

... but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence ...

1 PETER 3:15



CHAPTER 28

Archaeology and Liberal Theology

Theological liberals tend to stereotype conservative Christians as ignorant simpletons lacking intellect, who cling to their beliefs in blind faith. However, I would suggest that quite the opposite is true. Theological Liberalism was constructed based upon the piecemeal-at-best Biblical archaeology of its day. Over the hundred years that have passed since Liberal Theology was birthed, many significant archaeological discoveries have occurred that call into question their whole way of thinking. Indeed, we now find that the “historic” foundation of Theological Liberalism is eaten through with termites, and is on the verge of collapse.

Modern Biblical archaeology carries a tremendous testimony—learn it! The evidence for the veracity and trustworthiness of the Bible is compelling and overwhelming! It is time for theological liberals to reboot their thinking. Let’s examine the evidence that defeats their suppositions.

During the nineteenth century, at the height of Darwinism and Deism (the belief in a supreme being who does not intervene in the universe), a theory was floated regarding the origins of the first five books of the OT. Attributed to Moses, known to the Hebrews as the Torah, and referred to by the Greeks as the Pentateuch, these are the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. This new theory disputed their Mosaic authorship and instead postulated that they were written long after Moses and were derived from various other sources.

This theory flies in the face of the Torah, because the Torah itself states that it was written by Moses. The authors of other OT books confirm that the Torah was written by Moses. Even Jesus Christ Himself in the NT attests to the Mosaic authorship of the Torah.¹ Therefore you could say that embracing a theologically liberal position regarding the origin of the Old Testament is tantamount to calling Jesus a liar. Furthermore, if the first five books of the Bible are inherently untrustworthy, can you trust any of the Scriptures?

The predominant liberal theory regarding the origin of the Torah is known as the Wellhausen Theory, also known as the Documentary Hypothesis, or the JEDP Theory. This hypothesis proposes that “the Pentateuch was a compilation of selections from several different written documents composed at different places and times over a period of five centuries, long after Moses.”² Unfortunately many seminaries in America persist even today in teaching this viewpoint, as if nothing has changed in OT scholarship, especially the archaeological portion of it, since 1880 when the JEDP Theory of Torah origination was first popularized! What is doubly sad is that ever since its inception, theologically liberal scholarship in Europe “has time and again administered fatal blows to nearly all [Wellhausen’s] foundations.”³ Triply sad, the liberal professors have no bench strength, no substitute players for their admittedly weak superstar who has been so hammered out there on the court. Even though he has been drastically outplayed during the second half, to their embarrassment, they’ve left him in the game!

What follows is a discussion of how JEDP came into existence. But before we go there, we must first ask why a study on the integrity of the first five books of the Bible is so important. The answer is that Christian theology is founded on the Torah, as the teachings of Jesus Himself confirm. Throughout that early collection of books we find road signs pointing to our Savior. When I teach on the major doctrines of the Bible and the attributes of God, those lessons are often rooted in the first five books of God’s Word, especially Genesis. To allow for their subtle or overt dismemberment is to damage the foundation, construct, and confidence we have in our understanding of the Christian worldview. It all begins there! Furthermore, being conversant with the shortcomings of JEDP Theory will equip you to argue effectively with those who reject the Christian worldview based upon adherence to this theory.

STAGE ONE OF LIBERAL OT THEOLOGY

The JEDP Theory's original foothold can be attributed to Jean Astruc, a French physician who in the mid-eighteenth century conducted a literary analysis of the book of Genesis and discovered that sometimes God is referred to in Hebrew as Elohim and at other times as Yahweh. From that discovery he formed the supposition that Moses relied on two different sources in writing Genesis (versus the simple explanation that Moses used two names for God). His notion received little attention, but what is most significant is that he set the stage for a criterion of "source division."⁴

STAGE TWO OF LIBERAL OT THEOLOGY

The second stage of development is found in the work of Johann Gottfried Eichhorn in his 1783 publication, *Einleitung in das alte Testament (Introduction to the Old Testament)*. His work dissects the book of Genesis and the first two chapters of Exodus, attributing them to two sources: The Jahwist (who called God Yahweh) and the Elohist (who called God Elohim) sources (thus J and E are the first two letters of JEDP).

