

ANTI-SEMITISM IN WELLHAUSEN

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Lieulich sind die alten Juden nicht, aber respektabel sind sie doch. Sic [*sic*] gehen doch ganz anders im Kampf gegen die Römer unter, als Athener und Spartaner, obwohl sie von militärischen Dingen absolut nichts verstehen und gar keine Disziplin kennen. Eigentlich sind sie überhaupt nicht untergegangen, sondern haben trotz allem über die Römer triumphiert. Man mag es bedauern, aber man muß es anerkennen.¹

Thesis and Outline

Lament it, indeed! In his letter to Justi, Julius Wellhausen reveals his orientation and his intent. He finds Judaism's very survival lamentable, and his purpose in developing the documentary hypothesis, as he reveals throughout not only the *Prolegomena* but in much of his other writings as well, is, as one commentator puts it, "extolling the Church and denigrating Judaism."² Wellhausen, I submit, is not only permeated by anti-Semitism; anti-Semitism is his very motive!

I shall begin this paper by briefly placing Wellhausen in his historical context. I shall then look at some examples of his antipathy toward Jews and Judaism, as expressed in his theories concerning both the Tanach (documentary hypothesis) and the Christian Testament³ (Markan priority). Finally, I shall discuss how Wellhausen's attitudes have colored the understandings of his followers and successors.⁴ Each of these sections could easily be expanded into a monograph or a book chapter, as could a discussion of the work of Umberto Cassuto,⁵ Yehezkel Kaufmann,⁶ Frank M. Cross,⁷ and other critics of Wellhausen, but constraints of time and length compel me to limit myself to a cursory review of the subject. "Had we but world enough, and time. . . ."

¹ Julius Wellhausen, Letter to Ferdinand Justi (dated March 5, 1893); quoted in Friedemann Boschwitz, *Julius Wellhausen: Motive und Mass-stäbe seiner Geschichtsschreibung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968), 56.

² Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 5.

³ As a Jew, I eschew use of the terms "Old Testament" and "New Testament," which have a clearly Christian connotation as well as a subtle (or, perhaps, not so subtle) supersessionistic implication. I am also disinclined to refer to the "Hebrew Scriptures" and the "Greek Scriptures," inasmuch as parts of the former are in Aramaic rather than Hebrew and parts of the latter, although preserved in Greek, may have been composed in either Hebrew or (more likely) Aramaic. My expressions of choice – without claiming consistency in this matter – will therefore be "Tanach" and "Christian Testament."

⁴ My emphasis will not be upon the accuracy (or lack thereof) of either the documentary hypothesis generally or Wellhausen's version of it in particular, but only upon Wellhausen's antipathy toward Jews and Judaism. While I will cite examples of his theories, it will be for the purpose of exhibiting that antipathy.

⁵ Esp. *The Documentary Hypothesis and the Composition of the Pentateuch*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1961).

⁶ Esp. *The Religion of Israel*, translated and abridged by Moshe Greenberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

⁷ Esp. *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973).

A brief aside is here called for. We are accustomed, in this post-Holocaust era, to think of anti-Semitism as aiming at the physical destruction of the Jewish people. Adolf Hitler's desire for a *judenrein* world has come to be paradigmatic of anti-Semitism. Many who seek the destruction of the State of Israel insist that they are anti-Israel, not anti-Semitic. Many Christian evangelists who seek to bring all Jews to a recognition of Jesus Christ as their L*rd⁸ and Savior insist that they "love the Jewish people." An attempt to destroy an essential part of a people's culture, of a people's beliefs, of a people's faith tradition, is as much a genocide (a "cultural genocide," if you will) as is an attempt at physical destruction. The aim remains – to wipe out the people as a people – whether the method is through the murder of the individuals making up the people or through causing those individuals to cease being a part of that people. There is no indication in the Wellhausen corpus of any desire to engage in the murder of Jews. When he declares, however, that he finds the survival of the Jewish people a fact to be lamented,⁹ he is declaring that he desires a world in which there are no Jews; that wish, even absent a desire to kill, is anti-Semitism.

