

Apologetic Values of Pentateuchal Criticism

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ABSTRACT

Biblical criticism is often viewed from two perspectives. On the one hand, it is seen as a discipline that aims at making the biblical content and intent explicit and easily understandable. On the other hand, however, it is perceived as a destructive exercise to fragment, disparage and rob the Bible of its spiritual authority. As a result, discussion on concepts such as textual, source, form and redaction criticism in biblical studies often attracts jeers. A central question that always accompanies such debate is about the relevance of those criticisms, which has led to the conclusion that such an exercise is just an academic showmanship. Through a descriptive method, this paper investigates the values of biblical criticism from an apologetic perspective by using Pentateuchal criticism as an example. It establishes that there are theological, exegetical and hermeneutical values in Pentateuchal criticism.

Keywords: Biblical criticism, Pentateuchal criticism, Apologetics.

INTRODUCTION

Like other Holy Writs, the Bible is believed to be a product of divine inspiration. Inspiration has been defined from diverse perspectives. For Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, "Inspiration is that mysterious process by which the divine causality worked through human prophets without destroying their personalities and styles to produce divinely authoritative and inerrant writings."¹ This definition stresses the Bible's mysterious nature, divine causality, human instrumentality and inerrant nature. The mystery resulted from divine involvement, which resulted in its error-free nature. The often-cited passages that attest to biblical inspiration include II Pet. 1:21; II Tim. 3:16-17; Heb. 1:1-3.

While the source and the process of inspiration have generally been considered mysterious, the involvement of humans has created a big concern. Kenneth S. Kantzer, while stressing human tendencies in inspiration asserted "...biblical inspiration (as distinguished from illumination) may be defined as the work of the Holy Spirit by which, through the instrumentality of its human authors, he constituted the words of the Bible in all of its several parts as his written word to the human race and, therefore, of divine authority and without error."² This implies that the inspired human authors did not write in the words of angels. Rather, they wrote in their languages with their linguistic limitations. As stated by Howard Marshall, "there is a gap between the process of inspiration and the text of the Bible which causes some disquiet, particularly when we remember that according to II Timothy 3:3-16, it is the scriptures which are inspired rather than the process of composition."³ Therefore, the human linguistic limitation in inspiration gave rise to scepticism about the authority and inerrancy of the Bible as reflected in the dittography, haplography and doublets.

Consequently, biblical criticism emerged as a discipline to take an introspective look into the biblical text to identify compositional grey areas, studying and responding appropriately. This was aided by the Enlightenment of the 17th century, which questioned religious foundations, claims and beliefs. A product of this was treating the Bible from a pure literary perspective, devoid of divine inspiration through rational analysis. This has resulted in the opinion that critiquing the Bible is a negative enterprise by intent. For example, after a decade of teaching the Old Testament in some seminaries in Nigeria, I discovered that one of the most challenging topics is biblical criticism. Students always consider it dry, abstract, and void of spiritual or educational value. As a result, they intentionally struggle to get good grades with little sense of application. There is a need to emphasise its values. To this end, the paper aims to highlight and discuss deducible values of critiquing the Bible using Pentateuchal

criticism, a subset of source criticism, as an example. Therefore, this paper's task is to investigate the variety of sources of information that shaped the Pentateuch and to discuss its value from an apologetic perspective.

Pentateuchal Criticism

Pentateuchal criticism is the academic study of the origins and composition of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. After gaining prominence in the 18th century, its most famous product is the documentary hypothesis, which has extended beyond the scope of the Bible's first five books.⁴ Pentateuchal criticism focuses on the sources from which Genesis–Deuteronomy was written. The traditional position has been that Moses wrote all the first five Bible books, otherwise known as the Pentateuch.⁵ In fact, some of the earliest versions of the Bible, especially those of the 16th and 17th centuries, consider the Pentateuch as the five books of Moses.⁶ Until the 18th century, there were no serious questions about the tradition that Moses was the author of the Pentateuch. However, with the dawn of humanism cum the Renaissance, several scholars and Bible readers started to view the Pentateuch from a critical perspective, thereby challenging the text and the resultant traditions.⁷ As a result, several doubts evolved about Moses' sole authorship of the Pentateuch. There began suggestions about the content and identities of different personalities in the Pentateuch and conjectures about its composite authorship. Further study on the Pentateuch has led to sub-units of studies for easy assessment and understanding. Some of these include source criticism, literary, form and redaction criticism. They are, however, not limited to the authorship and composition of the Pentateuch.

