

Preconceptions in Interpretation

As original questions grew out of the work of former scholars and the
more of such their conclusions to have been the result of a
In Bible scholarship, it is quite evident that men with similar
backgrounds, training, and intellect can translate the Bible in a wide
variety of ways. No matter how objective a scholar appears or claims
to be he can not help but bring into his scholarship certain prespec-
tives and pre-understandings which is part of his intellectual and
even notional make-up. I would venture to say that most of Biblical
scholarship is controlled by the preconceptions that a scholar will
bring to the mass of evidence that he is to decipher. For this reason
many of conclusions reached by scholars will be highly subjective in
nature and will bear little resemblance to the end product of a "cut
and dry" scientific inquiry. This paper will explore some of the pre-
conceptions held by a few scholars and/or the intellectual climate that
nurtured their scholarship. It is not going to be in any way an in-
depth study due to the time allotted and the frequent difficulty in
"tacking down" the preconceptions held by various scholars - scholars
tend not to admit at least in print, the subjective elements that
effect their objective studies. But it will bring into sharper focus
the difficulties for scholars, both liberal and conservative, to in-
terpret the facts to such a high degree of accuracy as to even ap-
proach oftentimes a true evaluation of the material.

One of the most influential interpretations to sprout and grow
in the Biblical scholarship world was the J, E, P, D hypothesis work-
ed out by Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918). He saw the historical devel-
opment of the Old Testament to be Prophets, Law, Priests rather than
the formerly held Law, Priest, Prophets. His work, not being altogether

The roots of much their conclusions go deep into the intellectual climate of this period of history. Wellhausen as well as the many scholars previously who had contributed to the hypothesis (Astruc, Geddes, Vater, De Wette, Ewald, Tuch, Hupfeld, and Graf) were to some degree products of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was characterized by the enthroning of human reason and also importantly for Biblical studies a reaction to some degree of religious dogmas, church traditions, and ecclesiastical authority. This in itself may not have been so bad but the reaction included also the possibility of taking the Bible as divinely inspired. According to the rationalists, the Bible was true where it agreed to the conclusions arrived at by independent reasoning. Also influencing Wellhausen were the principles of causation and evolution of Hegel. Rejecting the divine influence and accepting the philosophy of Hegel, he could not see in the religion of the Hebrews a God interacting with man. The sources that described the religion of the patriarchs as being monotheistic he could not agree with either but saw the sources as being unhistoric. The early religion of Israel he felt to be primitive and animistic. Later the Israelites adapted themselves Canaanite patterns and the religion gradually evolved to the sophisticated, highly ethical religion of the scriptures. Israelite religion progressing from the simple to the complex had all the earmarks of Hegelian evolutionism. So successfully did Wellhausen's hypothesis fit in with the religious climate of the day that it met wide acceptance in a very short time. There were those who rightly criticized much of his hypothesis (as attributing such importance to the use of two divine names)

But their voices were drowned out by the applause of Wellhausen's followers. (Harrison pp. 21-22). Catching the imagination of many young scholars of the day, the theory was accepted, expanded, and applied to many parts of the Bible including the New Testament. Since the introduction of the hypothesis, several of Wellhausen's methods and conclusions have found to be very weak. Archaeological discoveries and cuneiform and hieroglyphic decipherments have further weakened some conclusions. Despite this however, the Graf-Wellhausen theory still has a significant effect on contemporary scholarship, and is now part of the presuppositions held by a great many scholars today.

Rationalistic historicism if not before was now well established. The philosophical presuppositions of this system guided many schools, and investigations. The claims the Bible made of itself of being divinely inspired or at least being a record of God's dealings with man were not even considered. God was a dead issue. The universe was controlled by fixed laws and there is no god who interfere. As a result miracles and prophecy were out. They had to be explained in some other way. Exemplificative of this was the book of Amos, a book with fewer problems than any other book. Certain scholars maintain there are certain annotations and additions in the book. These are 1:1-2, 9-10, 11-12; 2:4-5, 12; 4:7b, 8a, 13; 5:8-9, 18b, 22b; 6:2, 9-11a; 7:1d, 8a; 8:2a, 6, 11a; 9:8c-25. These additions are prophecies foretold by Amos along with passages of hope and and Messianic prophecy. (Freeman, pp. 188-189).