Wellhausen's Historical Setting

Wellhausen did not arise in a vacuum. Emil Schürer and Wilhelm Bousset defined Judaism in a manner similar to that of Wellhausen.¹⁰ As did Wellhausen, we are told by both Weinfeld and George Foot Moore, they based their descriptions of Judaism on ignorance, not on knowledge and study. "Schürer was never widely read in the literature of the school and the synagogue, and . . . he paid the least attention to precisely those parts of it from which most may be learned about religious feeling and the inwardness of Jewish piety."¹¹ "In Bousset's case, . . . [his] knowledge [of Judaism] was a negligible factor."¹²

In 1903, Bousset published his *Die Religion des Judentums im neutestamentlichen Zeitalter*. He refers to Judaism of the turn of the Era as "*die Religion des Spätjudentums*," as if to imply that, with the advent of Christianity, Judaism had reached the end of its significant existence. Bousset and

⁸ In keeping with the Jewish tradition, I do not spell out the Divine Names. I insert an asterisk, even in quotations from authors who do spell out the names, considering this a form of translation, just as I would translate a quotation from a foreign language. Further, I capitalize words which refer to G*d, including "Name" and including most pronouns and many adjectives, but in these cases I follow the style of the authors whom I am citing. I do not claim complete consistency in this matter.

⁹ While his precise words were (in English translation) "one may lament, . . ." the form of expression makes it clear that he does lament not only Judaism's having "triumphed . . . over Rome," but equally the fact that "the Jews . . . did not perish at all."

¹⁰ Weinfeld, 5.

¹¹ George Foot Moore, "Christian Writers on Judaism," *Harvard Theological Review* 14 (1921): 240.

¹² *Ibid.*, 242.

Schürer were scholars of the Christian Testament; their interest in Judaism was not for its own sake, but solely for the light it might throw upon the origins of its supersessor, Christianity. Bousset asserts that Jesus – the individual and his teachings – does not have his roots in Judaism but rather “as the antithesis to Judaism in every point.”¹³

As do Bousset and Schürer, Wellhausen describes Judaism out of his ignorance, not his knowledge. He himself admits that, aside from the Mechilta and “a few snippets of Mishna,”¹⁴ he had never made any serious or systematic study of Rabbinic literature. Despite this lack of knowledge, he asserts that the Mishna, from beginning to end, is characteristic of the Pharisees and that, inasmuch as it is all the same, it would be pointless to discuss it in any detail.¹⁵

An Early Controversy

A new edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, published in 1876, included an article on the Bible which “was written from the point of view of the Higher Criticism, and practically accepted the Graf-Wellhausen theory as to the documents of the Pentateuch.”¹⁶ Despite the fact that Robertson Smith, Professor of Hebrew at Free Church College in Aberdeen, was the author of the article, its conclusion engendered great controversy in the Scottish Presbyterian Church, as it challenged many of that church’s traditional beliefs. Inasmuch as the author was a renowned and respected Presbyterian minister and teacher, it was especially troubling.

Over the following five years, Robert Rainy led a faction within the church that sought to have Smith first censured (which motion failed) and finally dismissed (which motion passed the Free Church Assembly in May 1881). William Robertson Nicoll, although sympathizing with Smith’s position, sought at first to mediate between the two factions and finally found himself supporting Rainy’s motion.¹⁷

A few months later, Nicoll visited Greifswald (where Wellhausen resided) for several days with the express purpose of meeting him. He described the friendly reception he received from Wellhausen, and he went on to tell of their conversation: “I asked him what he thought of the

¹³ Ibid., 241.

¹⁴ Julius Wellhausen, *Die Pharisäer und die Sadducäer* (Greifswald: L. Bamberg, 1874), 123. “*Einigen Abschnitten der Mischne.*” My English rendering.