At first, Eichhorn believed that Moses was the editor who combined these materials. In later phases of his thinking and theorizing, he would yield to the consensus of the movement he helped create, and state that the Pentateuch was not written by Moses at all, but rather it was written at a much later date.

STAGE THREE OF LIBERAL OT THEOLOGY

The third stage of development of the JEDP Theory can be attributed primarily to Willem Martin Lebrecht De Wette and his *Dissertation Critico-Exegetica* published in 1805. His main contribution was the idea that none of the Torah came from a time earlier than King David's reign. More specifically, he suggested that the source of the Deuteronomy literature was extracted from a book of law that was found in the Jerusalem temple, having originated around the time of the Biblical account of King Josiah's reform, around 621 BC. Thus "D" for the Deuteronomic source was introduced.⁵

A word must be added here about the motivation for the broad acceptance of a later date of authorship of the Torah. Why did these skeptics feel compelled to do all this work of debunking the Torah in the first place? They were primarily motivated by the prophetic passages within the Torah—specifically, Leviticus 26:27–45 and Deuteronomy 28:58–63. These passages prophesy the Babylonian captivity of Israel and their later restoration from exile—events that are undisputed in history. Fulfilled prophecy sets the Bible apart from all other books in both ancient and modern time, both religious and secular, and lends credibility to divine inspiration. This includes the fulfilled prophecy in the Torah.

The method that liberal theologians chose to *explain away* fulfilled prophecy was to invent a later date for the origin of the book that foretells the event. It is quite convenient to postulate that Biblical books containing prophecies of future events—events history records as having occurred—were written *after* the event they predict. Of course this critical repositioning is a sort of double jeopardy: either it destroys the credibility of the book's author or it destroys the credibility of the critics themselves, casting either one or the other in the darkest light.

The phrase that encapsulates this common practice amongst liberal theologians is *vaticinium ex eventu*, meaning “prophecies” of events that are written after the events have already occurred. *Vaticinium ex eventu* is commonly invoked to explain away fulfilled prophecy in Scripture, specifically in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Those who are strong in Christ, those who are always “*ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you*” (1 Peter 3:15), must be conversant with such scheming.

STAGE FOUR OF LIBERAL OT THEOLOGY

Although many other individuals would contribute to this theory, the next major contribution would come in 1853 from Hermann Hupfeld's *Die Quellen der Genesis* (*The Sources of Genesis*) and its refinement by the Dutch scholar Abraham Kuenen. He believed that the Priestly Code found in the Pentateuch, which includes the Holiness Code of Leviticus 17–26, stemmed from a source *after* Israel's exile. This code has to do with Israel's rituals, forms of sacrifice, genealogical lists, and their origin as a people. “P” then stands for this supposed source.

JEDP supposedly represents a confluence of sources that comprise the Pentateuch. Granted, this is quite complicated to understand, but this much is undeniable: it is all conjecture! *The documents and authors for each of the supposed sources, J, E, D, and P are either unrelated, or the sources for these speculative theories do not exist!* The amount of faith required to buy into this concocted explanation of Scripture's origin only serves to illustrate the bias of its inventors! In this way it is similar to the theory of evolution, which proposes that nothing times nobody equals everything! All is conjecture. It is not a thinking man's position. A parallel thought is purported to have been expressed by Charles Darwin at the end of his life:

Any theory, no matter how far-fetched, was better than the
alternative: bowing in submission and obedience to a Holy creator.

This is the rationale of the fallen mind: to expunge any and all accountability to God.

Moses: The Actual Author of the Torah

Moses, on the other hand, had every *qualification* to write the Pentateuch. He had the education, background, and experience necessary. By God's sovereign arrangement he was brought up and tutored in Egyptian society, whose culture then far surpassed that of the rest of the ancient world. Additionally, he had the *motivation* to compile the Pentateuch, being the patriarchal leader of Israel. And lastly, like the apostle Paul in prison, Moses had the *time* to write the Pentateuch. During his forty years in the wilderness he could have written something even longer. As will be seen by what follows, writing was prevalent in his day, and his early Egyptian upbringing in Pharaoh's court most certainly accommodated the honing of his literary skills. Despite his years of shepherding his father-in-law's flocks, we have no reason to call into question Moses' fitness as a writer.

