THE PENTATEUCH IN RECENT RESEARCH: 
A TIME FOR CAUTION

by

E.W. NICHOLSON
Oxford

The quest for an explanation of the origins and composition of the Pentateuch has been a pre-eminent occupation of critical Old Testament research for upwards of two centuries. That it remains so today is a telling indication of how elusive the solution is, for no theory has succeeded in accounting for all the problems with which this complex literature confronts those who seek to discern the manifold processes and the different writers and redactors who contributed to its formation. Even the view which has won the largest following among scholars — the so-called “newer documentary theory” so brilliantly argued by Julius Wellhausen — remains correctly described as a hypothesis. It is a further indication of how intractable the issues are that none of the energetic attempts on the basis of new methods during the middle decades of this century to reconstruct the pre-compositional stages in the emergence and formation of the Pentateuch or Hexateuch, and thus to achieve greater comprehensiveness than had earlier been attempted, has succeeded. Even the supposed sociological matrix in early Israel so essential for the viability of these attempts — the so-called “amphictyony” with its “all Israelite” institutions — is no longer subscribed to as the assured result of historical research it once seemed to be. Few today have any confidence in Martin Noth’s reconstruction of a supposed Pentateuchal Grundlage, to mention the best known and most thorough of these attempts. In short, it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that we seem to be little further on, if further on at all, than where Wellhausen left us over a century ago.

It is no act of perversity, therefore, that has led a group of distinguished scholars during the past fifteen years or so to re-open in a vigorous manner the question of Pentateuchal origins, challenging not only earlier results but also the methods employed in arriving at them, and offering new approaches and solutions. I say
“group”, but in fact this is misleading, for it suggests that these scholars represent a co-ordinated movement or “school”. This is far from the case, however, for though some recognize mutual debts to each other, there are irreconcilable differences between them both in method and results.

Thus, R. Rendtorff\(^1\) has pressed for a thoroughgoing traditio-historical method, investigating the gradual growth from smaller units to larger and still larger complexes which were united only at a final stage, when each individual complex was virtually complete in itself, to form the Pentateuch. On this understanding of the formation of the Pentateuch the earlier notion of expansive narratives composed by individual creative authors such as the “Yahwist” is ruled out. It was an anomalous adherence to the older method of literary or source analysis that prevented scholars from realizing the full potential of the new methods pioneered by Gunkel for a proper approach to the emergence, growth and final compilation of the Pentateuch which should be seen as a “stitching” together, so to speak, of originally discrete tradition-complexes.

In sharp contrast to Rendtorff, however, stand such scholars as J. Van Seters, S. Tengström, and R.N. Whybray who have re-emphasized the creative role of authors in the formation and composition of the Pentateuch, rejecting all suggestions of the formation of a Pentateuchal Grundlage or the like before the author or authors of the Pentateuchal literature as we have it took up their pens.\(^2\) No gradual and largely anonymous growth of individual tradition complexes such as Rendtorff proposes can realistically account for the sort of intellectual and creative endeavour necessary for the writing of this literature. Rather, according to Van Seters and Whybray, whether in the case of the Tetrateuch or the Deuteronomistic History a more illuminating “model” for understanding their composition is provided by the work of the Greek historians such as Herodotus.

Van Seters, Tengström, and Whybray are by no means at one, however, in their conclusions. Van Seters and Tengström argue a

---