¹⁵ Ibid., 19. “*Im Uebrigen ist die Mischna von Anfang bis zu Ende Quelle für die Charakteristik der Pharisäer. Es hat aber keine Werth, in die Einzelheiten einzugehen, die doch nur stets das selbe lehren.*”

¹⁶ T. H. Darlow, *William Robertson Nicoll: Life and Letters* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1925) 38.

¹⁷ Some three decades later, Nicoll declared “that Rainy and the Free Church erred most deplorably and most tragically in their treatment of Smith” (William Robertson Nicoll, in the *British Weekly*, May 23, 1912, quoted in Darlow, 39).

testimony of Christ. He replied that no doubt Christ was mistaken about the Old Testament, but that as He did not understand about the earth and the sun so He did not about the Bible, and it mattered little.”¹⁸ Later, Nicoll goes on to say of Wellhausen, “He does not like disputations, and bears no malice toward anyone,”¹⁹ although he had previously declared unequivocally, “W. hates Jews.”²⁰ Wellhausen’s anti-Semitism was clear even to one so sympathetic to his theories and so favorably impressed by him as was Nicoll!

Wellhausen’s Sources

Wellhausen rested his theories, at least in part, on work that had been done a century earlier by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. In several places in his writings, Wellhausen “emphasized that his ‘discovery’ that Exodus 34 preserved the original Decalogue” was drawn from Goethe’s 1773 essay “Zwo wichtige bisher unerörterte biblische Fragen.” In that work, Goethe declares:

The Jewish people I regard as a wild, infertile stock that stood in a circle of wild and barren²¹ trees, upon which the eternal Gardener grafted the noble scion Jesus Christ, so that, by adhering to it, it ennobled the nature of the stock and from there slips were fetched to make all the remaining trees fertile.

The history and teaching of this people, from its first shoots up to the grafting, is certainly *particularistic*, and the small amount of the universal [teaching] which may perhaps have been accorded it in anticipation of that future great deed is difficult and perhaps not even necessary to seek out.

From the grafting on, the entire matter took a turn. Teaching and history became *universal*. And although each tree that was ennobled from it had its own special history and its own special teaching according to its circumstances, my opinion is nonetheless: Here [in the case of Christianity] there is as little particularistic to be suspected and interpreted as there is universal there [in the case of Judaism].²²

Wellhausen’s lauding of Goethe’s essay cannot but raise the question of his possible adoption of the anti-Semitism of that essay.

¹⁸ William Robertson Nicoll, Greifswald, Pomerania, letter to his wife, dated August 3, 1881, quoted in Darlow, 40.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

²¹ The German adjectives characterizing the trees are the same as those characterizing the Jewish people.

²² Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “Zwo wichtige bisher unerörterte biblische Fragen,” in *Der Junge Goethe 1757-1775*, ed. G. Sauder (München, 1987), 436-437, quoted and translated in Bernard M. Levinson, “Goethe’s Analysis of Exodus 34 and Its Influence on Wellhausen: The *Propfung* of the Documentary Hypothesis,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 114 (2002): 216. Italics and interpolations in Levinson.

An Example of Wellhausen's Preconception Coloring His Work

One of the principles underlying Wellhausen's documentary hypothesis²³ is that the two Names of G*d used in the Torah necessarily imply two distinct sources. Indeed, the shifts in Name between *Y*hweh* and *E*lohim* may suggest – but only suggest – two traditions. If the two Names are to establish a documentary contention and overturn the unitary hypothesis,²⁴ then that contention must be demonstrated by corroborating evidence and must be unassailable. An analysis of the two Names and how They are used – examining the Names Themselves and not just the fact that They are distinct – can well lead to a conclusion very different from Wellhausen's.²⁵

