

## THE PENTATEUCH AND CATHOLIC CRITICISM

### THE CATHOLIC CRITICAL SCHOOL (1897-1906)

Pentateuchal Criticism took definite shape at the end of the eighteenth century; it became a powerful instrument in the hands of rationalists and their followers for the demolition of many of the traditional beliefs. Against these destructive tendencies Catholics arrayed themselves into two camps: some wanted to safeguard truth by adapting it to modern thinking but they soon got infected by modernism which was condemned by the Church. The others went back to uncompromisingly defensive positions; they strongly pointed out the weak points in the tenets of the new theories and refused to accept what may have been positive acquisitions.

Outside this generally defensive tendency there were others who were ready to accept what was really correct in the analysis of independent criticism. They took it upon themselves to analyse the results of the critics, to reject what was evidently false and irreconcilable with dogma, and to accept what had been proved to be correct. Among these we find Von Hügel, J.M. Lagrange, P.Vetter, F.Hummelauer, Van Hoonacker and others.

The work of these scholars will form the subject of our present study.

In 1897, five years after the publication of the Encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* and nine years before the promulgation of the Pontifical Decree on the Pt., J.M. Lagrange and Von Hügel in their lectures to the International Scientific Congress at Freiburg launched their new methods in handling Biblical problems, at once in line with progressive science and in harmony with Tradition. Hügel justified the fundamental principle of literary criticism by showing that literary criticism, as such, is not based on a vicious circle<sup>1</sup>.

LAGRANGE treated the whole matter in his characteristic thoroughness in his paper *Les Sources du Pentateuque*, which he supplemented by later articles. He divided his lecture into five headings in an attempt to show that the documentary theory has been substantially proved and that it could be harmonized with Catholic doctrine. The final editing of the Sacred Books, legislative evolution, the testimony of the Holy Writ, the value of Tradition, the historical worth of the documents of the Pt.,

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. De Hummeleaur, *In Deuteronomium*, Paris 1901, p. 138.

all were embraced within a masterly exposition impregnated by a spirit of loyalty to the Church. Lagrange never abandoned this position<sup>2</sup>.

He introduced his dissertation by pointing out that it was Catholic science that through the efforts of Astruc discovered the clue which gave the start for the critical examination of the Pt.; Astruc however was modest enough not to put on a level of certainty the results of his investigations. His lead was not followed by Catholic students, who thus deprived themselves of the means to defend the Bible from the attacks of Rationalists<sup>3</sup>. The writer traced out the causes of the defensive position of the Catholics without, however, condemning it unreservedly. But he did not agree with those who were ever ready to find fault with conclusions arrived at by outsiders; on the contrary he condemned such a behaviour as harmful to the Church and to the salvation of souls in so far as it was causing estrangement between the Church and many scholars, among whom there were many who felt the force of the critics' arguments. On the other hand one should not always nod at the pleasantries of the independent school; the Catholic cause is not served by simply waiting for the independent school to destroy itself. One must remember that unlike the weak affirmations, the strong negations are being widened. Following this, Lagrange lists his ideas under five headings:

*The Editing of the Sacred Books.* Lagrange insists that the Sacred Books had not been written and polished up as the literary works of the Graeco-Roman world were, or as the Massoretic text would have us believe. Gn. 47 in the Massoretic text is different from that of the LXX; which difference is inexplicable without admitting a later revision of the text or even a doublet in Gn. 47, 1-5 and 5b-7. The overlapping in the LXX had been polished off by the Massoretics. This was confirmed later in an article in the RB of 1906 by I. Guidi who discovered an extant Oriental history formed by the dovetailing of two still extant documents into one whole<sup>4</sup>. Hence the documentary theory is not impossible in itself.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. *L'Authenticité mosaïque de la Génèse et la théorie des documents*, RB 47 (1938) 162-183; Cfr. F.M. Braun, *L'Oeuvre du Père Lagrange*, Freiburg 1943, pp. 92-97.

<sup>3</sup> 'Cette voix ne fut pas écoutée, et la dix-huitième siècle ne sut pas défendre la Bible contre les sarcasmes de Voltaire' RB 7 (1898) 12.

<sup>4</sup> 'Au lieu de la critique des sources et de l'élaboration des matériaux et des livres antérieurs nous y voyons copiés et mis bout à bout du morceaux tirés des histoires plus anciennes, sans que le lecteur soit averti de la différence de leur origine. Cette méthode qui nous paraît si défectueuse se retrouve dans toutes les littératures sémitiques.' I. Guidi, *Historiographie chez les Sémites*, RB (1906) p. 509.

