

Robert Vannoy, Genesis

Lecture 1: Wellhausen (Source Criticism) and Gunkel (Form Criticism)

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Abstract

This lecture examines the development of historical-critical approaches to the Old Testament, focusing primarily on Julius Wellhausen's Documentary Hypothesis (JEDP) and Hermann Gunkel's Form Criticism. Wellhausen developed an evolutionary model of Israelite religion that questioned the historicity of early biblical narratives by claiming that concepts such as circumcision and covenant were projected back from post-exilic times. In response, Gunkel accepted the JEDP source divisions but sought to penetrate behind the written documents to isolate oral traditions, classifying the narratives of Genesis as etiological legends or poetry meant to convey religious truths rather than prose history.

Outline

I. Review of Wellhausen's Documentary Source Hypothesis (JEDP)

A. The JEDP Theory and Chronological Sequence

1. J (Jehovah source) – Dated to approximately 850 B.C.
2. E (Elohim source) – Dated to approximately 750 B.C.
3. D (Deuteronomy source) – Written around 621 B.C. during Josiah's reign and the finding of the book of the law.
4. P (Priestly source) – Dated to the post-exilic period, approximately 450 B.C.
5. Redactors – Combined these independent sources over time into a composite mosaic.

B. Significant Historical Milestones in Israel's History

1. The Exodus – Approximately 1400 B.C.
2. Time of King David – Approximately 1000 B.C.
3. Fall of the Northern Kingdom to Assyria – 721 B.C.
4. Fall of the Southern Kingdom to Babylon – 586 B.C.

C. Wellhausen's Religious Evolutionary Scheme

1. Evolution of the divine concept: Polytheism (many gods) to Henotheism (tribal superiority) to Monotheism (one God).
2. Developmental stages of religion:

- a. Natural Religion: Primitive worship associated with JE sources.
- b. Prophetic Religion: Ethical consciousness associated with D source.
- c. Priestly Religion: External ceremonial rites associated with post-exilic P source.

D. Impact on Historicity

- 1. Wellhausen's theory views many early historical narratives as late projections or outright fabrications.
- 2. Key concepts (circumcision, covenant, election) attributed to the Patriarchs are claimed to have originated in the post-exilic period (P source) and projected backward, distorting history.
- 3. Complete absence of external documentary or archaeological evidence for the existence of J, E, D, or P as independent physical documents.
- 4. Results in a low view of Old Testament historical reliability, laying the groundwork for theological liberalism in mainline denominations and seminaries.

E. Wellhausen's Resignation from Greifswald (1882)

- 1. Wellhausen resigned from his theological professorship out of conscience, realizing his teachings did not prepare students for practical church ministry.
- 2. He accepted a Semitic languages post at Halle, where he was forbidden to teach the Old Testament.
- 3. Walter Zimmerli's book "The Law and the Prophets" documents his resignation letter.
- 4. Contrast with subsequent American professors who adopted and perpetuated his critical theories in seminaries without resigning.

II. The Rise and Development of Form Criticism

A. Overview and Relationship to Source Criticism

- 1. Form criticism modified and refined Wellhausen's hypothesis rather than rejecting it; the basic JEDP sequence was preserved.
- 2. It introduced an added dimension by seeking to penetrate behind written documents to trace the underlying oral traditions.

B. Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932) as Key Figure

- 1. Younger contemporary of Wellhausen who introduced a new methodology.
- 2. Described by W.F. Albright as an extraordinarily influential scholar whose methodologies were widely adopted across biblical studies.
- 3. Introduced three central German terms to the field:
 - a. Gattung (Genre): The specific literary type (e.g., poetry, narrative, prophetic text).
 - b. Sitz im Leben (Situation in Life): The specific historical or social context that gave rise to a particular literary type.
 - c. Formgeschichte: The history of literary forms.

C. Gunkel's Methodology and Oral-to-Written Progression

- 1. Break JEDP documents down into small, individual story units.

2. Prior to the time of David (1000 B.C.), Israel had no written history; diverse groups preserved distinct oral traditions.
3. Over time, these independent oral traditions were gradually molded and combined into written J, E, D, and P sources.
4. Single stories (such as the Abraham narrative) were strung together, modified, and combined into larger written cycles.
5. Difference from Wellhausen: Gunkel recognizes the antiquity of these oral traditions, meaning they were not simply fabricated by late writers out of nothing.

D. Contrast of Criticism Types

1. Lower Criticism (Textual Criticism): Focuses on examining existing manuscripts to reconstruct the original text.
2. Higher Criticism: Focuses on authorship, dating, settings, and literary development. Gunkel's form criticism falls under this category.

E. Genesis Narratives classified as Legend or Poetry, not History

1. Published "The Legends of Genesis" to argue that Genesis consists of legends rather than factual history.
2. Argued that legend is a form of poetry and represents a superior, more intensely religious medium than historical prose.
3. Dismissed NT/apostolic testimony regarding the historicity of Genesis as merely reflecting the unscientific views of their time.
4. Established a priori criteria for distinguishing legend from history, primarily by dismissing any miraculous elements as incredible.
 - a. Examples: Speaking animals (serpents and she-asses), trees conferring immortality or knowledge, physical unions of angels and humans, and the military victory in Genesis 14.
 - b. Relies on the principle of historical analogy: if it is not experienced in modern times, it cannot have occurred historically.
5. Concluded that the historical reality of these events is unimportant; the true value lies in the moral lessons and religious concepts conveyed.

F. Genesis as Etiological Legends

1. Etiology defined: The study of causes, or stories designed to explain why something is as it is currently observed.
2. Four types of etiological legends identified by Gunkel:
 - a. Ethnological Legends: Fictitious stories explaining contemporary tribal relationships and geographic locations (e.g., Canaan's servitude, Lot's descendants in the East, Cain's wandering, Beersheba's ownership, Ishmael's territory).
 - b. Etymological Legends: Fictitious folk explanations for the origins of names of places and people (e.g., city of Babel, Jacob as "heelholder"; compared to modern popular etymologies like the Connecticut River or Manhattan Island).

c. Ceremonial Legends: Fictitious narratives designed to explain the origin of contemporary religious customs (e.g., the Passover, twelve stones in the Jordan, circumcision, the Sabbath).

d. Geological Legends: Fictitious accounts explaining the origin of natural features (e.g., the Dead Sea's barrenness, Lot's wife turned into a pillar of salt).

G. Gunkel's View on the Value of the Old Testament

1. Argued that the true value of the Old Testament lies in its magnificent religious concepts and emotions (divine rule, providence, retribution of good and evil, grief, joy).
2. The narratives are compared to Aesop's fables: they are highly valuable for moral instruction but are not to be read as historical reality.