

## What is Liberal Scholarship?

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The term Black Liberation theology, as expressed by James Cone and his disciple Jeremiah Wright, have been in the news for the last few years. Black liberation theology, which contends that, *“the idea that theology is not universal, but tied to specific historical contexts; he (Cone) thus critiques the Western tradition of abstract theologizing by examining its social context. Cone formulates a theology of liberation from within the context of the Black experience of oppression, interpreting the central kernel of the Gospels as Jesus' identification with the poor and oppressed, the resurrection as the ultimate act of liberation.”*<sup>1</sup> Liberation theology, whose origins can be traced to the 1960's, re-interprets the bible to state that your background, both ethnicity and social status, determines how you should relate to God and to your fellow man. It totally distorts God's view of mankind that there *“is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.”*<sup>2</sup>

How could theologians not just distort the truth of scripture, but actually reject many of its tenants while still bearing the mantle of pastor and teacher of Christianity? This distortion of the scripture can be traced back to the birth of liberal scholarship, which has replaced traditional scholarship in the vast majority of seminaries. Liberation theology builds upon liberal theology, whose origins can be traced to the late 1800's in Germany. What is the difference between traditional (also known as conservative) scholarship and critical (also known as liberal) scholarship?

Traditional scholars believe that the bible is God breathed and divinely inspired.<sup>3</sup> Traditional scholars believe Moses wrote the first five books of the bible, often called the Pentateuch. Traditional scholars believe there was an exodus from Egypt lead by Moses at either 1440 BC or 1250 BC (there is a disagreement on the timing of the Exodus in traditional circles). On the other hand, critical scholars believe the bible is a set of legends, fables and morals that have been merged syncretically together. Critical scholars believe that the story of the Exodus and Moses are fables and legends, at best. Critical scholars believe the first five books of the bible were pieced together between 1,000 and 500 BC and had nothing to do with Moses.

## Traditional Scholarship

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Scholars define traditional scholarship as:

*For some true believers today, the Bible is the Revealed Word of God, and nothing else need be said about its authorship... (For traditional scholars), the first five books of the Hebrew Bible were conveyed in their entirety 'from the mouth of God to the hand of Moses,' according to the prayerful words still recited in synagogues today. The remaining sacred books of the Bible, according to tradition, were authored by various prophets and kings: Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel, for example, are thought to be the authors of the books that bear their names; King Solomon wrote the Song of Songs; David wrote the Psalms; and so on.*<sup>4</sup>

*The traditional view of the Pentateuch is in the most striking and most extreme contrast to the critical theories adumbrated above. Whereas the critical theory depends upon the assumption that the Pentateuch (in particular) is a composite work consisting of different documents, composed at different times and edited into a composite whole, the traditional view is fundamentally based upon the belief that the whole of the Pentateuch, the \*Torah proper, is a unitary document, divinely revealed, and entirely written by Moses with the exception of the last eight verses of Deuteronomy, which record the death of Moses and, according to one opinion, were written by Joshua (BB 15a:*

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James\\_Hal\\_Cone](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Hal_Cone)

<sup>2</sup> Gal. 3:28

<sup>3</sup> 2 Tim. 3: 16 All scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness

<sup>4</sup> Kirsch, Jonathan, *The Harlot by the Side of the Road: Forbidden Tales of the Bible*, Ballantine Books, New York, NY, 1997, p. 315

according to the other they were written by Moses at the dictation of God 'with tears' (*dema*), but Elijah Gaon of Vilna renders the word 'mixed up'). In other words, on the death of Moses the whole of the Pentateuch was complete, having been divinely revealed. Nor can any rigid doctrine be laid down as to the exact manner of communication of this revelation. ...This implies our belief that the whole of the Torah found in our hands this day is the Torah that was handed down by Moses and that is all of divine origin. By this I mean that the whole of the Torah came to him from before God in a manner which is metaphorically called 'speaking'; but the real nature of the communication is unknown to everybody except to Moses to whom it came. In handing down the Torah, Moses was like a scribe writing from dictation the whole of it, its chronicles, its narratives, and its precepts."<sup>5</sup>

## Critical Scholarship

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Scholars define critical scholarship as:

