

Documentary Hypothesis: An Assessment of Its Nature and Implications

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Introduction

In the world today, whether in academia or outside, much debate, conversations around trendy matters, fads or controversial issues is continuously on going. Though the Christian Scriptures were once presuppositionally accepted and believed without question by all and sundry within the Church, increasingly, this is no longer the case. There is a march back to the *dark-ages* kind of scenario where scripture is either mystically, superstitiously believed or ignored and subtly relegated to the side, questioned or rejected altogether. The situation, however, in our current scenario is slightly different. It is the educated, enlightened and trained, that should know better, who are busy shredding the Holy writ apart in the quest to appear credible, current, scholarly trendy, in step with the times, rational, articulate and intelligent. Others may not overtly or out-rightly reject scripture per se, but obscurely subtly enter through the Seminary or Church door progressively and clandestinely begin to critique the Bible. Perhaps at this juncture, in order to seriously focus, we need to ask, what exactly are the current issues of the times? What are the possible triggers or root causes? How should Christians respond? This paper introduces matters related to the Canon, specifically origin of the Old Testament books as relates to the *Torah*. Were the books in the Pentateuch written by one person or not? If so, how do we account for the parts that talk about Moses posthumously? What methods and tools exist to determine the authorship? That said, several propositions around these many issues currently exist with many novel ones consistently generated. One model is specifically examined in the present discourse. Several questions are addressed in this relatively brisk write up. We limit our exploration with a brief consideration of the argument around the writing of the Pentateuch or the first five books attributed to Moses.

Document Analysis Approaches

The curious human mind consistently wants to explore and find out stuff. At times, this curiosity (good as it is in many cases) leads in different directions, including the bad. For a number of years, scholars have been curious as to how

the Bible was compiled and by whom? Apart from the compilation, humans wish to know why authors generated those documents and to what end. Then there is the desire to know what style (or genre) was used and how best to interpret the said writings. To arrive at some of these answers, scholars have devised different methods and tools attempting to get closer to what the author's world was like and how they would have understood or interpreted things. Apart from the back ground contextual issues or established hermeneutical principles, inquisitive scholars exploit relevant tools to probe, interrogate or discern what the original author's pulse may have been. Although in this paper, we do not delve deeply into all the afore mentioned, we none the less hasten to mention that several critical approaches have been used, with some level of success, attempting to get closer to what could have been, despite the forbidding time distance challenge between them. We need to mention, in passing, the existing critical approaches but leave the reader to further explore. Gary V Smith (1977), in evaluating the structure and purpose in Genesis 1-11, gives helpful insights to these methods. The first approach, in this consideration, is dubbed Form criticism which traces the content and forms the books of the Bible take. In a sense, this includes literary analysis such as genre, language structure, norms and how the authors expressed themselves. Then there is the Historical criticism (other-wise called Historical-critical method or simply Higher criticism) whose aim is to investigate the origins of ancient documents, artifacts with a view to grasp, appreciate the background to them. Then there is Source criticism whose aim is to investigate and determine the source of documents, who contributed/generated this or that and what was their credibility? Could they have actually generated such artifacts or used a pseudonym? Did the compiler assume ownership because they merely collated documents? Did they receive attribution merely because of their compilation role? Is there tangible evidence we can examine? Are there fingerprints, speeches, photos, observation or other credible sources? These and several other questions come to the fore. These tools have either helped Biblical scholarship or simply shred it to pieces attributing all sorts of things to the Bible that probably were previously not there. The destructive types of criticism have eventually shredded, declaring the Bible a mass of confused, contradictory writings whose coherence is difficult to comprehend. In such scenarios, the Bible has been reduced to a mere writing of men rather than originating from God. In the 19th century, for instance, higher criticism did just that. In this paper, we focus on one approach, the Documentary Hypothesis in relation to the Pentateuch.

