

Oral Tradition and Written Documents

Buck, Harry M., People of the Lord (The Macmillan Company, New York) 1966

p. 99 When modern critical study emerged, minute differences in diction, style, vocabulary, and point of view were seized upon by scholars who developed elaborate theories about literary sources of biblical books. By the late nineteenth century, scientific separation of sources had fragmented the Bible into a jumble of sources, sub-sources, emendations, and redactions. In recent years, the pendulum has swung to the other extreme, as it was realized that the growth of the narratives preserved in the Bible was neither uniform nor always literary. Now we recognize the need of both careful source analysis and a bolder reconstruction of oral tradition. The sources are not separate literary compositions, but the written redaction of oral tradition that had circulated in various places.

Historical objectivity, at best an illusion, was never the aim of those who told the stories. Everything in the tales and the legends was presented from the point of view of an a priori judgment that they reflected God at work on behalf of his people. The incidents were remembered and the tales were rehearsed over and over because in the recollection YHWH's people recreated the events that gave them birth, and took warning from errors made in the past.

p. 405 Because the Graf-Wellhausen Hypothesis was tied too much to written documents, our own age has seen the rise of studies dealing with oral tradition and the nonliterary transmission of Israel's heritage. Conditioned as we are to the use of the written message, we fail to realize how little we now rely on our own memories. The ancients, however, tended to trust their memories more than they trusted writing. Semitic peoples excelled in the use of the spoken word. Writing was the quasi-official job of the specialist. Living tradition bypassed the confines of literature for the same reason that the prophets could not be confined to books. Thus, when documents first appeared, they did little more than record oral tradition at first.