*Legislative Evolution.* Moses, the Legislator, must be distinguished from Moses the Writer. Law is by its very nature evolvent, and there is nothing against faith in this principle. Once we admit this, it would be very easy to explain away the doublets occurring in the Mosaic law. 'Depuis long temps les harmonistes donent des solution qui sont possible chacune en particulier, mais dont l'ensemble constitue une impossibilité morale. Que l'on admette une législation qui évolue, l'apparence même de contradiction disparaît.'<sup>5</sup> Lagrange put the question in these clear-cut terms: 'Moïse est-il législateur parce qu'il a posé les fondement, ou parce qu'il a couronné l'édifice?'<sup>6</sup> He gave an unequivocal answer in the affirmative to the first alternative.

*The Testimony of the Bible.* The learned speaker in meeting the objections raised against him on the force of the Biblical evidence in favour of Mosaic Authorship, proved that in his view there was nothing definite or conclusive on the subject because the statements referring to it do not cover the whole Pt., and moreover, the writer had not in mind the solving of literary problems.

*The Value of Tradition.* 'Moïse est le législateur d'Israel, le mosaïsme est à la base de toute l'histoire du peuple de Dieu, voilà la tradition historique; Moïse a rédigé le Pt. que nous possédons, voilà la tradition littéraire.'<sup>7</sup> The value of the historical tradition is beyond question; that of the literary one is doubtful. The early Fathers erroneously followed the Jewish opinion that Esdras was inspired to recover the whole Pt. No less did the Jews believe in the inspiration of the LXX translators. Hebrew traditions, therefore, cannot be accepted at their face value<sup>8</sup>. One must remember that the historical tradition itself is being attacked.

*Historical Value.* 'On tient à l'authenticité pour établir la veracité.'<sup>9</sup> This is the reason of many who defend a strict authenticity of the Pt. They subordinate the accessory to the essential. A documentary theory as such does not necessarily imply the historical disparagement of the Pt. He admitted then with radical modifications the documentary theory, defending the historicity and antiquity of E as being older than J, the latter being contemporaneous with the Exodus; D is at the end of the whole evolutionary process<sup>10</sup>. Lagrange would not accept the plea that Moses may have written a duplicate (D) of his own laws<sup>11</sup>. P is post-exilic. This does not in any way prejudice its veracity guaranteed by

<sup>5</sup> RB 7 (1898) p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 137.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 28.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. Ibid. p. 29ff.

<sup>11</sup> 'Est-il vraisemblable puisque la Loi été donnée par Dieu au Sinai que Dieu la transforme au bout de quarante ans pour l'immobiliser ensuite pendant des siècles.' Lagrange, *La Methode Historique*, p. 176.

Inspiration and the other documents. As to the different points of view exhibited by the single documents, he asks whether God did really want to inform us about them, or rather He used them as a means to mediate more important information<sup>12</sup>.

Lagrange thus made a determined attempt to open a middle way between the views of the critics and the traditional viewpoint. We described his opinions at length on account of their novelty and intrinsic value.

Lagrange welcomed the commentary of F. HUMMELAUER on Num. (1899) and Dt. (1901)<sup>13</sup>. He congratulated the commentator for his courage in admitting publicly and in writing the need of thorough critical discussion of the whole Pt. by some Catholic critics. 'Aegre ferimus, writes Hummelauer, uti alii. faciunt, nondum repertum esse virum catholicum qui totum Pentateuchum critice discutiens plenam et solidam, neque solum negativam totius textus rationem reddiderit'<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, Hummelauer was not satisfied with words alone; he himself applied critical methods to Num. and to Dt. In the latter he went definitely adrift from the traditional course.

Even a superficial reading of his definite statements in the introduction to his work<sup>15</sup> would convince one of Hummelauer's attempt to reconcile tradition with the new criticism. He supports his theory with an impressive array of historical facts and hypotheses based on history; not all of these hypotheses are invulnerable, nor can one unreservedly accept his conclusions therefrom. Lagrange, recognising the merit of Hummelauer in attempting to give a reasonable solution to the problem of Dt. in particular, and of the Pt. in general, remarks: 'mais il y lieu de tenir compte aussi de l'observation du Sauver: le vin nouveau fait éclater les veilles autres: Les conclusions de la critique moderne... ne doivent pas être adaptées à des lambeaux d'anciens systems; faut voir ce que exigent les principes et leur donner satisfaction, mais en les considérant en eux-mêmes, non tels qu'ils se reflètent dans des fragments de systemes après qu'on a tout brisé'<sup>16</sup>. In other words, Lagrange is not satisfied with Hummelauer since the latter did not prove himself consistent with his own principles throughout his system. Notwithstanding his weak points, Hummelauer had the merit of applying courageously and unhesitatingly critical methods to the exegesis of the Pt.