*E*lohim* is a generic name – in Hebrew and, in cognate forms, in other Semitic languages – for a divinity. The gods of the Canaanites are called *elohim*, and, indeed, *elohim* is used in the Tanach to designate the mighty and powerful among human beings.²⁶ The expression בני א*לוהים, traditionally rendered as “sons of G*d,” was understood by John Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, as referring to “fallen angels.”²⁷ The Enochic tradition (particularly in the *Book of the Watchers*) also understands this expression as designating rebellious angels, who finally receive their punishment.²⁸ Other Jewish commentators lower the rank of the בני א*לוהים even further. Rashi and Nahmanides, among others, call them the “sons of the rulers.”²⁹ Josephus calls them “fallen angels,” and ibn Ezra, following *Targum Yonatan*, designates them the descendants of Seth, distinguished from the “children of man,” the descendants of Cain.³⁰ In II Kings 1:3, we read of מלאך יהוה, a messenger of Y*hweh, instructing Elijah to confront the agents of Ahaziah, king of Samaria, by demanding of them, “Is it because there is no *E*lohim* in Israel that you are going to inquire of Baal-Zebub, the *elohim* of

²³ I call the documentary hypothesis “Wellhausen's” even though its genesis preceded him, inasmuch as it was Wellhausen who was instrumental in bringing it to the fore.

²⁴ The “unitary hypothesis” – for lack of a better name – does not necessarily have ultimate sanction, but, I submit, it has traditional standing which, while it can certainly be overturned, carries a *prima facie* presumption of validity. That is to say, clear and not merely speculative evidence is necessary for overturning the earlier assumption. It is my contention that Wellhausen set out intentionally to overturn the unitary hypothesis and that this preconception vitiates his scholarship. There is a great difference between research into a subject to “see what is there” and research designed to reach a preconceived conclusion.

²⁵ Isaac M. Kikawada and Arthur Quinn, *Before Abraham Was* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 18.

²⁶ Cf. Genesis 6:2.

²⁷ *Interpreter's Bible*, 1954, vol. 1, 533-534.

²⁸ Birger A. Pearson, “Enoch and Jesus,” *Bible Review* 19:2 (April 2003), 29.

²⁹ Meir Zlotowitz, ed., *Bereishis*, vol. 1, *Bereishis and Noah* (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1977), 180-182.

³⁰ Aryeh Kaplan, tr., *The Living Torah* (New York: Maznaim Publishing Corporation, 1981), 25

Ekron?”³¹ The word *elohim*, thus, could refer to “pagan” gods and even to powerful mortals as well as to G*d.³²

*Y*hweh*, on the other hand, is a specific Name. As the Torah describes it, this Name would not have been known had G*d not Personally revealed it to Israel through Moses.³³ (The use of the four-letter Name in Genesis is admittedly anachronistic, but it can as easily indicate a later redaction and an evolution of the religious consciousness of ancient Israel as a multiplicity of sources.) “This was not a term [the Hebrews] would share with the Canaanites. It was a personal name, not one that would be used in the plural.”³⁴

The portions of the Tanach which have come to be classified as “wisdom literature” consistently use the name *E*lohim*. This corpus is largely universalist, in that it speaks not only to the Hebrew/Israelite/Jewish³⁵ people, but, at least potentially, to the world at large. The Prophetic Books, on the other hand, are quite consistent in their use of the Name יהוה; the Prophets speak explicitly to the Israelites.³⁶

We find an analogous phenomenon in later Christian writings. Thomas Aquinas, for example, in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, speaks of *G*d*, a generic term for a divinity. In the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas speaks of *the Trinity*, a “Name” which does not appear in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. Yet no-one would even suggest – and it is, I submit, a safe speculation that it will not be suggested even two millennia after Aquinas – that these two *Summae* came from the hands of two distinct authors. Like Aquinas, who chooses his Name for G*d with an eye toward both the point he is emphasizing at the moment and the audience to whom he is writing, “Genesis 1-5 might just have an author with a strong sense of decorum about the use of divine names. When discussing aspects of primeval history appropriate to wisdom literature, he would use *E*lohim*; when dealing with those aspects emphasizing specific revelations he would feel inclined to introduce *Y*hweh*.”³⁷ Wellhausen’s conclusion – the conclusion which he has chosen – reflects his preconceptions at least as much as his research.

³¹ My rendering.

