THE YAHWIST CREATION STORY

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There is fairly wide consensus among scholars that the Pentateuch is made up of at least four different strands labelled J, E, D & P respectively. At the same time there is considerable diversity of opinion as to how these strands were finally put together to form our present Pentateuch; a combination of the documentary and the supplementary theories seems to be the most widely accepted view; 1) but in the main scholars have generally devoted the greater attention to a more or less detailed delineation of the extent of these strands with a presentation of the various characteristics and tendencies, literary, linguistic and theological, of each of them in distinction from the others. Amid the diversity of opinion regarding the process by which the Pentateuch reached its final form there seems to be one point of common agreement viz. that the P strand gave the Pentateuch its present plan and provides the framework for the whole.

It does seem however that the pre-occupation with the characteristics of the various strands has adversely affected the exegesis of the books of the Pentateuch as we now have them. While this problem is not so marked in the interpretation of the legal corpora in the Pentateuch, it is much more obvious in the interpretation of the narrative portions. The value of a discussion of the characteristics of the various strands as these appear in individual passages cannot be doubted, but it is also surely legitimate to go beyond this and to enquire what is the significance of these individual passages as now part of a larger continuous narrative. While it may not be doubted that a peculiar significance attaches to individual passages within their own original strand, can it be maintained that they still retain the same significance after they had been combined to form a larger narrative complex?

Have we penetrated their meaning merely by indicating the original strand from which they were taken, and by using their contents to illustrate the characteristics of each such strand? Has their meaning and significance not been affected by their combination together to form a larger narrative? These questions cannot be avoided once we accept that there is a continuity within the Pentateuch in spite of the various doublets, repetitions and contradictions which point to the existence of the various strands.

The suggestion is not to be countenanced that the final redactor was unaware of these so-called doublets etc. The more pertinent question is why he has retained them? Further we have to ask the reasons for the variation in his method of combining the various strands, sometimes juxtaposing at other times conflating the material. If we may not argue that he was unaware of the discrepancies then surely the most natural assumption is that they have some relevance to the story which he intends the whole work to tell. The present exegetical tendency can only be justified on the assumption that the final redactor intended to present a series of vignettes each self-contained and self-explanatory or that he had an abundant mass of material which he was constrained to preserve at all costs. Either assumption would not explain the reason for conflation and both are contradicted by the assumption of a unity in the Pentateuch unless this unity is an accidental result of the compilation and not part of the original intention of the compiler of the whole work.

The problem outlined above is particularly evident in the so-called primeval history, Genesis i-xi, which contains elements from the

1) E. A. Speiser, argues that doublets etc. occur because tradition had stamped the material as inviolable "and they had acquired an aura of sanctity because the subject-matter was not secular but spiritual history" (Genesis: Anchor Bible, Vol. I, p. XXXVIII f, Doubleday and Co. Inc. N.Y. 1964). While this may be true it can hardly be maintained that the gifted writers who have transmitted this material held their imagination in check. The examples which Speiser subsequently quotes from the other historical books would suggest considerable imaginative handling of the material rather than the contrary. The sanctity of the material cannot therefore be a sufficient explanation of all the doublets in the book of Genesis; the postulated sacrosanctity of the material is also contradicted by the evidences of conflation, and renders unintelligible the later use of these early traditions in some of the Pseudepigraphal books.

2) The description 'primeval history' can only properly apply to the original mythologies from which these stories were derived. In their present form as they have been put together in Genesis i-xi they serve a clearly defined theological interest—a function which is obscured by the description 'primeval history'. The primary interest is not simply to tell of what happened long ago but to illustrate God's dealings with man and man's response to God—a theme which