Comparison and Contrast of the Approaches of W. M. L. de Wette, Julius Wellhausen, and Gerhard von Rad to the Interpretation of the Old Testament

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The modern era gave rise to a number of approaches to the interpretation of the Old Testament (OT). Three very influential scholars of this time were W. M. L. de Wette, Julius Wellhausen, and Gerhard von Rad. Each of them were a result of a unique intellectual climate and personal background.\(^1\) Each of them made particular contributions to the study of the OT. This essay will seek to speak briefly about the main thrust of their scholarly works, list some of their more important works, and compare and contrast the approaches of these scholars in their interpretation of the OT.

A. Introduction to Three Important OT Scholars

W. M. L. de Wette was the earliest of the three scholars. He lived from 1780-1849, and is characterized by Gignilliat as “both a romanticist and a historicist.”\(^2\) His most important writing was entitled, “Contributions to the Introduction of the Old Testament.”\(^3\) The core of His approach was an understanding that the value of the Old Testament lie not in its veracity as a testimony to Israel’s past (which he denied), but its ability to describe “the religious-historical outlook, worldview, and feelings of the authors who wrote these works.”\(^4\) As Gignilliat writes, “Biblical criticism of the Old Testament, for de Wette, is not an attempt to arrive at the events as they really occurred. Biblical criticism is an engagement of the mythical character of Israel’s religious documents for the purpose of gaining insight into Israel’s own religious beliefs.”\(^5\)

The second scholar, Julius Wellhausen, lived from 1844-1918, and was drawn to the perceived

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\(^2\) Gignilliat, 37, 48.

\(^3\) Gignilliat, 52.

\(^4\) Gignilliat, 49.

\(^5\) Gignilliat, 52.
task of reconstructing the history of Israel. He most important writing was his book *Prolegomena to the History of Israel.* He was the popularizer of the famous “JEDP” theory regarding the literary sources of the Old Testament, and he built his reconstruction of the history of Israel on the theory (borrowed from Karl H. Graf) that the Law of Moses was actually written after the Prophetic portions of the Scriptures. From this theory Wellhausen constructed a history of Israel in which the settled institutions of centralized worship prescribed under the Mosaic Law were understood to be postexilic fabrications. These institutions that arose late in Israel's history were very different in character in comparison to the freedom of preexilic worship espoused by the prophets, who emphasized ethics over ritual.

The third scholar, Gerhard von Rad (1901-1971), was also influential in the modern period. Von Rad's approach, following the form criticial approach of Herman Gunkel, was to view the OT as material that originated in the life of ancient Israel and was passed on as tradition before being worked into one unified cannon by means of a repeated process of editing. The difference between von Rad and Gunkel was the fact that Gunkel was interested in working backwards from the final form to the original experience that gave birth to the tradition, while von Rad was interested in moving forward from the isolated bits of tradition to understand how the traditions of the past were constantly picked up by the Israelites and experienced in a new way as a dynamic, present, living faith (a process that von Rad called “actualization”). Von Rad's most important work is *The Form-Critical Problem of the*
*Hexateuch*, and it “shaped the trajectory” for the rest of his scholarly endeavors, which included his *Old Testament Theology* and work on “the typological relationship of the Old Testament to the New Testament.”

**B. Comparison and Contrast**

The easiest place to compare the three scholar discussed above is in their views on the historicity of the OT. All three of these scholars agreed that the OT was not a historically reliable document. For example, in his book *Contributions to the Introduction of the Old Testament*, de Wette asserted that the book of Chronicles was a document that took previous materials and changed them to serve the theological purposes of the author. As a result, de Wette concluded that the book of Chronicles “is of no value as a historical source.”

Similarly, Wellhausen viewed the OT as a book with very little usefulness in understanding the history of Israel. Gignilliat says that he “viewed the material of JE [two hypothetical early sources of the OT] as a dubious resource for the reconstruction of Israel's early history of the patriarchs and Moses.”

Von Rad also views the OT as untrustworthy in historical matters. He viewed the composition of the “hexateuch” as deriving from a “settlement tradition” and a “Sinai tradition.” when it came to the historicity of the two traditions, “Von Rad does not labor over which tradition is more historically credible than the other. Such a question is inappropriate for him in light of the kind of material he believes the Hexateuch is—a retelling of Israel's history from the perspective of their faith, not an empirical history of what really happened.”

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13Gignilliat, 110, 117.
14Gignilliat, 49.
15Ibid.
16Gignilliat, 70.
17Gignilliat, 114.
Basically, they all agreed that the OT was not a historically reliable source. In light of the historical-critical tradition that they were a part of, they each approached the text with the understanding that the history described in the text and the history “as it really happened” were two separate things. However, what is interesting is how they each handled this separation between “canonical” and “empirical” history in different ways. Though they agreed on the foundational principle of a-historicity when it came to the OT, they each had a different interests that motivated their study of the OT.

For de Wette, the understanding that history and Scripture were different was not a problem because he was not really interested in history. Rather than an interest in history “as it really happened,” de Wette was interested in Israel's Bible because it gave insight into Israel as a particular people with their own unique ways of thinking and living. As an illustration of this interest, Gignilliat compares de Wette's interest in ancient Israel to modern interest in Virgil's Aeneid: its value for the scholarly community is not in providing a history of Rome, but in giving insight into Rome in the time that it was written. De Wette viewed the OT the same way.