Source Criticism

Source criticism analyses a text's structure, vocabulary, and style, identifies separate sources, and attempts to date them. Regarding the Pentateuch, source criticism attempts to identify and date separate sources that compose its content. This emanates from specific objections against the traditional position of Mosaic sole authorship. T. Desmond Alexander notes that from its inception, source criticism of the Pentateuch depended more on the presence of different names of God and doublets in Genesis.⁸ Some other reasons for this presupposition are:

- a. Parallel Narratives and Laws in the Pentateuchal accounts. For example, Abraham received the promise of a son three times (Gen. 15:4; 17:16; 18:10), four explanations of Isaac's name (Gen 17:17-19; 18:12-13; 21:6b), and duplication of the name of Yahweh (Exod. 3:14-15; 6:2-3).
- b. Inconsistencies within the narratives and laws. For example, man and woman were created together (1:26-27), but separately (21:22); 40 days for the rain of the Noahic deluge (Gen. 7:12), but the water prevailed for 150 days (7:24). Moses, father-in-law, was Rehuel in Exod. 2:18; but Hobab and Jethro in Exod. 3:1; 4:18; 18:1-12.
- c. Chronological Difficulties. For example, Isaac was sixty-five when Jacob was born (Gen. 25:26), he was a hundred years old on his sickbed while blessing his children (27:2, 4), but did not die until 180 years (35:28).⁹

First to mention the problem of authorship in the Pentateuch was Isaac Ibn Yaschush, a Jewish court physician in the 11th century, who noticed that the Edomite kings listed in Gen. 36 lived long after Moses died.¹⁰ He therefore submits that the list was inserted long after the death of Moses. Ibn Ezra followed him in 1167, who pointed out that Gen. 12:6 must have come from a period which lay a considerable time after Moses.¹¹ As quoted by Jay F. Schachter,

If you can grasp the mystery behind the following problematic passages: 1) The final twelve verses of this book [i.e., Deuteronomy 34:1–12, describing the death of Moses], 2) 'Moshe wrote [this song on the same day, and taught it to the children of Israel]' [Deuteronomy 31:22]; 3) 'At that time, the Canaanites dwelt in the land' [Genesis 12:6]; 4) '... In the mountain of God, He will appear' [Genesis 22:14]; 5) 'behold, his [Og king of Bashan] bed is a bed of iron [is it not in Rabbah of the children of Ammon?]' You will understand the truth.¹²

Carlsdadt in 1520 submitted that the account about Moses' death and its aftermath could not have come from Moses himself; rather, someone must have written that account in Deut. 34:5-12. Andreas Masius (1574) also

points to various repetitions and contradictions in the Pentateuch. Scholars such as Isaac de la Peyere (1655) and Richard Simon (1651) agreed that the Pentateuch is not a product of a single author.¹³

This submission has elicited diverse responses from scholars in an attempt to find a meaningful solution to the problem. For instance, Paul Soninno wrote that the Pentateuch “was miraculously rewritten by Ezra.”¹⁴ Thomas Hobbes and Spinoza also averred that Ezra, the scribe, was a notable figure in the compilation of the Pentateuch, although he did not finish the compilation.¹⁵ This position, according to Monika Bajic, became prominent around the third century C.E.¹⁶ H. B. Witter (1711) also contributed to the argument by stating that there is a remarkable difference in the use of the divine name in Gen. 1-2; 5-24; and that they are parallel in content.¹⁷ This was forgotten until 1730, when Jean Astruc, a physician to Louis XV, noted that Moses wrote the Pentateuch with two available sources. He named these sources A and B in light of the difference in using the divine name.¹⁸

In 1798, Ilgen took a notable step by asserting that Genesis contains 17 individual documents, which three authors wrote; two used Elohim, and one only used Jehovah.¹⁹ In 1865-66, Karl H. Graf published the results of his critical work on the historical books of the Old Testament.²⁰ He maintained that the Book of the Law in the temple in the time of Josiah (1 Kings 22:8) was the Deuteronomic Code. The laws in Exodus were regarded as JE, which Ezra added together to make a complete document. Julius Wellhausen, in 1876, embarked on the process of synthesising diverse conclusions and presenting them convincingly. He proposed that the Pentateuch contains four originally separate documents. The earliest is the J, because of the use of Yahweh for Elohim. The other three are: E (Elohistic), D (Deuteronomic), and P (Priestly) sources. This is known as the Documentary Hypothesis (JEDP).²¹

Yahwhistic Source (J)

