to believe, and the moral laws by which their conduct was to be governed. No doubt there are many who, like Mr. Chapman, succeed to their own satisfaction in combining acceptance of "critical results" with belief in the general trustworthiness of the Pentateuchal narratives and the supernatural origin of the revelation which they contain. How they do it we cannot even imagine. Certainly, it is by no known process of logic. For if these narratives were first committed to writing some centuries after the events which they describe, on what grounds can Mr. Chapman or any other "moderate" critic dispute the verdict of Kuenen, who regards even JE as unhistorical? Kuenen's opinion may be wrong — we believe it to be entirely wrong — but if his dating of the Codes is correct, his judgment on their historicity cannot be contested. It is true that numerous examples may be quoted of historical works, written long after the times of which they profess to be an account, which nevertheless are regarded as authoritative. But these works are based upon written documents. The case of the Pentateuch is different. For (1) it contains a number of extraordinary statements which are so inextricably interwoven with the narrative of the Exodus, the Sinaitic covenant, and the desert wanderings, that they cannot be eliminated without destroying the whole history, and which can be received only on the clearest possible evidence. And (2) it is obvious that this evidence must be, at least, contemporaneous. But the critical theory in its most moderate form (and this is certainly true of Mr. Chapman's state-

ment of it) contends that even the earliest of the Pentateuchal sources is founded upon oral tradition handed down from generation to generation through a period of some centuries. Sir W. Muir, who is certainly entitled to be heard on the subject of Oriental tradition, has clearly shown, by a reference to the actual growth of the Moslem tradition, that oral tradition pure and simple possesses no historical value after the lapse of a few generations. Under the most favorable conditions the oral traditions concerning Mahomet became a mass of discordant tales and wild extravagances. Two hundred years after the death of Mahomet, out of 600,000 traditions then current, only 2000 could be deemed to have the slightest claim to be regarded as authentic. What would have been the condition of oral traditions concerning Moses, to say nothing of Abraham, in the ninth century B.C.? The fact is that "the value of tradition depends absolutely on the date at which it ceased to be oral by being fixed in writing. After the lapse of a few generations oral tradition loses all pretence of simple truth. Instead of furnishing any material of fact whatever for history, it can be regarded but as the creature of fancy." If then the Pentateuch is only a collection of traditions committed to writing centuries after the time of which it professes to be a record, it cannot possess the slightest historical value—in other words, it is not what Mr. Chapman calls it, "a religious history": it is merely a religious romance.

But if the Pentateuch is unhistorical, what shall we say of the supernatural revelation of which it claims to be the medium? According to the biblical view expressed not only in the Pentateuch, but also by the prophets and historians, Jehovah chose Israel to be his peculiar people, befriended and protected them, delivered them out of the hands of their enemies, succored them

in distress, manifested himself to their leader, and gave them laws and ordinances by obedience to which they might prove their loyalty to him. But the critical view reverses all this, and conceives of Jehovah as chosen by Israel, and served and worshiped in ways which were discovered by repeated experiments through a long period. The two theories are diametrically opposed. The fact that Mr. Chapman, like other "moderate" writers, but unlike many advanced critics, regards a great part of the Pentateuchal legislation — even of the Priestly Code — as very ancient makes no difference. It matters little how ancient it was, if it was not Divinely communicated, but the result of many experiments, reformations, and revolutions. True, Mr. Chapman upholds its divinity on the ground that it is the development of laws and principles which were given through Moses from the beginning. But unhappily he has omitted to specify any such.

This reminds us that Mr. Chapman is not happy in his attempted refutation of the charge brought against the critical theory that it postulates a series of "frauds" perpetrated upon the Jewish people at various times by priests and prophets. According to criticism laws were imposed on the nation in the name of Moses of which Moses himself knew nothing. The reply to this appears to be that the successive codes were rightly attributed to Moses because they embodied principles which their authors regarded as communicated by God to Moses when the Hebrews were delivered from bondage and chosen by him as a people in order that "they might keep His statutes and observe His laws." Without enlarging upon the insuperable difficulties of the critical version of the circumstances in which Deuteronomy and the Priestly Code were published, we may refer to one point, Mr. Chapman's treatment of which is extremely unsatisfactory, viz., the crit-

ical explanation of the connection of Moses with the Jewish legislation.

If the Codes embody genuine Mosaic principles, what are those principles, and where may we hope to find them? According to our author's First Proposition, even JE must be dated long after the time of Moses. And he insists that even the author of Deuteronomy, though acquainted with the laws of JE, did not connect them with the Sinaitic covenant: he knew of no Mosaic legislation at Horeb save the Decalogue. Further, if the narratives rest only upon oral tradition there is no reliable *history* of Moses extant. How, then, may we be certified that the Codes were really drawn up "in the spirit of Moses"? Was Ezekiel's code not drawn up in the spirit of Moses? If it was Mosaic in spirit why was it too not ascribed to Moses? Was its failure to secure recognition due to the fact that it was published in the prophet's name instead of being attributed to Moses? On the critical hypothesis the only reasonable explanation of the ascription of the laws to Moses is, that his name invested them with an authoritative character which otherwise they would not have possessed. And this fact is itself a powerful argument for the genuineness of the Pentateuchal legislation. The belief that Moses was the Divinely appointed lawgiver of Israel, whose authority was greater than that of kings and prophets, could not have arisen at a late date. It could not have arisen *at any time* if it had no historical foundation.

Much more might be said, but the foregoing observations may suffice to show that Bowdlerized Wellhausenism is no better than the undiluted article.