

UMBERTO CASSUTO'S *THE DOCUMENTARY HYPOTHESIS* : THIRTY YEARS LATER*

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1991 marked the occurrence of two anniversaries connected with the late Jewish scholar Umberto Cassuto: the fortieth anniversary of his death that took place in 1951 as he was preparing the third volume of his commentary on Genesis, that was to be entitled *Abraham and the Promised Land*, to cover *sidra* or pericope Gen 12,1-17,27;¹ and the thirtieth anniversary from the publication in 1961 of the small volume *The Documentary Hypothesis* and the Composition of the Pentateuch.² Of course, we are speaking here of its first English edition since in modern Hebrew it had already been published in 1941 and reprinted twice, in 1953 and 1959.

With the author's demise ten years past, this booklet still constituted an important publication event for three reasons:

1. It offered to a wider readership the principal insights into the composition of the Torah held by this distinguished scholar and expressed at greater length in his 1934 monograph *La Questione della Genesi*, published in Florence.

2. Here, as in his 1934 work, Cassuto is said to have offered one of the best critical appraisals of the documentary hypothesis which for most had become a dogma of critical scholarship.³ In the words of S. Segert: "Of all the attempts to criticize the documentary hypothesis, this one by Cassuto is perhaps the most

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1. Cfr Israel Abrahams, in Umberto Cassuto *Commentary on Genesis*, II, *From Noah to Abraham* (Magnes Press; Jerusalem 1964)VIII
2. (Trans. Israel Abrahams) (Magnes Press; Jerusalem 1961)
3. Cassuto quotes H. Gressmann's emphatic statement: "We must stress, with the utmost emphasis, that there is no school of Biblical scholarship today that is not founded on the critical analysis of the sources in the Hexalèuch (that is, the Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua), and anyone who does not accept the division of the text according to the sources and the results flowing therefrom, has to discharge the onus, if he wishes to be considered a collaborator in our scientific work, of proving that all the research work done till now was futile", *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* (1924). This text has been translated and reproduced by Cassuto in *Documentary Hypothesis*, 7.

clearly presented. The weak points of the classical Pentateuch literary analysis are detected and characterized with great perspicacity, the argumentation is consistent, the discussion is presented in a very dignified form".⁴

3. This volume has been read by some as introductory to Cassuto's own Genesis commentary in several volumes.⁵

One cannot expect in a short paper to find an exhaustive evaluation of Cassuto's contribution to the understanding of Scripture; I shall limit myself to sharing a number of considerations I made on perusing this "excellent summary of the author's earlier publications" (Abrahams). For the sake of colleagues who may have read *The Documentary Hypothesis* a very long ago I shall first offer a description of the book's contents and then come to the reflections I made as I followed Cassuto in his argumentation. Again, I shall refrain from presenting in detail his arguments against the documentary hypothesis. This has been done by others.⁶

In the Preface to *The Documentary Hypothesis* Cassuto describes the present volume as "a popular digest of a comprehensive scientific work" (p.2). The stress on the popular nature of this book comes out not merely in the conversational tone and style, proper to lecture-giving to audiences more or less ignorant of the subject-matter of the lectures, but also in the almost total

4. *Archiv Orientalni*, 33(1965)126. For the sake of completeness one should report that other reviewers criticized Cassuto for waging his war against a dead foe: the classical form of the documentary hypothesis which Cassuto so vehemently opposed had already become "a thing of the past", cfr André Caquot in *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 163(1963)88-89, and L.H. Brockington in *Journal of Theological Studies* 14(1963)109-111.
5. "Altogether *The Documentary Hypothesis* serves as a valuable introduction to the late Professor Cassuto's Hebrew Commentaries on the Pentateuch, which have helped so much to illuminate our understanding of Scripture with the light of new knowledge and interpretation, expounded by one of the most original minds among modern Biblical exegetes", Israel Abrahams, *Documentary Hypothesis*, translator's forward p.VI. Notwithstanding the cynicism of some — cfr the review of Marvin H. Pope in *Journal Biblical Literature* 82(1963)360 — and neglect and cautiousness of others — cfr Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, (Basic Books, New York 1981)14 — Cassuto's works have greatly influenced a whole generation of scholars, especially those who were sensitive to the narrative poetics of the OT; cfr for instance, Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative. Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Indiana University Press; Bloomington 1985); Gary A. Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis* (Eisenbrauns; Winsnahake, Indiana 1986).
6. I refer in a special manner to the long debate that followed the publication of *La Questione della Genesi*, which Cassuto himself labelled "a comprehensive scientific work", between the author and Prof. Carlo Bernheimer published in the *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 16(1937)307-336.337-374. Bernheimer was very critical of Cassuto's solution to the problems created by the Pentateuch. Cassuto answers to Bernheimer's critical remarks on pp.337-361 while on pp.362-374 he reviews the principal reactions to his monograph. Other contributions by the two savants are to be found in the next volume of the same review (1937-1938)pp.453-459.

absence of technical details and of a critical apparatus, and in the author's frequent resorting to imagery in order to explain his thoughts. In the same preface, though, Cassuto insists that the non-academic character of these eight lectures should not lead to the belief that what the author says in the book has no scientific basis: "I have not conceded one iota, I need hardly stress, in regard to the scientific character of the content; the scholarly apparatus is not visible, but in actuality it constitutes the foundation of my entire dissertation" (p.2).

