

ELLEN BATTELLE DIETRICK:
A NINETEENTH CENTURY MINIMALIST

Mayer I. Gruber

Summary

Revisionist historicism dates most Hebrew Scripture to the Hasmonean Era. Elizabeth Cady Stanton's plea that heroines should be named suggests that credit for the revisionist thesis be given to Ellen Battelle Dietrick, who expounded it in 1895. Moreover, Dietrick's exposition fully displays the eisegetical method by which the revisionist claim is read into 2 Maccabees.

In his highly provocative, *The Mythic Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel*, Thomas L. Thompson argues on the basis of 2 Maccabees 2:13–15 (which he calls 2 Mac. 4) that the oldest testimony to the existence of Hebrew Scripture comes from ‘the Hasmonean state, created by the Maccabees’.¹

Unfortunately, in *The Mythic Past* Thompson seldom cites previous research. In this regard, Thompson seems not to discriminate on the basis of gender. However, with respect to the radical assertion that most of Hebrew Scripture, including the Books of Kings, was composed in the Hasmonean era,² Thompson writes out of the history of biblical research the scholar who published this very thesis in 1895. She was Ellen Battelle Dietrick, one of the seven wise women who collaborated with Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the writing of the

¹ Thomas L. Thompson, *The Mythic Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel* (London: Random House, 1999), 294.

² Cf. David M. Gunn, ‘The Myth of Israel: Between Present and Past’, in *Did Moses Speak Attic?* ed. Lester L. Grabbe (JSOTSS 317; European Seminar in Historical Methodology 3; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 182–99, especially pp. 185–86; see also Niels Peter Lemche, ‘The Old Testament—A Hellenistic Book?’ in *Did Moses Speak Attic?*, pp. 287–318; see also Thomas L. Thompson, ‘The Bible and Hellenism’ in *Did Moses Speak Attic?*, pp. 274–86.

commentaries included in *The Woman's Bible, Part I: Comments on Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy*.³

Mrs Dietrick writes as follows:

Not until about 247 B.C.⁴ (some theologians say 226⁵ and others 169 B.C.)⁶ is there any record of a collection of literature in the rebuilt Jerusalem, and, then, the anonymous writer of II Maccabees briefly mentions that some Nehemiah⁷ 'gathered together the acts of the kings and the prophets and those of David' when 'founding a library' for use in Jerusalem.⁸

³ Elizabeth Cady Stanton *et al.*, *The Woman's Bible, Part I* (New York: European Publishing Co., 1895).

⁴ This date refers to the translation of the Pentateuch into Greek in the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285–247 BCE) as recorded in the *Letter of Aristeas* and in Philo Judaeus, *De Vita Mosis* II, 5–7.

⁵ This alternative date for the earliest reference to a collection of books forming the nucleus of what is now called Hebrew Scripture or the Old Testament reflects Heinrich Grätz' transferring the date of the composition of the Septuagint or Old Greek version of the Pentateuch from the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus as per the *Letter of Aristeas*, Philo, and Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities* XII, 2 (cf. the previous note) to the reign of Ptolemy III Philometor (246–221 BCE). See Heinrich Grätz, *Geschichte der Juden von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf die Gegenwart aus den Quellen neu bearbeitet* (11 vols.; Leipzig: O. Schnauss, 1853–1876), vol. 3, pp. 615–16; cf. Henry Barclay Swete, *An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek*, revised by Richard Rutherford Ottley, with an Appendix Containing the Letter of Aristeas, ed. H.St.J. Thackeray (Cambridge: CUP, 1902), 17.

⁶ This date must refer to the decrees of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–164 BCE), which called for the burning of all books of the Torah and the penalty of death for anyone in whose possession was found 'the Book of the Covenant'. According to 1 Mac. 1:54–57 the date of this decree, which presupposes the existence of Jewish religious books called variously 'books of the Torah' (cf. Dt. 17:18; 2 Ki. 22:8; 2 Ch. 34:15) and 'Book of the Covenant' (see Ex. 24:7; 2 Ki. 23:2; 2), was the year 145 of the Seleucid era. The latter date is commonly understood to correspond to 167 BCE; see, e.g., Victor Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews* (trans. S. Applebaum; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1959), 196.

⁷ By writing 'some Nehemiah' and by saying that the work of this otherwise unknown Nehemiah took place 'not until' 247 BCE or later Mrs Dietrick avoids the possibility that a Jewish library containing any of what is commonly called the Old Testament may have been established by the most famous of all Nehemiahs, namely Nehemiah son of Hachaliah. This Nehemiah first held the office of the cupbearer of Artaxerxes I (465–424 BCE) of Persia, and he also served twice as governor of Judah. It is, of course, this Achaemenid era Nehemiah who is singled out for praise in 2 Mac. 1:18, 20–36 and in Sirach 49:13. Only two other Nehemiahs are mentioned in Hebrew Scripture, and both of these also belong to the Achaemenid (539–333 BCE) era. These are (1) a certain Jew, who returned to Judah from Babylon with Zerubbabel in 538 BCE (see Ezr. 2:2; Neh. 7:7); and (2) Nehemiah son of Azbuk, who was a contemporary of Nehemiah son of Hachaliah according to Neh. 3:16. The two additional Nehemiahs known to us from epigraphic sources also appear to belong to the Achaemenid era; concerning these persons see Shmuel Ahituv, 'Nehemiah', *Encyclopaedia Biblica* 5:517 (in Hebrew) and the literature cited there.