This was believed to have been composed in the Southern Kingdom of Judah in the court of David or Solomon in the 10th century.²² As a result, the central role of Judah and the other tribes was stressed. In the accounts, many events are located in the southern kingdom. There are distinct vocabularies that are peculiar to J editors, such as יהוה “Yahweh,” (Gen.2:4); יָדַע “to know” as euphemism for sexual intercourse (cf. Gen 4:1, 4:17, 4:25, 24:16, 38:26). J is also full of anthropomorphism, a method of expressing divine personality with human qualities. Some of these are include יָצַר “to form or to fashion as a potter” (Gen. 2:8; Isa. 29:16, 41:25; Jer. 18:4, 18; 18:6; 18:6; 1 Chro. 4:23; Lam. 4:2); נָטַע “to plant” (cf. Isa. 37:30, Zeph. 1:13, Deut. 20:6, 28:30, 28:39, Jer. 31:5, 31:5).

Elohistic Source (E)

This is believed to have been composed in the northern kingdom, in Israel, after the division of the monarchy, perhaps in the early part of the 9th century (900-850BC). The account is characterised by the use of Elohim to refer to God. E-editors placed much emphasis on Israel’s religiosity and Yahweh’s ethical demands. The E-editors aimed at achieving a “rapprochement” between J and E. In other words, the focus was to produce a document reflecting the eighth century’s socio-political realities. Such a document would also present a less anthropomorphic view of God.²³

Deuteronomic Source (D)

The common opinion about D source is that Deuteronomy, in whole or in part, is identical with the Book of the Law found in the temple during the reign of Josiah around 622 BC. Jerome and Thomas Hobbes advanced this.²⁴ This has been significantly challenged in recent times. Furthermore, D has been seen as a compilation after the fall of Samaria in 722.²⁵ It has also been seen as a product of the movement to reconstruct the northern community.

Priestly Source (P)

This was composed during the exile or shortly after 550-450 BC.²⁶ The P editors were mainly concerned with materials that would underscore the people’s institutional and ritual constitution as a unique community of Yahweh.²⁷ The P source used Elohim to refer to God in a transcendent nature through the use of special

vocabularies such as בָּרָא “he created,” and אָמַר “he said” to show that creation in the first five days was by fiat (cf. Gen. 1:1ff). Its content is packaged in a neat narrative sequence with repetitions (cf. Gen. 1:1-31).

Polemics against Pentateuchal Criticism

As scholarly as several aspects of Pentateuchal criticism may appear, they have been trailed by specific reactions and negative comments. A few of these are mentioned here. Source criticism has been attacked basically on the fact that it relies entirely upon internal evidence. Data or external evidence, such as manuscripts and archaeological material, cannot substantiate it. Furthermore, it has been criticised for rendering the Pentateuchal narrative as a mere anthology void of divine message or inspiration.²⁸ This is based primarily on how it helps one to read with an expectant heart when one knows that the Pentateuch is a compilation of several editors who are different from the real author. It renders such a narrative to mere literature.

In another instance, form criticism with its associated fields of study, such as form criticism and contextual analysis, has been considered a fragmentary device in studying the Bible.²⁹ In other words, it has been deemed capable of atomising biblical accounts from their coherent whole through identifying and isolating different literary genres.³⁰ Such exercise is therefore seen as an attempt to impose human criteria upon the divine message and make it ordinary. Form critics have been alleged as being preoccupied with the Bible’s pre-literary traditions that authors or editors finally combined to produce extended literary works such as the Pentateuch.³¹ In other words, its focus is not on how the writing was done, but on the fabric of traditions used in the composition.

Apologetic Values of Pentateuchal Criticism

Despite specific attacks on Pentateuchal criticism, it has continued to curry more favour from many scholars for particular reasons. In the book *Christian Apologetics: A Crash Course in Christian Apologetics*, Conrad Emil Lindberg remarked that among settled believers, Pentateuchal criticism has not undermined the old faith, nor has the Bible in the long run suffered from the analysis.³² In other words, the attempt is not to wither away the inspiration of the Bible; rather, it should be seen as an attempt to lay out a strong biblical case for apologetics. According to Douglas Groothuis, apologetics is “the rational defence of the Christian worldview as objectively true, rationally compelling, and existentially or subjectively engaging.”³³ Such an enterprise can establish a strong foundation for faith and interpretation of the Word of God. John M. Frame posited that “...apologetics gives reassurance to faith as it displays the rationality of Scripture itself. That rationality also gives the believer an intellectual foundation—a basis for faith and wise life decisions.”³⁴ Thus, the values of Pentateuchal criticism cut across exegetical, theological and hermeneutical perspectives.