³² Kikawada and Quinn, 18.

³³ Exodus 6:3. וַאֲרָא . . . בְּאֵל שְׁדֵי וְשֵׁם יְהוָה לֹא נִודַעְתִּי לָהֶם.

³⁴ Kikawada and Quinn, 18.

³⁵ The name by which the people designated itself evolved through the course of the centuries, but, curiously, we find no scholar making the suggestion that this name change reflects either separate peoples or distinct sources. The evolution of the name is accepted, even taken for granted.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 19.

Additional Effects of Wellhausen's Perspective within His Teachings

The documentary hypothesis, on its surface, seems quite reasonable. The Pentateuch is “the product of an evolutionary process in Israelite religion, and hence contain[s] material representing various stages of that evolution.”³⁸ Where Wellhausen took this seemingly quite reasonable concept, however, reveals much about his intent. He characterized the earliest stages of the Jewish religion as primitive and materialistic and the Second Temple period as an almost equally primitive priestly theocracy. Only in the prophetic tradition did Judaism – as Wellhausen imagined it – reach the heights of spiritual development embodied in an ethical monotheism, and only in the prophetic tradition is Judaism sufficiently exalted to be “seen as providing Christianity with its rootage in the Old Testament.”³⁹ Other forms of Judaism, other parts of the Tanach, constituted superstitious and legalistic religious forms, more primitive and more decadent, leading only to rabbinic Judaism, which Wellhausen considered a dead end.

Wellhausen calls his own objectivity into question when he examines the Hexateuch (the five Books of the Torah plus the Book of Joshua). “The agreement of the sources in the plan of the narrative,” he declares, “is not a matter of course, but a matter requiring explanation, and only to be explained on the ground of the literary dependence of one source on the other.”⁴⁰ The agreement of the sources is surprising – “a matter requiring explanation” – only if one enters upon the study with a presumption that the presumed sources are, in fact, distinct. If one enters into the examination of the Biblical text without this assumption, then neither the agreement of the sources nor their lack of agreement need surprise; it is simply one of the factors discovered in the course of the examination. “Wellhausen argued deductively from a set of presuppositions rather than inductively from raw data.”⁴¹

Wellhausen's anti-Semitism affects more than just his view of the Tanach, more than the Documentary Hypothesis; it permeates his view of the Christian Testament as well. Wellhausen was instrumental in bringing to the fore the doctrine that the Gospel of Mark is the earliest of the Synoptics, opposing the views of J. J. Griesbach almost a century earlier that Matthew was first. “The

³⁸ David E. Timmer, “The Bible Between Church and Synagogue: Thoughts on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures,” *Reformed Review* 39 (1986): 98.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁴⁰ Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 296.

⁴¹ Ziony Zevit, “Converging Lines of Evidence Bearing on the Date of P,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 94 (1982): 482-483.

Markan Hypothesis deeply undercut the concept of a Jewish Christianity, a Jewish Christian, a Jewish Jesus.”⁴²

Wellhausen asserts that the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3-10) originally numbered only seven, rather than the eight which have come down to us. Which does he consider a “later interpolation” and, hence, less authentic? “The one interpolated is not verse 10, which might so easily be considered, based on its content, because it provides a transition to the next two verses. On the contrary, it is verse 4, inasmuch as this is taken over hide and hair (τὴν γῆν) from Psalms 37:11.”⁴³ Matthew’s Greek – μακάριοι οἱ πραεῖς, ὅτι αὐτοὶ κληρονομήσουσιν τὴν γῆν – is not quite identical to the Psalm’s Hebrew – יַעֲנֵנִי יְיָ אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל – but it is close enough to hint at a possible dependence. Inasmuch as Matthew has long – and justifiably – been recognized as the “most Jewish” of the canonical Gospels, it seems hard to understand how his drawing upon the Tanach should be regarded as a “later interpolation” and hence less authentic, unless the commentator wishes, echoing Marcion, to excise all of Christianity’s Jewishness.