Current positions based on rationalistic historicism and heirs of the Graf-Wellhausen theory with its modifications can be seen throughout liberal scholarship today. A good part of liberal scholarship today is made up of these presuppositions which are in turn made up of presup-

positions. In his first chapter Gerald A. Larue states;

The literary history of the Bible can be said to have begun in the time of Solomon when two men, or groups of men, produced what was to become the nucleus of the Old Testament. One concentrated on the story of David.... The other writer or writers delved into the oral and written traditions of the past to enrich the understanding of the present.

(p. 4)

Later he displays his true colors again by saying:

Because the documentary hypothesis is the most widely accepted of all theories of Pentateuchal analysis, this book will utilize in principle the conclusions reached by this method of research.

(p. 33)

Other noted scholars supporting the Graf-Wellhausen view and rationalistic historicism are such notables as John Bright, N. Gottwald, and Otto Bissfeldt. Gottwald states in his A Light to the Nations says,

"One of the certain results of modern Bible study has been the discovery that the first five books of the Old Testament were not written by Moses." (p. 103)

Old Testament scholars who support Mosaic authorship are primarily, Archer, Harrison, Hengstenberg, Green, Keil, Kitchen, Moeller, Unger, Wood, and Young. The presupposition generally held by conservative scholars is of course the belief in God and his working in history. And, naturally this view would tend to color an individual's scholarship and interpretation as much if not more than a scholar's non-belief in God. Holding high the colors of this view is Merrill F. Unger who says:

Together with its inseparable counterpart, the New Testament, it (the Old Testament) is essentially incomparable with any other written book, because it is the Word of God.

(p. 16)

The causes fought by the conservative are such things as the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, the divine inspiration of the Bible, and the unity of the books, but this is quite natural considering their preconceptions. And who can argue with them when such men as Unger claims more or less, that God is on our side? A problem that many conservatives have with their world view is not to admit anything that may take on the aura of compromise. (After all, the liberal does not have much to loose but the conservative does i.e. his God.) Despite this the conservative view of the unity of the Bible and the early date of its writing is still supported strongly by Biblical and extra-Biblical evidence.

The wide divergence of opinion by the conservative and the liberal in regards to the date of various books of the Bible can be best illustrated in two graphs by Samuel Schultz.

Biblical Historical Viewpoint of OT Literature

1400	931	732	586	500	400	200	100	90
							B.C.	A.D.
Pent.					O.T.			
Josh.-Jud					C			
I Sam-II Kg.					A			
I Chron. II Chron. Ez Neh.					N			
Poet, and Proph. bks.					O			
					N			
1400	931	732	586	500	400	200	100	90
							B.C.	A.D.
J Doc		JE			Gen.			
E Doc		R			Ex.			
					Lev.			
		D			Num.	Josh.		
		P			Deut.	Judg.		
						Sam.	O.T.	
						kgs.	COMPLETE	
						Isa.		
						Jer		
						Ezk.		
						12 Pro.		

Both views are basically the result of two presuppositions held by scholars i.e. the rationalist approach and God working in history approach. An agreement by both liberal and conservative scholars will most certainly never occur, unless individual members of one camp will surrender and join the enemy. (But then to the liberals, the conservative does not even pose a threat much less an enemy.)--The presuppositions of the Bible being divinely or not divinely inspired will always exist for there is not enough evidence to support either fully. The liberal will continue to claim that the conservative is blinded by his faith or more likely the liberal will only ignore the conservative and the conservative will continue to claim that the liberal is blinded by dust of trivia and will not clear his vision and look at the message God has for man.

By Ken Holmgvist