Similes and metaphors are frequent. The documentary hypothesis is compared to a "beautiful and majestic edifice ... which was erected and completed by the devoted and industrious labour of many generations of distinguished workers" (p.13); or to the "mighty structure in which European scholarship has hitherto taken so much pride" (Ibid.). This reminds me of Genesis 11 where we are told how *Yahweh* looked with awe at the mighty structure labelled 'city' or 'tower' in the present masoretic text, which *ha'ādām* (the subject of most narratives within Gen 1-11) were building, and somehow entered the new building to sow discord and disquietude! Cassuto likewise invites his readers to enter this beautiful and majestic edifice, this mighty structure, in order "to test, together with me, its soundness and the stability of the pillars upon which it rests" (p.13). The five pillars in this building stand for the criteria of differentiation which served the classical source critical analysis of the Pentateuch, that is, the use of different names for the Deity; variations of language and style, contradictions and divergencies of views; duplications and repetitions; signs of composite structure in the sections.

Cassuto dedicates a separate lecture to the examination of each of these pillars — for the diversified use of the divine names he devotes lectures Two and Three. Lecture One is introductory and in it Cassuto discusses in general terms the documentary hypothesis and the criteria employed for source criticism. Lecture Eight carries the author's conclusions. To proceed with the metaphor of the building and its pillars: "We shall see if they (i.e. these pillars) rest on a firm foundation, if they are hewn from hard rock, and if they are strong enough to bear the weight of the structure. As a result of our investigation, we shall be able to decide whether the building can still be considered solid and sound, or whether, on the contrary, it is something that is irretrievably doomed" (p.14).

On reading closely Cassuto's contribution to the discussion of the documentary hypothesis thirty years after its publication, as expounded in his 1961 monograph, the present writer made a number of considerations:

1. The first lecture Cassuto devotes to introducing the subject-matter of his book: the documentary hypothesis and the criteria employed to distinguish the various sources in the Pentateuch. One should not search in this lecture an

outline reconstruction of Pentateuchal research, for such is not offered, even though important moments of this history of research are referred to. What we find in this chapter is a comparison between Pentateuchal and Homeric research. "My purpose is only to indicate briefly the relationship between the course taken by research with respect to our problem (the origin and composition of the Torah) and that followed by scholarship relative to the analogous question in Greek literature concerning the works of Homer, to wit, the origin of the two poems, the Iliad and the Odyssey, which are attributed to him" (p.9).

For Cassuto there exists "a surprising parallelism between the evolution of views and theories in the two fields of inquiry; in every generation similar concepts and hypotheses prevail at the same time in regard to the Homeric and Biblical problems" (p.9). Parallels include similar patterns of research development, for instance: in both fields amateurs discover paths which are later taken up and developed by professionals (Astruc-Eichhorn/Abbé d'Aubignac-Wolf); there were also similar compositional theories (a Fragment Theory and a Supplementary Hypothesis, p.11); but the most important similarities were methodological ("It will suffice to note that the analytical method developed in the two branches of learning on similar lines, particularly the technique of studying repetitions and duplications, contrasts and contradictions, linguistic and stylistic variations and the like, and it led in both fields of investigation to the minutest differentiations and successive dissections, the verses being subjected to microscopic examinations," p.12). This parallelism goes so far as to include in the two areas of research identical reactions to "this exaggerated process of analysis" (p.12).

What interests us most for our purpose is Cassuto's interpretation of this historical phenomenon. He admits to the possibility of explaining these parallels by reciprocal influence or by "the general progress in the methods and techniques of research which is common to all humanistic studies." "But undoubtedly it is affected also by the opinions and concepts, the trends and demands, the character and idiosyncrasies of each age. This being so it may well be that we have not before us an objective discovery of what is actually to be found in the ancient books, but the result of the subjective impression that these writings have on the people of a given environment" (p.12). Cassuto nurtured the suspicion "that the investigators' conceptions are not based on purely objective facts, but that they were appreciably motivated by the subjective characteristics of the researchers themselves" (Ibid.).