Theological Value

Pentateuchal criticism has been of immense value in understanding the theological framework in which the Pentateuchal redactors have worked. It has served as an eye-opener to the fact that each documentary source, that is, JEDP, originated from particular theological orientations, greatly influencing what the editors wrote. Pentateuchal criticism has shown that while the P source has great respect for transcendence of God through the use of fiat statement “and he said,” and “he created,” a term that has been used to mean creatio ex nihilo, the J source prefers anthropomorphic terms like “he planted” to show serious concern for God’s immanence. Furthermore, in the creation accounts of Genesis 1-2, the transcendental perspective is stressed with the use of בָּרָא in P narrative (1:1-2:4a); while עָשָׂה and נָטַע are used in the J narrative (2:4bff) to show his immanence. The vocabulary variation is not accidental, but a reflection of a theological perspective. In essence, Pentateuchal criticism has contributed significantly to biblical understanding by avoiding mixing up the theological positions of each source.

Exegetical Values

Pentateuchal criticism is helpful for exegetical study. Apart from the fact that it shows different theological concerns of each documentary source, it also helps in understanding the historical facts behind it. This also indicates the linguistic framework of each source; in other words, JEDP editors wrote their concerns in specific vocabularies. For example, the J source uses Yahweh instead of Elohim for the divine name (cf. Gen. 1:1ff;

2:4bff). A Q^{re} perpetum, יְהוָה as used against אֱלֹהִים has exegetical implications. The former focuses on intimate nuances about Israel's relationship with God. It stresses the covenantal relationship between God and the Patriarchs. It serves as an expression of a deeper operation between Him and the Israelites against their generic opinion of אֱלֹהִים "God" and אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ as "God of our fathers." Discovering this requires exegetical skill and procedure. Furthermore, J source enthusiastically accepts agricultural life, national, political power and cultus. The two are bound together in an inseparable unity (cf. Gen. 2:4bff, Exod. 34:18-26). Pentateuchal criticism has shown that such a high view of cultus and religious festival could only have come before the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC.

Hermeneutical Value

In discussing apologetics and biblical interpretation, Groothuis stressed, "Bad biblical interpretation can make Christianity look bad."³⁵ Hence, Pentateuchal criticism offers help in interpreting the literature of the Pentateuch. For example, various literary genres of the Pentateuch have been brought out through form criticism. Also, its understanding has helped develop a specific interpretative approach suitable for each. Literary genres like prose, genealogies, and poetry and their accompanying features, require special interpretation procedures. All these have been made possible through Pentateuchal criticism.

Second, Pentateuchal criticism has shown clearly how to handle authorship problems in its studies. The arguments about Mosaic sole authorship or multiple authorship have been clarified through source and redaction criticisms. It is now clearer that while Moses cannot be denied to have written some portions of the Pentateuch (Exod. 24:4; 34:28; 27:14), the entire Pentateuch did not come from him. Instead, it is an anthology compiled together by redactors at different places and times, but Moses remains the authority behind all they have compiled. Concisely, Moses was the authority behind the Pentateuch, while redactors were responsible for the penmanship. A proper understanding of this will aid in how it should be interpreted.

CONCLUSION

For those who have cast aspersion on the integrity of the Pentateuch as inspired books, a proper understanding of its nature will go a long way to change their mind. Therefore, the critique containing many inconsistencies and conflated facts cannot be considered inspired literature and would require proper knowledge of Pentateuchal criticism to resolve. Pentateuchal criticism has shown that the contents of the Pentateuch are from different redactors. This has opened the door for variations. These variations are not intentional mistakes, but variant accounts of the same events from various persons and perspectives. Therefore, Pentateuchal criticism is a good defence against destructive biblical criticism.

ENDNOTES

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³Howard Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 38.

⁴Documentary Hypothesis (DH) focuses on suggesting various sources that the content of the entire Pentateuch could have originated from. It was a response to the traditional conclusion that the Pentateuch as it appears today is a product of sole Mosaic authorship.

⁵Philemon Ibrahim, "Pentateuchal Authorship: A Critical Analysis of Existing Imaginations," *The American Journal of Biblical Theology*, Volume 2(2). January 12, (2020): 1-17.

⁶The Early Eastern Versions such as Syriac (c. 170); Old Syriac and Peshitta (3rd - 5th century); Coptic, Ethiopic, Arabic versions (3rd - 9th century) up to the time of The King James Version (1611); maintained the sole Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. See Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations; The Origin and Development of the Bible* (Michigan: Baker Academics, 1999), 245-204.

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