The Refutation of the Wellhausen Theory

Before examining some illustrations of the testimony of archaeological discoveries since the liberal theories were developed, it is important to make mention that the Wellhausen theory was refuted early on by such men as Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg, a leader in conservative Biblical scholarship in Germany during this time. His work, *The Genuineness of the Pentateuch* (1847) represented a profound conservative argument in refutation of Wellhausian thought. In America, Princeton Seminary scholars Joseph Addison Alexander and William Henry Green also eruditely upheld Mosaic authorship. Even long before the archaeological discoveries that have made such a difference since the liberal theories emerged, these men dealt strong blows to Wellhausen and his cohorts. Liberal theologians have never successfully rebutted the critics of the Wellhausen theory. The more recent published findings of archaeological excavations have only served to reinforce Alexander and Green's position.

Archaeology and the Antiquity of the Torah

The Wellhausen Hypothesis formulated its judgment on the historicity of the OT in part based upon the scant archaeological evidence of the nineteenth century. That data was meager at best. An unfortunate bias drove the theory's proponents, in part because at the time there was no archaeological evidence for Scriptural sources. They did not give the benefit of the doubt to the documents they critiqued, which is a hard and fast rule in the science of hermeneutics. They failed to believe the following archaeological axiom:

The absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence.

For example, at the time of Wellhausen, archaeological evidence for certain people groups spoken of in the Bible, including the Hittites (Genesis 15:20) and the Horites (Genesis 36:20), and for certain individuals, including King Sargon II (Isaiah 20:1), and King Belshazzar (Daniel 5:1), had not been uncovered. Wellhausians' condemned these people as mere fiction on the part of the later authors of the Torah. And in their arrogance the liberals railed on about the improbability of these Biblical accounts, refuting the Biblical record with their supposed erudite intellectual superiority. But be sure of this, the sin of arrogance cannot stand against the truth. Gleason Archer states:

It has come about that in case after case after case after case where alleged historical inaccuracy was pointed to as proof of late and spurious authorship of the [B]iblical documents, the Hebrew record has been vindicated by the results of recent excavation, and the condemnatory judgments of the Documentarian Theorists have been proved [to be] without foundation.⁶

William F. Albright, the man esteemed as the world's leading archaeologist of his generation, who formerly held to the Wellhausen Theory, confirms this:

Archaeological and inscriptional data have established the historicity of innumerable passages and statements of the Old Testament.... Wellhausen still ranks in our eyes as the greatest Biblical scholar of the nineteenth century. But his standpoint is antiquated and his picture of the early evolution of Israel is sadly distorted.⁷

John Elder concurs:

It is not too much to say that it was the rise of the science of archaeology that broke the deadlock between historians and the orthodox Christian. Little by little, one city after another, one civilization after another, one culture after another, whose memories were enshrined only in the Bible, were restored to their proper places in ancient history by the studies of archaeologists.⁸

Adds J. A. Thompson (written before the year 2000):

Finally, it is perfectly true to say that [B]iblical archaeology has done a great deal to correct the impression that was abroad at the close of the last century and in the early part of this century, that Biblical history was of doubtful trustworthiness in many places. If one impression stands out more clearly than another today, it is that on all hands the over-all historicity of the Old Testament tradition is admitted.⁹

With those statements in mind regarding the verification archaeology provides for an early dating of the Torah, it will prove beneficial to examine some specific scientific discoveries that substantiate Mosaic authorship and further discount the JEDP, or Documentary Hypothesis Theory:

A Sampling of Archaeological Discoveries

What follows are a number of archaeological discoveries in the twentieth century that refute Wellhausian premises of the nineteenth century.

THE RAS SHAMRA TABLETS

These tablets were discovered by C. F. A. Schaeffer in 1929 and are composed in a thirty-letter Semitic alphabet that more closely parallels the Hebrew dialect and symbol usage than any other ancient language. The tablets date to around 1400 BC and reveal a depraved polytheistic Canaanite culture existing, very importantly, at the time of the Israelite conquest of Canaan.

In addition, the dialogue inscribed on the tablets reveals clichés that are characteristic of the poetic forms found in the Pentateuch and in the Psalms. For example, the tablets refer to Baal's home as being located "on the mountain of his inheritance." This closely parallels Exodus 15:17, which states, "You will bring them and plant them in the mountain of Your inheritance." Numerous other forms similar to Hebrew poetry are in evidence on these tablets, including tricolonic prose and elevated writing skills.