Today, the Bible is regarded by most scholars and critics as a patchwork of legend, lore, and law that was created over a thousand years or so in distant antiquity by countless unknown chroniclers and lawgivers and storytellers, collected and compiled and corrected by generation after generation of editors (or "redactors"), and canonized by the ancient rabbis only toward the end of the biblical era."<sup>6</sup>

Among biblical scholars, the dominant view is that the Pentateuch is a composite work in which several major traditions have been blended together. According to this hypothesis, which rests on the critical labors of more than two centuries of intensive study, there are four main literary strands, to which are assigned the symbols, J, E, D, and P. J, the earliest source, comes from the time of the early monarchy, perhaps about 950 B.C.; E, a closely related source, comes from the Northern Kingdom and is usually dated about 750 B.C.; D, which is best represented in the book of Deuteronomy, comes from the Southern Kingdom about 650 B.C.; and P, so designated because of its priestly interests, comes from the period after the fall of the nation in 587 B.C. These strands were woven together in various stages until the Pentateuch assumed its final form in about 400 B.C."<sup>7</sup>

By the seventeenth century, Thomas Hobbes, in his *Leviathan* (1651), was trying to prove that the Pentateuch had been written after the time of Moses. In 1753, the French Catholic physician and scholar Jean Astruc advanced the theory that there were multiple sources behind the books of Genesis and Exodus, and that they could be distinguished by whether they referred to God as Yahweh (God's special name, revealed only to Israel) or simply as God (for which the Hebrew word is *elohim*). This proposal was expanded and refined in the nineteenth century by K. H. Graf (1865) and J. Wellhausen (1878), so that there emerged a widely held theory that there are four literary strands behind the Pentateuch in its present form: J (Yahwist; abbreviated as J. rather than Y. following the German Jahwist), E (Elohist), P (Priestly), and D (Deuteronomist). The last two strands represent respectively the priestly and the legal revisionist reworking of the Pentateuchal traditions in the period during or just after the exile in Babylon. The first two strands J and E, are the oldest strata of the tradition. Also in the nineteenth century, scholars sought to show that the earlier prophetic utterances had been worked over, expanded, supplemented, and other wise edited at the end or after, Israel's return from exile, and only then achieved the form that we now possess."<sup>8</sup>

According to Wellhausen's synthesis, first proposed in 1878, the Books of Genesis through Deuteronomy are based upon four documents. Documents J (which uses the divine name Yahweh) and E (which uses *elohim*) were written during the monarchy (tenth to eighth centuries B.C.E.) when Israelites sacrificed at local sanctuaries. This type of religion is implied in these documents and in the Books of Samuel. Deuteronomy (D) is associated with Josiah's

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<sup>5</sup> Roth, Cecil, *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 13, Pentateuch, pp. 261-2

<sup>6</sup> Kirsch, Jonathan, *The Harlot by the Side of the Road: Forbidden Tales of the Bible*, Ballantine Books, New York, NY, 1997, p. 315

<sup>7</sup> Anderson, Bernhard W. *Understanding the Old Testament*, Second Ed. Prentice-Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1966, p. 16-7

<sup>8</sup> Kee, Howard, Meyers, Eric, Rogerson, John, Saldarini, Anthony, *The Cambridge companion to the Bible*, Cambridge University Press 1997, p. 13-4

reformation in the late seventh century. The reform closed all the sanctuaries save for that in Jerusalem and reformulated some of the laws in J and E in the light of the centralization of sacrifice and worship in Jerusalem. The document containing the priestly traditions (P) was written during and after the exile in the sixth to fifth centuries B.C.E. Its stress on the details of ritual and sacrifice developed what had begun with Deuteronomy, when the first attempts were made to regulate the free and spontaneous worship implied in J and E. Wellhausen's synthesis, called the documentary hypothesis, begged many questions.<sup>9</sup>

Liberal theology is not limited to Christian circles and Christian theology. As the Encyclopedia Judaica shows, this split between traditional Jewish scholars, who accept that God divinely inspired the Torah and miraculously lead Israel out of Egypt, and liberal Jewish scholars is far wider than the parted Red Sea.