The Arguments for the JEDP case

The issue we investigate relates to the five books of the law, commonly called the Torah. There has been considerable discussion as to the nature and purpose of these books. Were they narratives of actual events or just imagined? What was the aim of the writer? The reader will not go far before encountering these questions in about any modern academic literature focused on the Torah. In this

section, we address these matters to some level of detail offering analysis in ensuing parts of this discourse. We commence our exploration by asking the very questions we hinted at: Who wrote the Pentateuch? When was it written and by whom? Was it written by others and then Moses merely compiled or did he have anything to do with it at all? There have been many competing propositions as earlier intimated at. Though many ideas exist, the most prominent argument, obviously evolutionary in nature, that has even invaded many once sound seminaries, is the Documentary or JEDP voice. This school claims that Genesis and indeed the first five books (or Pentateuch) of the Bible were not written by Moses but by a collection of other people. This school argues that different individuals wrote/contributed portions of scripture and are thus, this theory (rightly?) attributes them to the said sources under the acronym: JEDP. This acronym stands for the sources who probably wrote a portion and all that Moses¹ did was to compile them into one mystical story drawn from several fairy tales from the Ancient Near East. This view therefore argues that the Bible was written progressively, over time, evolving into one disjoint and at yet cohesive whole. The sources then are:

J for Jahwist and written from Jehovah or Yahweh

E for Elohim: This source used the name Elohim for the name of God as we see in Genesis 1 and part of chapter 2

D for Deuteronomy source:

P for Priest source: These priests wrote post exilic

Then there is the **R** or other various sources.

Each of these sources wrote at different times and once collated gave us the first five books of the Old Testament. Those that would argue for this case refer to different points as evidence for this hypothesis as given at length:

- The words used for God differ across the book of Genesis, suggesting that different individuals contributed to the writing/drafting of the entire book collection. If the same individual wrote the book(s), it follows that they could have consistently used the same or single name of God throughout including between Genesis 1-2:4a and Genesis 2:4b. There most likely would have used the same name consistent with other parts of scripture. Why the (sudden) change in the use of the name from *Elohim* in Genesis 1 to *Jehovah* in other parts of the book? This observation sounds a somewhat valid argument but the confusion comes in when the compound names of God are used such as *Jehovah-Elohim*. This argument is thus weak and easily answered by Umberto Cassuto, an Eastern Language

¹ One school completely rejects the idea that Moses had anything to do with the Torah. But then one wonders whether Jesus was equally mistaken by the attribution to Moses of the Pentateuch?

expert. He asserts that this practice (and change overs) was perfectly normal and acceptable in eastern languages.

- Secondly, this school argues that if a single person wrote all the books of the law (i.e. the Torah), the writing should have been uniform in language terms. Why the apparent changes in the language?
- Thirdly, this school asserts that the personal name of God is a later invention of the author hailing from a polytheistic context later developing monotheistic tenets.
- Fourthly, the school posits that writing was unknown in the time of Moses, so how could he have written? They claim that what we have were later writings by people beyond the life time of Moses. Granted, the cuneiform was extant but only in Mesopotamia.

There are several other arguments that this school summons to support this (i.e. Documentary hypothesis) view and has gained credence over time, initially having been proposed by Jean Astruc in 1753 but strongly championed by Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918).

Weaknesses of the JEDP Hypothesis Claims

Like all other theories, models or arguments, they have a strong and weak side. The said hypothesis potency lies in the argument that different words for God are used within the same piece of writing. However, this school equally has serious weaknesses that work against it. Below, we suggest some weak points:

- The arguments at times are contradictory.
- At other times, the JEDP argument cannot be used consistently. An example is where God's names are compounded e.g. *Jehovah-Elohim*. How can we determine the source of that particular passage, do we split the verse and what is the rationale?
- The argument for varied authorship of the books is not a strong enough argument based on the different words used. One research in Jerusalem concluded that over 82% of the Torah was probably written by one author, effectively dealing a mortal blow to the JEDP argument.

