

Priests and Levites

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"Priests and Levites" by R. Abba in IDB (1962) Vol. III, p. 880

In no other field of OT scholarship do the conclusions of modern critical study stand in such marked contrast to the traditional view. The line of approach pioneered by Graf, Kuenen, and Wellhausen led to a thorough-going reconstruction of the history of the Hebrew priesthood and a revolutionary change of view in regard to the relationship of priests and Levites. But the problem of their origin and development is far from being solved, as differences of view among critical scholars clearly indicate. Indeed, the weaknesses of the Graf-Wellhausen theory, which are becoming increasingly apparent, call for far-reaching modifications of the generally accepted critical reconstruction.

Development

Ibid, p. 886

This documentary hypothesis, almost universally accepted in the first two decades of the twentieth century, has been repeatedly challenged, especially by Scandinavian scholars. While, therefore, it is still generally held in some form, it is undergoing considerable modification; and this is true also of the historical reconstruction with which it is allied. The evolutionary presuppositions of the Wellhausen school resulted in an oversimplification of the religious development in Israel. It was assumed that primitive ideas must be early and more advanced conceptions late. Hence the attempt was made to fit the biblical data into an evolutionary mold.

The fallacy of this attempt is now widely recognized, but there is need for a more searching examination of the underlying assumptions of the critical reconstruction than has yet been made. All that is attempted here is to indicate some of the lines along which such an examination should proceed,

On closer examination, the theory of the Wellhausen school that the high priesthood was nonexistent before the Exile proves to be untenable. It is, indeed, no more than a conjecture which does violence to the biblical evidence in the interests of a theory of development.