#### THE CRITICAL VIEW

*In the Book of Joshua it is possible to discern the sources found in the Pentateuch, i.e., J, E, P, and D (see below), thus this book might be seen as the direct continuation of the Five Books of Moses...*

*Date and Composition. The pentateuchal literature originated no earlier than the period of the Monarchy. This can be learned from a number of allusions found in different places in the Pentateuch, e.g., Genesis 36:31 (a king in Israel), Exodus 15:17 (Temple), Numbers 24:7 (Agag; cf. 24: 20-21). These allusions are doubly significant since they are interspersed, especially the two latter, in poetical pieces which are accepted as being more ancient than the prose sections....*

*SOURCES-The opinion accepted in contemporary biblical research is that the pentateuchal literature is composed of four major sources: J, E, P, and D....The basis of this division into sources is literary-critical, i.e., it is based on topical and stylistic-linguistic distinctions.<sup>10</sup>*

*Wellhausen's View: J. Wellhausen held that the Jewish religion underwent a development from a religion rooted in the life of nature to a religion divorced from nature and that the P source embodied the peak of this development. According to Wellhausen, it was the rule of the hierarchy of the Second Temple period that was reflected in the Priestly Code. His view may be summarized as follows:*

*(1) P assumed the centralization of the cult as a self-evident fact. The worship of God is indeed linked in this source to the Tent of Meeting, which is an exclusive cultic institution.*

*(2) In the period preceding the reform of Josiah, cultic activities were conducted everywhere, and people who were not priests served in the various temples and altars (see Ex. 20:24-26 [21-23]). With the centralization of the cult by Josiah the provincial cultic places were abolished and the Temple in Jerusalem became the exclusive temple in which only priests from the house of Zadok officiated; the priests who served in the high places and provincial temples became, in the course of time, secondary cultic officials (cf. Ezek. 44:9ff.), and these were the levites of P. According to Wellhausen, the high priest found in P is a reflection of the head of the religious community in the Second Temple period....*

*(6) The festivals which were connected with the agricultural seasons in Palestine became historical festivals given specified times and stripped of the agricultural milieu, which by its very nature could not be bound by a strict chronological framework. During this period two festivals came into being: Rosh Ha-Shanah and the Day of Atonement (Lev. 23: 17ff; 23: 23-32; Num. 29:1-11) which have no connection with the natural-agricultural life of the people and which express the supreme spirituality of Second Temple Judaism and the sense of sin inherent in it.*

*(7) The Tent of Meeting, described in detail in P (Ex. 25-30; 35-40; Num. 1-4; 7- 8), is a fictional creation of the Jerusalem priesthood of the Second Temple period and is only a reflection of the Temple of Jerusalem. All the ancient history related in P underwent, in effect, schematic editing in accordance with the religious reality of the Second Temple."<sup>11</sup>*

Critical scholars believe that the annual Sabbaths listed in Leviticus 23 and Deuteronomy 16 were agricultural festivals celebrated by a people that had nothing to do with the worship of YHWH or the Exodus. These critical scholars

<sup>9</sup> *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible*, p. 36

<sup>10</sup> *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 13, Pentateuch, p. 233-4

<sup>11</sup> *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 13, Pentateuch, pp. 239-40

believe the Bible is made up to justify some kind of homogenization of religions between Canaanite farmers and mountain shepherds. Critical scholars believe the priests who wrote large chunks of the Pentateuch invented the feasts of Trumpets and Atonement around 650 B.C. because they wanted holidays that had no relationship to nature. It is likely that these critical scholars have studied how the Catholic Church's belief system was a syncretic merging over a millennia and have used this process to create the Document theory, something that traditional scholars reject.

The difference between traditional and critical scholarship is important for Christians to understand so they know the perspective of the teaching they are studying. This author is not suggesting that Christians should ignore liberal scholarship because this author has used liberal scholarship and even learned things from liberal scholarship that has deepened my relationship with God. But this author is contending it is essential for Christians to understand the type of scholarship they are using as aids in their study of scripture to help discern any personal bias that rejects a creator God who performs miracles and who raised his only begotten son from the dead. While most liberal Christian theologians do indeed reject this idea of a creator God capable of miracles, including the resurrection of his son, there may be nuggets of wisdom that can be gleaned from a large variety of sources.

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