Dangers With and Implications of the JEDP view

The JEDP approach has weaknesses and strengths no doubt, but it has far reaching implications of how people view scripture. Stated below are some of the

points what we perceive as the negative consequences of holding on to this liberal and evolutionary view:

- This view denies the inspiration and revelation of scripture reducing it to mere folklore or tales of the Ancient Near East.
- This view denies and rejects basic doctrines of the Christian faith by claiming that the Genesis accounts for instance, are mere mystical stories from the Near East. This implies that original sin goes flying through the window, the Garden of Eden an imaginary tale as well as Adam and Eve being imaginary characters. Further, this denies the very God of the Bible.
- This view posits that the Old Testament has somehow been doctored to give a story that claims origins rather than an evolutionary approach of things.
- Fourthly, this view claims that the Biblical meta-narrative cannot be accepted or relied on. The Bible's veracity comes into sharp question. It further restricts the relevance and applicability of the Hebrew Bible to the Jews only and not beyond. This probably indirectly adds credence to the claim and argument by some Christians today that the Old Testament is archaic, ancient and should be left to the dustbin of the Hebrew past.
- It is solely (or leans towards) premised on the literary or Source criticism approach to the exclusion of other approaches. One other approach, as earlier highlighted earlier in this paper, is the Linguistic criticism which yields other conclusions. A careful study of the Hebrew language reveals that repetition in Eastern languages was normal and expected. Thus internal consistency is a strong possibility. Using an approach foreign to the text misleads readers and thus yields false conclusions as in the case of the Documentary Hypothesis.

Author of the Torah and adduced Evidence

From the internal and external evidence, the authorship of Moses is asserted and fostered. The internal evidence within the Bible points to the fact that Moses is accepted and believed to have been the author of the Torah. Even Jesus (e.g. Lk 16:29), apart from Paul and other inspired writers attribute this book to Moses (Thiele 2014).

The external evidence may include archaeological findings, documents, writings, carvings, artifacts etc. from different parts of the world. Firstly, the argument that writing was not known in Moses' time has been put to rest as evidence predating Moses' time has come forth. Secondly, other writings and records, even from heathen sources, such as Mesopotamia's cuneiform, definitively prove that narrations, words or events claimed by Moses indeed took place.

Moses is believed to have written, compiled and edited the writings in the Torah². He may have had access to some source documents but it is evident that he actually collated and wrote the books as we know them today. The Jerusalem research as earlier alluded to (led by Yehuda Radday)³, conducted at the Technion University suggested that the probability of one author having written the Torah was high as 82% using computer analysis!

What Others have Written or Said about the Authorship of the Pentateuch

As would be expected, many have written over the subject matter above from either side of the debate. The liberals have been strongly supported by Julius Graf-Wellhausen, Duane Garret and others that claim Moses never had anything to do with the book of Genesis and thus demolish the Biblical claims. Garret's argument basically supports documentary hypothesis though from a slightly different angle. However, several valiant salty scholars and in some cases, saints have arisen to the occasion and written massively on the documentary hypothesis or areas to do with inspiration and revelation. These include Umberto Cassuto (1883-1951)⁴ Edward J. Young, Josh McDowell, Benjamin B Warfield, Rob Thiele, Gary V. Smith and T. Radday among others collectively hold and assert that the Bible is one cohesive whole, written by different inspired individuals and yet saying the same message with the same voice. They have further asserted that the *Torah* was authored by one person; Moses as God guided him to compile, edit and put the books together as we have them today. In addition, the narrations in Genesis are not a collection of Eastern folklore but actually took place and thus establish the doctrines therein stated.

Lessons Gleaned from this consideration

² Rob Thiele (2014) is even more emphatic after adducing evidence in his article entitled where he concludes *"Moses wrote the Pentateuch. His authorship is constantly declared. The record of the Old Testament confirms it. The prophets were intimately familiar with the text which influenced their own writings. Jesus and his apostles also confirmed it and unreservedly accepted Mosaic authorship of "the law of Moses"- the term used by used by the Jews in those times to refer to the Pentateuch. While we certainly acknowledge that the record of Moses' death was a later hand (possibly Joshua), we can be confident that the books of Moses were from his hand guided by divine direction and inspiration. We believe with Christ "all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the Psalms concerning me" (Luke 24:44)."*

³ Readers could verify claim of this information available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/11/08/world/computer-points-to-single-author-for-genesis.html>, viewed on 21/10/2021. See appendix.