This discovery, along with those dating to 1500 BC from the turquoise mines of Serabit el-Khadim, discovered by Petrie in 1904, and the Gezar Calendar found by Macalister in the 1900s, display beyond any shadow of doubt an ability to write in the Mosaic period.

Why is this significant? The JEDP liberals postulated that the art of writing was virtually unknown in Israel prior to the Davidic Kingdom; therefore there could not have been any written records during Moses' time.

THE NUZI TABLETS

These tablets were found in 1925 by Chiera and Speiser in the area of Nuzi, near Kirkuk on the Tigris River. They date from the fifteenth century BC. The customs of the era are revealed from the study of these thousands of tablets. They give insight into Abraham's culture prior to his sojourn to Egypt, such as the acceptable practice of

selling one's birthright. An example of this within the tablets is the story of a brother being recompensed for selling his primogeniture to his younger brother in exchange for three sheep. This parallels Genesis 25:33, where Esau sells his birthright to Jacob. Another example is the binding nature of a deathbed will, which we see played out between Isaac, Jacob, and Esau in the book of Genesis.

Another discovery that plays a supporting role in refuting Wellhausen is that of the Mari tablets. They were discovered by an archaeologist named A. Parrot in 1933 near the city of Tel Hariri on the Euphrates River. They contain direct evidence that during the eighteenth century BC a people group existed referred to as the "Hibiru," which is an ancient Akkadian reference to the Hebrews in the book of Genesis. In Canaanite language it refers to "wanderers," or "people from the other side." The word "Hebrew" comes from Abraham's ancestor Eber, meaning "one who crosses over," or "region beyond."

Why is this significant? Those who would have you believe that the OT is nothing more than a man-made collection of myths claim that the Genesis account of Abraham and his descendants is unhistorical and fictional. One prominent proponent of the theory went so far as to deny the existence of Abraham. But the Ebla tablets nail the coffin shut as it pertains to Abraham. This archaeological discovery of a whole ancient library, unearthed in 1974, testifies to the existence of the secular kings during the time of Abraham, recorded in Genesis 14.

THE BABYLONIAN CODE OF HAMMURABI

This 1901 discovery by Scheil serves to illuminate the numerous similarities between the societal laws of the books of the Torah, and Babylonian culture. This account of the law code of ancient Babylon displays forms of criminal punishment for breaches in contracts. There is an "if ... then" structure to the writings. This discovery serves to confirm the existence of a penal code at the time of Moses.

Why is this significant? The Documentary Hypothesis adherents theorized that the Pentateuch is fallacious on the basis of their belief that the legislation of the Priestly Code in these Biblical books represents a later, post-exilic stage of development in the Hebrew culture. They boasted that laws of this level of sophistication could not have been developed until the fifth century BC. States Millar Burrows of Yale:

"Scholars have sometimes supposed that the social and moral level of the laws attributed to Moses was too high for such an early age. [These discoveries] have effectively refuted this assumption."¹⁰

Such verifications from the world of archaeology serve to substantiate Moses' rightful place: staring down on the Speaker's podium in our U.S. House of Representatives, where our laws are birthed.

THE TELL EL-AMARNA TABLETS

Carrying the name of the city in which they were discovered in 1887, they date to 1370 BC and are comprised of correspondence between Palestinian and Syrian princelings. In part they speak of fierce invaders to the south, and request Egyptian troops. Those invading are the Hibiru. The cities that they say have already fallen are listed as Gezer, Ashkelon, and Lachish. Accordingly, this secular archaeological find parallels Numbers 21:1–3, which is a record of the Hebrew conquest of Canaan. Interestingly, the Tell el-Amarna account is told from the vantage point of those being conquered.

Why is this significant? Wellhausen proponents propagated their belief that the account of the conquest of Palestine and the Transjordan as recorded in the books of Numbers and Joshua was grossly unhistorical. But subsequent archaeological excavations indicate that the conquest did occur. It is interesting to note who turned out to be “grossly unhistorical.”