Perhaps that is, indeed, Wellhausen’s intent. He himself declares, “One may be justified in maintaining that what is un-Jewish in him [Jesus], what is human, is more characteristic than what is Jewish.”⁴⁴ Not only does Wellhausen declare that the most authentic, the most characteristic, Jesus is to be found precisely in those aspects of his teachings which are at odds with Judaism, he even tells us that what is “un-Jewish” is to be equated with what is “human”!

Examples of Wellhausen’s Followers and Successors

Joseph Blenkinsopp

Wellhausen’s antipathy toward things Jewish has affected at least some of his intellectual descendants. “It would be mistaken to call him anti-Semitic. His animus was directed not so much against Judaism itself as against religious institutions, including institutional Christianity.”⁴⁵ The same writer goes on to acknowledge that Wellhausen’s work “appeared at a time when anti-Semitism

⁴² David Laird Dungan, “Eppur Si Muove: Circumnavigating the Mythical Recensions of Q,” *Soundings* 78 (Fall/Winter 1995): 564.

⁴³ Julius Wellhausen, *Das Evangelium Matthäei* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1914), 14. My translation; Greek expression (from Matthew 5:4) in the original.

⁴⁴ Julius Wellhausen, *Einleitung in die drei ersten Evangelien* (Berlin: Reimer, 1905), quoted in translation in Hans Dieter Betz, “Wellhausen’s Dictum ‘Jesus was not a Christian, but a Jew’ in Light of Present Scholarship,” *Studia Theologica* 45 (1991): 86-87.

⁴⁵ Joseph Blenkinsopp, “The Documentary Hypothesis in Trouble,” *Bible Review* 1 (Winter 1985): 25.

was endemic in German universities,⁴⁶ as witness the 1879 coinage by Heinrich von Treitschke⁴⁷ of the expression, “*Die Juden sind unser Unglück*,”⁴⁸ echoed in a later century by the Nazis.⁴⁹ The same scholar, however, marginalizes Jewish scholars when he declares, “There have always been those who, . . . like the Jewish scholars Yehezkel Kaufmann and Umberto Cassuto, have rejected [the documentary hypothesis] outright. In the last decade, however, doubts have begun to be raised by biblical scholars *standing in the critical mainstream*.”⁵⁰ This juxtaposition conveys the clear message that “Jewish scholars” are to be distinguished from “scholars standing in the critical mainstream.”

Walter Eichrodt

Walter Eichrodt, in his *Theologie des Alten Testaments*,⁵¹ not only echoes Wellhausen when he declares that it is in Christ that “the noblest powers of the Old Testament find their fulfillment.”⁵² He then goes on to speak of “the torso-like appearance of Judaism in separation from Christianity,”⁵³ implying that Christianity can only stake a claim to roots in the Tanach by denying Israel’s claim or, at least, by limiting the Jewish claim to the “less noble”⁵⁴ elements therein. The latter include the post-Exilic priestly/scrival Temple cult and even the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah, which, by their devotion to a legalistic piety constitute, for Eichrodt, a distortion of the covenantal ideal.⁵⁵

Conclusion

We have seen that Wellhausen, heir to the work of Goethe, among others, exhibited a severe distaste for things Jewish. He declared that the survival of the Jewish people was a fact to be lamented, and he consistently chose interpretations of his research and analysis which would denigrate Judaism. He drew a distinction, in speaking of Christ, between that in Jesus which was “human” and that which was “Jewish,” implying that Jews are, somehow, other than human. We cannot but conclude that it was his antipathy toward Jews and Judaism which led him to his theories and to his conclusions.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Professor of history at the University of Berlin.

⁴⁸ “The Jews are our misfortune.”

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid. Emphasis added.

⁵¹ Three volumes, Leipzig, 1933-1939.

⁵² Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 63, quoted in Timmer, 99.

⁵³ Eichrodt, 133, quoted in Timmer, 99.

⁵⁴ Eichrodt, 168, quoted in Timmer, 99.

⁵⁵ Timmer 98-99.

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