⁴ This scholar argues against the Documentary Hypothesis stating that aspects such as repetition were acceptable and common place in the Eastern languages. His argument is from linguistic rather than literary/source arguments. This should dislodge the Documentary/source hypothesis originally crafted by Graf-Wellhausen

- Scripture is one, inherently authoritative and to be obeyed.
- Genesis is pivotal to our understanding the Biblical meta-narrative.
- The Bible has and will always have enemies attacking and seeking to discredit it.
- Christians need to be careful with the Documentary Hypothesis as put across by the liberals and other Bible opponents. It may be a useful tool/approach in some way but largely misleading.
- The Christian must not tire in exploring and defending the scriptures. Both legitimate internal and external evidence must be adduced to defend scripture veracity and authority.
- All scripture is God breathed and thus inerrant and authoritative.
- The documentary hypothesis is ever becoming more popular and is being aggressively taught to future Christian leaders. There is need to contend for the faith in various forms and approaches.
- Other approaches such as the Linguistic rather than exclusive literary/source criticism yield other conclusions helpful to explain the difficulties or potential wrong conclusions. Scholars and readers need to be careful as they evaluate ancient works without grasping the historical background, culture, language mechanics or customs of authors before arriving at conclusions or building theories as has been the case with the Documentary Hypothesis. Thomas S Kuhn (1996)'s views on the scientific approach proves handy. Theories do change over time as better or more accurate information becomes available.

As evident, much can be learnt from reading what the Documentary Hypothesis posits. Though popular, it has serious cracks that expose its inherent weaknesses.

Benefits of this Consideration

The idea of reviewing the Documentary Hypothesis is an excellent one as it addresses the issues of the day, namely inspiration and reliability of Scripture. The reader is exposed (and thus equipped or forearmed) to what is trending in relation to what ought to be believed. In the midst of competing views, it is important to remain vigilantly alert while charting new approaches for the glory of God through on-going research projects. The Christian Church needs to urgently away because what is churned out of our Seminaries and Bible Colleges, at times leaves one wondering. Many times the contemporary Church casts an unfortunate blind eye to the reality of error creeping in into our midst unawares. The Documentary Hypothesis is one of them and so are other human made

models and systems. Quite alright, they may be handy but at times lead in the wrong direction. Dr J.P Moreland (2020) expressed similar concerns when he lamented:

...I am increasingly troubled by what I am seeing...as professional disciplines and by the weak impact they are having upon the Church and culture...And scriptural scholars have increasingly turned their attention to tiny, technical issues, churning out more commentaries, or doing biblical Theology in a way that simply acts as though a war of ideas and the secularization of culture is not even happening. Most ST/SS scholars act as if no culture war exists!"⁵.

We do well to take heed. We need to add the following: The reader is equipped if they, at a bare minimum, access (and review) to the reference materials used in this study as an introduction to this whole sea of criticism, in the quest to arrive at the best possible answers to questions. Now that readers are aware about the various approaches to document criticism/probing, they do well to have a go at Literary/Source or Linguistic criticism, among others. It may take time to grasp skills but it pays in the long run. However, necessary cautions must be observed to avoid pitfalls many giants before us have erred!

Conclusion

From the foregoing, we may safely conclude that the JEDP Documentary Hypothesis does not hold much weight and thus, worth ignoring. The evidence adduced seems to strongly favour a single authorship attributed to Moses of the *Torah*. Eastern Linguistic allows for practices such as repetition which may be at variance with the logical approach from the West. The western linear & logical approach to analysis may lead to erroneous conclusions or faulty theory generation as is the case with the Documentary Hypothesis advanced by Julius Graf-Wellhausen. The Hebrew Scriptures are reliable and not mere folk tales as purported by pundits from the liberal or rank rationalist camps. The Christian needs not lose sleep over this matter although called to defend truth.