F.E. GIGOT (1901) welcomed the documentary theory in his *Introduction*

<sup>12</sup> RB (1898) p. 30.

<sup>13</sup> RB (1899) p. 609ff and (1901) p. 609ff.

<sup>14</sup> Vide note 12.

<sup>15</sup> F. De Hummelauer, *In Deuteronomium*, Paris 1901, p. 61-107.

<sup>16</sup> RB (1901) p. 614.

to the *Study of the Old Testament* (New York) with slight modifications. He pointed out the inadequate arguments brought against the critics with the consequent distrust in them on the part of the faithful. 'Smart writing on the critics is comparatively easy, but if their conclusions are to be effectively replied it must be someone who will go into the details of the case with the same diligence which has been employed on the other side'<sup>17</sup>. Notwithstanding disagreement on the points of detail there is amongst the critics a sufficient degree of unanimity as to command respect. 'Men, Gigot remarks, do not debate on points of agreement, but on points of difference'<sup>18</sup>. He goes on to apply the documentary theory to the books of the O.T. His views may be summed up thus: (a) The term Hexateuch is justifiable on account of the common subject-matter of the Pt. and Joshua; (b) The documentary theory may be harmonised with the data of Revelation (in fact some Catholics, e.g. Hoberg, have already admitted it with modifications); (c) It is antecedently probable due to the methods of historiography among Orientals; (d) One is struck by the unanimity among the critics; (e) It must be stated that with regards to a certain number of facts appealed to, and of inference admitted by the advocates of the recent theories respecting the authorship of Genesis-Joshua, even some Catholic scholars whose traditional views are well known have already made admissions, which may perhaps be regarded as an omen of complete endorsement, at no distant date, of the other positions already regarded as certain, or nearly so, by other no less orthodox writers. In view of the importance which thus attaches to the main results held as certain by contemporary critics, they will be briefly set forth in connexion with the literary structure of each separate book of the Hexateuch<sup>19</sup>.

VETTER in 1903 put the final editing of the Pt. at the time of Esdras. The history from Adam to Abraham originated at the time of the Judges. Legal dispositions go back to Moses. These laws were expanded and collected into one whole by the priests; Dt. was written at the end of the Judges' epoch; chronology and songs are mosaic. The Pt. as such was first composed when the Temple of Solomon was constructed<sup>20</sup>.

VAN HOONACKER<sup>21</sup>, in the early years of this century according to a

<sup>17</sup> F.E. Gigot, *Introduction* etc., p. 45.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. 45.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 138-140.

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. M. Hetzenhauer, *Introductio in librum Genesis*, Viennae 1910, p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> J. Coppens, *De compositione litteraria et de origine mosaica Hexateuchi disquisitio historico-critica: een historichkritisch onderzoek van Professor Van Hoonacker naar het ontstaan van de Hexateuch op grond van verspreide nagelaten aantekeningen samengesteld en ingelied.*

posthumous work published by J. Coppens, tried to tackle the Pentateuchal problem. He presented objectively the difficulties and tried to give thereto an original solution. There is no sufficient evidence in Holy Scripture for the establishment of Mosaic authenticity of the Hexateuch; the Catholic scholar therefore is not bound to defend Mosaic authenticity at all costs. Van Hoonacker admits the existence of JEDP without accepting Wellhausen's interpretation of this phenomenon: D is Josiah's lawbook which forms his whole reformation; P is older than D, but later than J and E; these two were combined into one whole composition of P and that of D; P was joined to JE before D; JEP was united with D not earlier than the Exilic period.

To conclude we may state that Catholic scholars who set out to apply the new methods in this period were few in number, even if we include Hommel Bickel, R. Clarke and Baumgartel. But even these did not go through it with that thoroughness as one would have it. Hummelauer tried to find a middle way between the rights of criticism and those of Tradition with some success, and Van Hoonacker accepted the analysis into the four documents and rejected the datings giving an explanation of his own; Hügel approved of the critical principles adopted by critics in analysing the documents; Lagrange picked up the question in lectures and in book-reviews; others lamented that Catholic criticism is still in its infancy. Not a single writer took it upon himself to submit the Pt. to a rigid analytical investigation to explain its origin in such a way as to satisfy all the data furnished by the books themselves and by Tradition. They all stopped at outlining fundamental principles, and, excepting in part Hummelauer, they did not try to apply them to the whole Pt. As Lagrange clearly remarked in another context, their solutions at times satisfy particular sections but by no means do they explain the whole work<sup>22</sup>. A new period was to be ushered in with the issue of the Pontifical Decree in 1906.

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<sup>22</sup> RB (1893) p. 19.