Numerous other archaeological finds could be recounted to make our point, but suffice it to say that archaeology has played a major role in supporting the veracity of the Old Testament. It would be foolish to propagate the JEDP theory today in light of all the discoveries that refute it. In fact, if theologians proffered the same theories today, they would be ridiculed. My favorite archaeologist, Albright, says:

New discoveries continue to confirm the historical accuracy or the literary antiquity of detail after detail in it.... It is, accordingly, sheer hyper-criticism to deny the substantially Mosaic character of the Pentateuchal tradition.¹¹

Here are some thoughts to take away from this faith-building exploration:

BE DISCERNING OF FALSE TEACHERS

Much can be learned from the arrogant scholarship of Wellhausen and his ilk. What follows are keys to identifying liberal theologians. The NT has many warnings about false religious leaders who lead people astray, leaving them shipwrecked regarding the faith. They will shipwreck nations too if you let them: *Liberal theology is too often the seedbed of liberal political theory*, a subject I will address in much greater detail in the next chapter.

Remember, one of the most significant indicators of spiritual maturity is discernment: the ability to distinguish truth from error. This requires an intellectual acumen that is only gained through in-depth Bible study. Conversely, as I minister to people in the Capital and travel around the country and the world, I often hear of spiritual maturity being defined as if it only means loving others! But what do you do when liberal theologians attempt to win political/ideological debates based upon their unscriptural premises? Do you respond with nothing but “love”? No. Love *“does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth”* (1 Corinthians 13:6). Consider the words of Philippians 1:9: *“And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment.”* What follow are identifying characteristics of liberal theologians. Learn to recognize them:

KEYS TO IDENTIFYING LIBERAL THEOLOGIANS¹²

1. They are predisposed to devaluing textual evidence from Scripture
2. They assume the Scriptural authors have lower literary standards than themselves
3. They assume the religion of the Bible is of purely human origin
4. They artificially concoct “discrepancies” to draw attention to supposed Biblical errors
5. They assume a knowledge of ancient history superior to the original authors who lived thousands of years closer to the events they recorded

HOLD TO A HIGH VIEW OF SCRIPTURE

In the Capital Community, do not be caught up in old myths that never seem to die regarding the supposed lack of integrity of God’s authoritative Word, the Holy Scriptures. His Word is just as true when it speaks in historical narrative as it is when it commands our obedience or provides us with principles for wise living. The Scriptures claim to be the Word of God not once or twice, but over and over again. And indeed they are. Foolish is the man or woman who suppresses that truth. In fact, Romans 1 tells us that those who suppress the truth are ungodly and unrighteous, and subject to the wrath of God.

RECOGNIZE WHO IT IS THAT POSSESSES BLIND FAITH

It is not the conservative Christians with a high view of the inspiration of Scripture who are the simpletons, who

cling to their beliefs with blind faith, ignorant and lacking intellectual, scientific, and historical support. Rather, it is those who espouse a liberal approach to God's Word. Modern day archaeology has served to undermine the postulations of liberal theologians. Romans 1:22 is an apt summary: "*Professing to be wise, they became fools.*" Do not be counted among them.

Let's spend a little more time looking at the roots and development of Theological Liberalism. This is a worthwhile endeavor considering how much influence that movement has held and continues to hold, both in government and in society as a whole.

Notes

1 See Exodus 17:14; Joshua 1:8; John 5:46–47. In the John passage Jesus says, "*For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for **he wrote** about Me. But if you do not believe **his writings**, how will you believe My words?*" (emphases added). In John 7:19 Jesus states further, "*Did not Moses give you the Law, and yet none of you carries out the Law?*" These passages provide Jesus' testimony that Moses wrote the books of the OT Law. How can one claim Christ and reject His words?

2 Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 89.

3 *Ibid.*, 97.

4 Astruc's writing, published in 1753, was titled, *Conjectures Concerning the Original Memoranda Which It Appears Moses Used to Compose the Book of Genesis*.

5 De Wette was actually not part of the Documentary Hypothesis School. Rather, he was a Fragmentary Theorist, believing the Pentateuch to be composed from separate fragments, some of which were as old as Moses and were fitted into an historical context.

6 Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament*, 174.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.*

10 Millar Burrows, *What Mean These Stones?* (New Haven, Conn: ASOR, 1941), 56.

11 William F. Albright, *The Archeology of Palestine*, Rev. ed. Harmondsworth (Middlesex: Pelican, 1960), 224.

12 Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament*, 112.