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⁵ J P Moreland (2020): How Christian Philosophers can serve. P 297 & 299.

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Appendix 1

About the Archive

This is a digitized version of an article from The Times's print archive, before the start of online publication in 1996. To preserve these articles as they originally appeared, The Times does not alter, edit or update them.

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A computer analysis of the Old Testament Book of Genesis has yielded evidence to support a common Christian and Jewish religious belief that the work was written by one author.

Yehuda T. Radday, professor emeritus of biblical studies at the Technion, Israel's institute of technology in Haifa, announced last week that a five-year linguistic analysis of the book's 20,000 words indicated an 82 percent probability that it was written by one author.

This contradicts the "documentary hypothesis," which has been accepted by many biblical scholars since the early 19th century, when Julius Wellhausen, a German Protestant theologian, said variations in the style of the first of the five

Books of Moses showed that Genesis was a compilation of documents written by two or three authors.

Professor Radday and three researchers - Moshe A. Pollatschek, a Technion professor of computer science; Haim Shore, a Tel Aviv University statistician, and Dieter Wickmann, a mathematician from West Germany's Aachen Technical Institute - investigated word usage and frequency in Genesis. 'Reliable Gauge of Authorship'

The team said usage and frequency provided "a reliable gauge of authorship" because they were stylistic nuances "beyond the author's conscious control."

Professor Radday and the others reported that the computer analysis revealed the stylistic "fingerprints" of only one author, upholding the traditional religious view of "single authorship in Genesis."

But many biblical scholars here are skeptical about the results. "The finding that there is stylistic unity could mean that the book was composed during the same century or epoch," argued Moshe Weinfeld, professor of biblical studies at Jerusalem's Hebrew University. "It doesn't necessarily mean that only one person wrote it," he said.

Professor Weinfeld pointed to his earlier study, published in 1972, of the Book of Deuteronomy. It suggested that two distinct groups of authors had written the work, though apparently during the same period, in light of its stylistic homogeneity. Holes in a Biblical Hypothesis?

"What the computer perhaps has proven," Professor Weinfeld said, "is that Wellhausen was not correct in asserting that portions of the Book of Genesis were probably written in the modern era."

The German scholar, he explained, attributed two major stylistic differences in Genesis to a hypothesis that certain chapters were probably rewritten by Jewish scholars in the Middle Ages.

But the "Jerusalem School," which Professor Weinfeld said represented a consensus of views on Israeli biblical research, asserts that the Old Testament was composed during the First Temple period - from the 10th to 6th centuries B.C.

Shalom Paul, professor of biblical research at Hebrew University, said certain nonlinguistic differences in style in Genesis warranted further investigation. A Nonlinguistic Analysis

In certain episodes, he noted, dialogues with God are related directly while in others they are described by the use of dreams. "I don't know if the computer would pick this up," Professor Paul said.

Professor Radday countered that "significant variations in language behavior" in Genesis were probably due to "variations in literary techniques employed by the same author."

He said an author could be expected to use different narrative forms to relate different types of accounts. "If you compared love letters and a telephone directory written by the same person, linguistic analysis would point to different authors, though this would not be the case," he said.

Most Old Testament researchers here insist that the "documentary hypothesis" remains a basic axiom in modern biblical scholarship, and is not so easily refuted. However, Professor Paul conceded that the Technion's computer research "may show that some areas have to be reinvestigated."

A version of this article appears in print on Nov. 8, 1981, Section 1, Page 7 of the National edition with the headline: COMPUTER POINTS TO SINGLE AUTHOR FOR GENESIS. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

Source: New York Times; <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/11/08/world/computer-points-to-single-author-for-genesis.html>, date: 21/10/2021.

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