He then suggests we take up the whole issue of the origin and compositional process of the Torah "with complete objectivity marred by no bias — either towards the views of one school or the opinions of another". Nor should the researcher allow his religious beliefs to influence his search for objective truth. In the specific case of Pentateuchal studies, "the honour and sanctity of our

Torah" transcend the literary critical problems of how or when the Torah originated. Finally Cassuto recommends to prospective scholars not to approach "the Scriptural passages with the literary and aesthetic criteria of our time, but let us apply to them the standards obtaining in the ancient East generally and among the people of Israel particularly" (p.13).

There is little doubt that the greater part of what Cassuto states here stands for credal in literary circles. But to say that the criteria for source criticism, that led to the slow construction of the documentary hypothesis, and that were interpreted as being symptomatic of multiple origin of the material of which the Pentateuch is composed, are not objective, rather they are to be found in the minds of the builders themselves of the documentary hypothesis, is to be considered as a hazardous statement. This for two reasons: (i) Even if some of these "pillars" do constitute an exaggeration on the part of the source critics,⁷ the literary phenomena listed are there to be interpreted: the alternation of the divine names, doublets, repetition, chronological difficulties, contradictions. The problem arises when we come to interpret them. Julius Wellhausen and colleagues explained these phenomena source-critically which is not so very different from what Cassuto himself proposes. Cassuto opted for unitary authorship of the Torah, but admitted the use of sources — written it seems — by the presumed ingenious writer who gave us the first five books of the Hebrew Bible.⁸ This means that with Cassuto we are back to square one regarding the complex issue of the *Tôrāh*'s origin concerning which we should perhaps adopt R.N. Whybray's pessimistic view that it is doubtful "whether it will ever be possible to establish with any degree of certainty how the Pentateuch was composed".⁹

(ii) The accusation that the arguments against the monolithic nature of the Pentateuch are subjective projections of source critics may backfire on Cassuto himself; his arguments for a unitary authorship are as conclusive as those brought forward for a multiple compositional process. We may cite his rules for the use of the divine names, which may reflect his decision to opt for a unitary reading rather the objective and historical employment of these names in the

7. I would refer to Rolf Rendtorff, *The Problem of the Process of Transmission in the Pentateuch* (Sheffield 1990) chapter 3.
8. "Egli ammette quindi in conclusione che l'autore unico abbia raccolto, ordinato e riunito fonti varie, quindi fonti scritte, giacchè per tradizioni orali il processo immaginato dal Cassuto non è ammissibile. Ora questo mi pare che, mutate le espressioni, sia nè più nè meno di ciò che ammettono i critici della scuola documentaria; la sola differenza sta in ciò che il Cassuto chiama autore quello che essi chiamano redattore e che le varie fonti che racchiudono le contraddizioni evidenti di cui parla il Cassuto essi le chiamano JEPD," Bernheimer, *La Questione della Genesi*, 320.
9. *The Making of the Pentateuch A Methodological Study* (JSOT Supplement 53; Sheffield 1987)9.

way Cassuto indicates in the second and third lecture. His interpretation of the literary phenomena present in the Pentateuch may be as subjectively projectional as that of the proponents of the documentary hypothesis.

Notwithstanding his avowal of absolute objectivity in approaching the text, Cassuto often approaches the text from the stance of the believing Jewish tradition. This becomes painfully evident when he discusses contradictions in the fifth lecture of his book, or what in his 1934 monograph he terms “i valori morali”.¹⁰ Cassuto’s treatment in these cases is apologetic and is armed solely to prove that what the *Tôrāh* says is true and irreprehensible. His discussions reminds one of the rabbinical disputes of long ago when the canonicity of such scriptures as Ezekiel, Proverbs or Ecclesiastes was being debated.¹¹ These disputes were aimed at explaining away through harmonization any contradictions with the *Tôrāh* that were detected in these books. Because there could exist no contradictions within the Word of God. The explanation of why the Pharaoh in Gen 12,10-13,1 had to pay Abraham on behalf of his wife Sarah offers an example of the apologetic nature of Cassuto’s exegesis and approach to the text.¹²

2. Cassuto’s approach provides a welcome focusing on the moment of the literary composition in the formation process of the Pentateuch. The second and third lectures in *The Documentary Hypothesis* are dedicated to prove whether “the central pillar of the documentary hypothesis” (p.17), that is, the use of divine names *YHWH* and *’Elôhîm* as a basis for source identification and isolation is “strong and durable” (p.15). For Cassuto the question of the Divine names “is in truth the ultimate foundation of the documentary hypothesis, not only historically, but also theoretically” (p.16). We have to read these two lectures together with chapter One of his 1934 work¹³ in order to appreciate Cassuto’s insight into the text as he examines closely the use of these divine names. I shall not enter into a detailed analysis of this issue in this paper as I mean to dedicate a whole study to Cassuto’s treatment of this problem in the near future. After defining the main thrust of Cassuto’s argumentation, I shall stop upon a consideration to which his approach gives rise.