Though he also started from the same assumption of the historical unreliability of the OT, Wellhausen was in a sense the opposite of de Wette when it came to interest in the OT. While de Wette's was interested in the outlook and feelings of Israel as expressed in the text of Scripture, Wellhausen's interest was in the empirical history of Israel. While Wellhausen wanted to understand the thoughts and outlook of the people at the time of the composition of Scripture, he wasn't interested in it for its own

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18Gignilliat uses the phrases “canonical history of Israel” and “empirical history of Israel” on 55.

19Gignilliat says about de Wette that “De Wette's particular approach to historical matters within the Scriptures was not to gain factual knowledge of Israel's history per se. De Wette was not interested in the events of Scripture 'as they really happened' because Israel's Scriptures were not written to give that kind of historical factuality” (48).

20Gignilliat, 52.

21Gignilliat, 52.
sake, but in order that he might be able to reconstruct “what really happened” in the life of Israel.\(^{22}\)

One example of how this worked out in practice was Wellhausen’s view of Israel’s historical development in terms of place of worship. He examined the OT and noticed that some places in the “Hexateuch” as well as the books of judges and Samuel mention various locations of worship (“high places”).\(^{23}\) On the other hand, Deuteronomy has much more to say about a centralized place of worship.\(^{24}\) He then applies the method of “\textit{Tendenzkritik},” in which he seeks to “determine the \textit{Tendenz} (tendency), or outlook of the writer.”\(^{25}\) Building on de Wette’s view that Deuteronomy was written in the seventh century at the time of Josiah’s reforms, Wellhausen constructs his history as follows: early on it was widely accepted that God could be worshiped in the many high places in Israel. However, with the reforms of Josiah, there was an attempt to consolidate the worship, and so Deuteronomy was “discovered” (i.e. forged) in order to convince people that they were supposed to be worshiping in a centralized location (Jerusalem).\(^{26}\)

Wellhausen examines the OT with regard to other themes as well: “sacrifice, the sacred feasts, priests and Levites, and the endowment of the clergy.”\(^{27}\) In each case he uses the outlook of the writer to identify where in the history of Israel the document was written.

While von Rad rejected the historicity of the OT along with the others, his interests were more in the dynamic nature of Israel’s faith than either of the more static approaches used by Wellhausen and de Wette.\(^{28}\) Wellhausen was interested in a particular dimension of Israel’s story: the history of Israel

\(^{22}\)Gignilliat, 63.
\(^{23}\)Gignilliat, 67.
\(^{24}\)Gignilliat, 68-69.
\(^{25}\)Gignilliat, 68.
\(^{26}\)Gignilliat, 69.
\(^{27}\)Gignilliat, 69.
\(^{28}\)Robin Routledge uses the term “dynamic” to describe von Rad’s approach. Robin Routledge, \textit{Old Testament}
“as it really happened” (according to his view). Likewise, de Wette is also interested in a particular facet of Israel's story—not “what really happened,” but how Israel understood what happened through her canonical history. In each of these two scholars, the facet of the story they are looking for can be located in one aspect of the empirical/canonical history divide, and is in that way, “static.”

On the other hand, von Rad is interested in the development of Israel's faith. In his thinking, the task of OT theology is to “trace the way particular stories and events have been developed, interpreted and reinterpreted in the light of changing historical situations, and to look at how the stories are used in their present form and context.”29 He began with what seemed to him to be the “most ancient confessional beliefs found in the Old Testament,” and tried to understand the process of development that took place that resulted in the final form of the Hexateuch.30 At every step of this process von Rad saw the story of Israel as being taken up by each generation and adopted as their story.

As each generation picked up the story and made it their own (“actualized” it), they left traces of their faith in the canonical Scriptures that remained like layers of rock in the geological record. An important aspect of this for von Rad is that each of the layers of tradition are allowed to speak with their own voice.31 Gignilliat says that in von Rad's view, “equal emphasis should be placed on the various layers of tradition (along with the revelations and religious experiences out of which those traditions arose) and the final form of the canonical document.”32 While von Rad wants this to explain how the Christian tradition could claim the OT as their own (as the last stage of “actualization”), this is

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29Routledge, 36.
30Gignilliat, 111.
31Gignilliat, 116-117.
32Gignilliat, 117. He quotes von Rad's work on this point: “None of the stages in the age-long development of this work have been wholly superseded; something has been preserved of each phase, and its influence has persisted right down to the final form of the Hexateuch.” (From Gerhard von Rad, The Form-Critical Problem of the Hexateuch, 58, quoted in Gignilliat, 116).
reality becomes a problem because there is no one “theology” that the OT contains, but a series of theologies, each of which are superseded (at least in part) and none of which can speak finally and authoritatively.\(^{33}\)

In conclusion, each of these scholars had much in common and much distinct about them. All of them denied the historicity of the OT. All of them affirmed a process of sources and editing that led to the final product of the OT. But each of them had a particular interest despite their agreements. De Wette was interested in the life and thought of Israel as revealed through the canonical Scriptures; Wellhausen wanted to utilize that perspective to reconstruct a history of Israel as he understood it; von Rad was interested in the developing traditions of Israel that resulted in the OT canon. They each made their own distinct contributions to the field of OT studies.

\(^{33}\) Routledge, 37.
Bibliography
