“BEGETING” AND “BEING BORN” IN THE PENTATEUCH: NOTES ON HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS AND SOURCE CRITICISM

by

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The style of Pascal belongs to him alone; but his grammar and the stock of his vocabulary belong to his time
(Marc Bloch, The Historian’s Craft)

Recent controversies concerning the analysis and dating of the Pentateuchal sources have made source criticism an interesting enterprise at the fin du siècle. Many of the issues are the same as those debated in the latter part of the nineteenth century, though some of the lessons of the earlier debate have been too often neglected. In particular, it should be recalled that the great nineteenth century critics attempted to marshal linguistic evidence in their arguments concerning the dating of the Pentateuchal sources. The paradigm example is S.R. Driver, whose magisterial Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament is peppered with linguistic comments that still retain their cogency. In recent years the use of linguistic criteria for source criticism has been advanced by the work of a number of scholars, most notably Avi Hurvitz.

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3 On the state of the art and current controversies, see A. Hurvitz, “The historical quest for ‘ancient Israel’ and the linguistic evidence of the Hebrew Bible: some method-
One item in the arsenal of the linguistic distinctions between J and P, according to the earlier source critics, is the complementary distribution of the verbs יָלָד (Qal) and הֹלִיד (Hiphil) for “he begat”. J exclusively uses the Qal form, while P exclusively uses the Hiphil form. The latter form was held to be a sign of later date, since it is the dominant form in the clearly post-exilic biblical books. I wish to reexamine and extend the analysis of these forms and their distribution, and also to include a consideration of the passive form, “to be born”, for which there is a complementary distribution of Qal passive and Niphal forms. If the diachronic distributions of these forms can be established, then these constitute a skein of evidence that is relevant to the dating of these two Pentateuchal sources.

1. ‘Begetting’: Qal versus Hiphil

Driver accurately described the semantic motive for the linguistic change from יָלָד to הֹלִיד in an article of 1882:

was for a time used indifferently of either parent, though far more frequently in actual usage of the mother; and to this fact is due, doubtless, the adoption of הֹלִיד, for greater distinctness, of the father.

The Qal, “to have a child”, is used for either parent in J and a few other texts (see below). But the semantic ambiguity of the Qal regarding the agent (male or female) is replaced in P and other texts by a pair of forms yielding a semantic opposition, “to bear” (for the female) versus “to beget” (for the male).


J: Gen. iv 18 (3x); x 8, 13, 15, 24 (2x), 26; xxii 23; xxv 3. P: Gen. v 3-32 (28x); vi 10; xi 10-27 (27x); xvii 20; xxv 19; xlvii 6; Lev xxv 45; Num xxvi 29, 58. See Driver, Introduction, p. 132 n. 45; Holzinger, Einleitung, pp. 99, 342. P also uses the noun, הִלְדָּה (always construct plural), derived from the Hiphil, and the Hithpael, הִלְדָּה (Num 1:18), denominative from הִלְדָּה (so BDB, p. 409).

I would maintain that it is evidence of this kind that offers the soundest foundation for any cogent argument about the relative or absolute dates of the Pentateuchal sources. While such data may not be sufficient to establish any particular case, they ought to be regarded as necessary ingredients of any coherent case.