Rather than explaining the use of the two divine names *YHWH* and *’Elôhîm* by their belonging to separate sources, Cassuto believed we owe this use to the strong literary and theological tradition to which the author belonged; this

10. *Questione*, 210 ff.

11. Cfr Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (SPCK; London 1985) chapter 7.

12. Cfr also *Questione*, 303-313.

13. *Questione*, 1-91.

tradition dictated now the use of one name, now the use of the other. "It is not a case of disparity between different documents, or of mechanical amalgamation; every Hebrew author was compelled to write thus and to use the two names in this manner, because their primary signification, the general literary tradition of the ancient East, and the rules governing the use of the Divine Names throughout the entire range of Hebrew literature, demanded this" (p.41). He believed to be able to distinguish different nuances in the use of the two words even when *'Elôhîm*, similar to *YHWH*, is employed as a proper name (p.31). Cassuto thought he could identify seven rules which governed the use of either divine proper name (pp.31-32). For the purpose of our discussion we shall quote two rules (mine is the numbering of the rules).

Rule number one:

"It selected the name YHWH when the text reflects the Israelite conception of God, which is embodied in the portrayal of YHWH and finds expression in the attributes traditionally ascribed to Him by Israel, particularly in His ethical character; it preferred the name *'Elôhîm* when the passage implies the abstract idea of the Deity prevalent in the international circles of 'wise men' – God conceived as the Creator of the physical universe, as the Ruler of nature, as the Source of life" (p.31).

Rule number Six:

"The Tetragrammaton appears when the reference is to the God of Israel relative to His people or to their ancestors; *'Elôhîm*, when He is spoken of in relation to one who is not a member of the Chosen People" (Ibid.).

Some comments: (1) In *La Questione* Cassuto warns his reader that in the application of these rules we should not be too mechanical. In Lecture Three of *The Documentary Hypothesis* Cassuto writes: "Sometimes, of course, it happens that two opposite rules apply together and come in conflict with each other; then, as logic demands, the rule that is more material to the primary purport of the relevant passage prevails" (p.32). This is a thinly hidden admission that the subjective element in the interpretation of the datum in the text is rather strong.

2. I shall refrain here from a text to text analysis of Cassuto's discussion of individual passages. This would have probably landed me in several different evaluations of what the texts offer. Carlo Bernheimer was very critical of Cassuto's study: "Se lo studioso ha la pazienza di analizzare sotto questo aspetto

il materiale narrativo in generale, constaterà che il risultato è assai spesso press' a poco lo stesso, cioè che esso non corrisponde ai principi sostenuti dal Cassuto".¹⁴ Bernheimer then passes to examine the application of the rules on the Genesis narratives and arrived to the conclusion that in Gen 1 one would have expected *YHWH* rather than *'Elōhîm*, while in Gen 2-3 we should have read *Elōhîm* alone given the several parallels to the story in other languages and cultures.¹⁵

3. The quandary into which Cassuto leads his readers by offering a number of hermeneutical tools based on contents elements, which appear to misfire on the very first application to a Genesis narrative, leads into the current debate concerning the literary and poetical dynamics involved in the formation of our texts. For Cassuto this is not a traditio-historical or historico-redactional but a literary issue. What has actually happened as tradition was crystallizing into script, that is, into a literary reality? Why has the narrator here used *YHWH*, there he used *'Elōhîm*? Were there really guiding principles that influenced his choice of the proper name employed? Were these principles epistemological or simply aesthetic?

This is a basic question which the documentary hypothesis leaves unanswered. Were the writers of the documents primarily authors or collectors?¹⁶ If we say that the use of the divine names depended rather on the sources which stand at the basis of the present text, we have still to answer how come that the two names are at times found in the same smaller units which are the episodes like Gen 17. I would agree with Cassuto¹⁷ that the use of the divine names was not indiscriminate, just as the selection of the narrative material was not haphazard.¹⁸ This would bring us to the original question: why this name in this particular text? Cassuto's rules may provide welcome enlightenment on particular texts, but the principle guiding the use of these names has yet to emerge. Cassuto's contribution, though, served to turn the spotlight upon this elusive moment when Pentateuch was being written.

14. "La Questione della Genesi", 309.

15. Ibid., 310-312.

16. Cfr Whybray, *Making of the Pentateuch*, 29.

17. Cfr *The Documentary Hypothesis*, 18.

18. In my essay, "The Redactional Structuring within the Abraham Narratives in Genesis", Vincent Borg (ed), *Veterum Exempla* (Melita Theologica Supplementary Series, I; Malta 1991)35-82, I have tried to show that the narrator of the Abraham narrative employed a global structure not merely to keep the narrative, constituted of diverse materials, as a whole together, but also to use fruitfully the analogy principle by which two or more texts help to throw light on each other.