

The Documentary Hypothesis and the Composition of the Pentateuch (book review)

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Every generalisation can be met by a counter-generalisation. More important is the concrete investigation of the text.

—Umberto Cassuto in *The Documentary Hypothesis*



Umberto Cassuto (1883–1951) was a Bible scholar of Jewish origin. He was born in Florence, where he had spent most of his life and where he had taught Hebrew and literature in the University of Florence, when he had to move to Israel because of anti-Semitic laws imposed in 1938. His natural erudition in biblical Hebrew and the fact that he could see and study the Aleppo codex before it lost considerable portion of its pages, makes him an impressive savant on the field of the textual criticism. And the fact that he was able to challenge the Documentary Hypothesis (henceforth DH) as an (to a large extent) impartial researcher and argued for literary unity of the Torah, transforms him into a refreshing exception in a long line of scholars who accepted basic propositions of the DH with but a little critical considerations.

I have just finished Cassuto's series of eight lectures on the DH. The book was published by Varda Books in 2005 (1–59045–802–8). It's a thin monograph, where Cassuto identifies five pillars of the Documentary Hypothesis and treats them one by one. These pillars are actually criteria and methods of the hypothesis used by its proponents.

The first and historically important pillar is, as he had put it, “the variations in the use of the Divine Names”. Cassuto shows that these variations occur across the whole body of Biblical literature and even in post-Biblical Hebrew writings. Cassuto identifies this variation as a normal literary device of the ancient Near East literature. He also holds that names YHWH and 'Elohim are not synonymous and that their employment in the Torah is governed by an intelligent principle, not by an arbitrary decisions of an editor.

The second pillar is identified as “the inequalities of language and style”. After examining the most important examples (e.g. interchangeable words *yaladh* and *holidh* or *heqim/nathan/karath berit* or *ani/anokhi*) Cassuto explains, that these variations in style can not serve as a criterion, because they are always conditioned either by the meaning intended by the writer or by non-negotiable rules of Hebrew language. (Here Cassuto appeals indirectly to his superior knowledge of Hebrew.)

The third pillar is based on discrepancies in worldview, religious conceptions, ethics, views on worship and politics, etc. Cassuto points out that wherever these discrepancies are found, they are not “of a kind that could not be found in a homogeneous work.” To the various conceptions of God within the Torah he responds by a parable of a biography of a professor written by his son. Some parts of such a biography would focus on his professional life, some on his family life. He does affirm an influence of pre-existing traditions, which may have penetrated for example into the different accounts of Esau's wives. But as he points out, these discrepancies are not solved by the Documentary Hypothesis, because it still can't explain why would the editor choose to preserve two contradicting accounts.

The fourth pillar is based on duplications and repetitions of certain stories and passages. Here Cassuto examines the most striking examples and explains them in his own way. The two accounts of creation, as he contends, are rather complementary and do not contain contradiction in any detail. Repetitions of the stories of Matriarchs taken to houses of Pharaohs have rather narrative value as they point typologically to the future exodus of Israel from Egypt.

The fifth pillar points to the composite sections, i.e. sections which have been patched from two original documents. On the example of Genesis 27 (the story of Jacob's deceptive usurpation of his brother's blessing) Cassuto demonstrates how untenable this alleged composition is. His Hebrew expertise allows him here to feel the spirit of the language and not merely sit and translate the text word by word.

Let me make something clear before I proceed to the evaluation. Cassuto's strong propositions could lead some undisciplined minds to hear things which Cassuto does not say. To such a mind, I wish to tell that **Cassuto does not...**

- ... affirm mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch.
- ... deny the presence of the ancient Near East traditions behind the text of the Pentateuch. He merely argues for the essential literary and theological unity of the Torah.
- ... deny the Documentary Hypothesis as an interesting and creative solution of the present problems with the text. He simply grades it's set of answers as unsatisfactory.
- ... inevitably argue for higher chronology of the Torah's origin. What he does propose in a final note of the book is that the prophetic writings do not precede the Torah and what he does claim in another book, not in this one, is that Torah may have been composed in the 10th century BC. This date is of course unacceptable to the present historical-critical mainstream. Let me just say that the question of chronology is not directly connected to the question of the Documentary Hypothesis. One could well propose wellhausenian dating and cassuto-like solution of the present problems, although such a solution would remain idiosyncratic and unaccepted for many reasons.

Cassuto's attempt does not represent the final debunking of the DH. There has been some development in archaeology and history of the ancient Near East in the past seventy years. This development has influenced also the DH, so it wouldn't be as wise to attack it again only with Cassuto in the right arm. Such a crusade might end up destroying straw man. On the other hand, what Cassuto's work does prove is that it is possible to seek for another way which does not uncritically adopt conclusions of the DH, it's rhetoric and it's ethos of treatment of the Bible. It is possible to make our own path towards the narrative criticism which is not mere addendum to the DH, as one can see in recent work of many scholars, but which replaces it completely.

Indeed, the reason of my vigorous denouncement of the Documentary Hypothesis and my heartfelt approval of Cassuto's work does no longer dwell in the stinking nest of my fundamentalist roots, but in a deep conviction of mine that the DH represents a major obstacle for holistic, independent and unprejudiced narrative approach to the Hebrew Scriptures. Issues of pseudoepigraphy, chronology or even historicity are so petty when compared to the problem of the hypothesis, which holds that the narrator or the chief editor of the Scripture didn't think too much during the process of mechanic amalgamation and that the narrative can actually be unglued and it's theological value denied.

If you can't buy the book right away and read it for yourself, you can access my messy reading notes: [Notes in HTML](#).

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