⁸ Stanton, *The Woman's Bible, Part I*, p. 16.

The relevant passage from 2 Maccabees 2:13–15 reads as follows in the NRSV (1989):

The same things are reported in the records and in the memoirs of Nehemiah, and also that he founded a library and collected the books about the kings and prophets, and the writings of David, and letters of kings about votive offerings. In the same way Judas also collected all the books that had been lost on account of the war that had come upon us, and they are in our possession. So if you have need of them, send people to get them for you.⁹

This passage from 2 Maccabees. appears to credit the fifth century BCE Nehemiah son of Hachaliah with having put together a library containing ‘the books about the kings and the prophets’. The latter term may indeed refer to the eight prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and The Twelve. Dietrick adumbrating Thompson and Thompson replicating Dietrick share a totally idiosyncratic eisegesis of 2 Maccabees 2. According to these scholars’ reading, it was for the first time in the Hellenistic era that a Jewish leader in Jerusalem put together a library, which became the basis of what are now the 39 books of the collection commonly called ‘The Old Testament’.

Wellhausen sought to show that the Sabbath, circumcision and laws of purity were post-exilic, i.e. subsequent to the demise of the nation of Israel in 586 BCE and hence not binding upon the new Israel, which was Christianity.¹⁰ Moreover, by arguing for the post-exilic origin of these characteristic practices of Judaism, Wellhausen was able to justify Christianity’s disparagement of these rules, notwithstanding Jesus’ declaring, according to Matthew 5:17, ‘Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets. I am come not to destroy but to fulfil.’ In Wellhausen’s reading of the history of Israelite and Jewish religion, the practices which Christianity eschewed and which Judaism held so dear, were not, in fact, part of the Late Bronze Age Torah given by God to Moses, which Jesus sought to fulfil. On the contrary, they were a fabrication originating in the post-exilic age when revelation had long ago ceased.

⁹ Concerning the presumed date of this passage see the discussion in Jonathan A. Goldstein, *II Maccabees* (AB 41A; Garden City: Doubleday, 1983), 186–87 and the literature cited there.

¹⁰ Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel*, translated by J. Sutherland Black and Allan Menzies with reprint of the article ‘Israel’ from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Edinburgh: A & C Black, 1883), 112–16 with respect to the Sabbath; pp. 338–39 with respect to circumcision; pp. 131, 339, 424, 510 and *passim* with respect to purity regulations.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her team of learned feminist biblical scholars attempted to undermine the authority of Holy Writ, because it was invoked by Christian clergy to deny women the right to vote in federal elections in the United States of America and in all states of the United States of America with the exception of Wyoming, Colorado, Idaho and Utah.¹¹ The only 'western' nation which granted women the right to vote at that time was New Zealand, which granted women the right to vote in 1893.

Echoing Wellhausen's historicism, which justified Christianity's neglect of the Sabbath and circumcision by arguing that these institutions were post-exilic, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her colleagues sought by means of historicism to prove that Hebrew Scripture was not the Late Bronze Age Law of God but simply a Jewish library only slightly more than 2000 years old.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton argued that one of the crimes which Hebrew Scripture perpetrated against women was its failure to supply names for so many of its women characters such as six of the seven daughters of Jethro and the mother of Samson:

If we go through this chapter [Ex. 2] carefully we will find mention of about a dozen women, but with the exception of one given to Moses, all are nameless. Then as now names for women and slaves are of no importance;¹² they have no individual life, and why should their personality require a life-long name? Today the woman is Mrs. Richard Roe, to-morrow Mrs. John Doe, and again Mrs. James Smith according as she changes masters, and she has so little self-respect that she does not see the insult of the custom. We have had in this generation one married woman in England, and one in America, who had one name from birth to death, and though married they kept it. Think of the inconvenience of vanishing as it were from your friends and correspondents three times in one's natural life.¹³

It is disappointing, therefore, that in failing to give credit to the work of Ellen Battelle Dietrick, one of the most distinguished voices of the recent revisionist historicism has ignored Mrs Stanton's plea that heroines no less than heroes should be mentioned by name.

Perhaps it was paragraph 6 of the Rabbinic document known as 'The Treatise on the Acquisition of Torah', appended to Tractate Avot,

¹¹ Josephine K. Henry in Appendix to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible, Part II: Comments on the Old and New Testaments from Joshua to Revelation* (New York: European Publishing Co., 1898), 206.

¹² Contrast Adele Reinhartz, *'Why Ask My Name?': Anonymity and Identity in Biblical Narrative* (New York & Oxford; OUP, 1998).

¹³ Stanton, *The Woman's Bible, Part I*, p. 73; similarly, *Part II*, p. 30.

‘The Ethics of the Fathers’, in virtually every Jewish prayerbook and in some editions of the Mishnah, which put it best:

Whoever reports an idea [Heb. *dabar*] quoting the person who said it brings deliverance into the world in accord with what is stated in Scripture, ‘Esther told the king quoting Mordechai’ (Esth. 2:22).¹⁴

Moreover, by juxtaposing Thompson, Dietrick and 2 Maccabees 2:13–15 it becomes totally clear that it is only by eisegetical sleight of hand that 2 Maccabees can be invoked in support of the Hasmonean origin of Hebrew Scripture.

¹⁴ Ironically, this dictum is itself presented anonymously in ‘The Treatise on the Acquisition of Torah’ and also in Babylonian Talmud, Hullin 104b and Niddah 19b. Only in Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 15a is the saying itself attributed, there to R. Eleazar quoting R. Hanina.