Bill T. Arnold  
Asbury Theological Seminary  
Wilmore, Kentucky

The nature of the Priestly materials in the Pentateuch is a hot topic at present. The so-called “Kaufmann school” is enjoying a resurgence with its views that the Priestly literature (P), whatever its original constitution, had a preexilic provenience instead of the postexilic date of the standard Documentary Hypothesis. This comes at a time when there is a renewed appreciation for the P source as the most identifiable and reifiable of the sources of the Pentateuch, which places the Priestly material at the center of research. These new investigations may eventually lead to a greater appreciation for what source-critical analysis can teach us about the Pentateuch.

King’s volume contributes to that renewed investigation, although how one evaluates the specific value of his book’s contribution depends largely on the assessment of the solution he offers. He is most interested in the disjunction between P narratives in Genesis (extended to Exod 6) and P material in Exodus–Numbers, most of which is legislative. He refers to the former in this volume with the siglum PN, postulating a northern provenience of the narrative portions of the Priestly material now found in Genesis.

The book opens with an introduction of only nine pages, surveying the Documentary Hypothesis with an eye to the “historical disjunction” between the elaborate cult system...
in the Priestly material and the early periods of Israel’s history (xi–xix). The contributions of de Wette, Reuss, Graf, and Kuenen are summarized as backdrop for Wellhausen’s famous synthesis and refinement, culminating in the theory that the Priestly writings constituted the latest stratum of the pentateuchal sources. King avers that scholarship has arrived at some degree of consensus (at least among scholars interested in source-critical analysis) about the standard indexes of the contents of the pentateuchal sources, and he asserts further in this introduction that the P source is the most identifiable of the sources (xvi–xvii). The particular focus of this study is the relationship between P’s legal or legislative material, on the one hand, and P’s narrative material, on the other. The author asserts that the scholarship on P is at an impasse because “a scholar may build a convincing argument regarding some aspect of P based on the legal material, only to be accused of neglecting the narrative material, or vice versa” (xvii). Building on the theories of Milgrom and other scholars of the Kaufmann school, King begins with the role of H as the redactor of P and argues that the disjunction between Priestly narrative and legislation is resolved when we recognize “the independent character of the narratives traditionally associated with P, particularly those in Genesis” (xix). Although not central or necessarily detrimental to the author’s main points, I would have appreciated more on the need for combining synchronic with diachronic approaches, which he mentions in passing in a footnote (xvi). As such, part of this introductory survey could have included the important work of David M. Carr (e.g., Reading the Fractures of Genesis [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996]).

After this brief introduction, the book proceeds through a simple and symmetrical structure of three parts devoted to three Priestly strands in the Pentateuch: (1) “P: A Priestly Legal Manual”; (2) “P*: A Northern Priestly Component”; and (3) “The H Redaction of the Priestly Literature.” Each of these three parts has two chapters, one devoted to composition and another to provenience and intent. Much of King’s discussion in the “provenience and intent” chapters is a straightforward literature review of the scholarship on these topics and would be useful for advanced students. This is especially true of chapter 2, which provides a summary of the evidence for the preexilic date for P and its priority to H, highlighting especially the linguistic, sociohistorical and literary data.

King restricts the definition of P to the legal material specifically focused on the sanctuary and its surrounding cult, which of course limits P proper to Exodus–Numbers. King is of the opinion that the original core of P consisted narrowly of the Sinai legislation from Exod 25 through Num 10, focused on the tabernacle and the cult. Brief narratives and itineraries provided a literary frame for this central core (Exod 6–24 and Num 11–36). King considers this P source to be the original cultic program for preexilic Israel, not an etiology of the postexilic cult (67–68). King argues further that the Priestly material of
Genesis (up through Exod 6) is unique in structure and terminology and was originally distinct from the P source. Three intentional editorial linkages (Exod 1:1–7, 13–14; Exod 2:23–25; and Exod 6) have been used to attach the Priestly narratives of Genesis to the rest of the Priestly literature, and these redactions are attributed to H in King’s approach, hence yielding a “realignment” of the older Priestly material. Perhaps what is new here is King’s theory that most of the non-JE materials of Genesis (that is, materials traditionally thought of as P) originally comprised a distinct document, a single written source, his PN, composed in the eighth century B.C.E. This original document had an independent transmission history from the P legislative materials of Exodus–Numbers and was arranged concentrically around the covenant of Gen 17, with four occurrences of the toledoth formula before the Abrahamic covenant (not counting the toledoth book, 5:1) and four occurrences after the covenant.

King further argues that this source, PN, originated with the northern tribes sometime prior to the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C.E. At this point, the book’s presentation ceases being largely a literature review and presents the author’s own understanding of the provenience for the Priestly narratives of Genesis (109–22) in a chapter that is both the most speculative and the least likely part of the argument. He asserts from the outset that the northern origins of PN are “suggested” by the climactic emphasis on the Abrahamic covenant (relying primarily on Gen 35:9–13; 48:3–5 for this assertion). This provenience is said to be supported further by PN’s preference for Elohim and El-Shaddai rather than Yhwh and King’s belief that PN’s hopeful and benedictory themes are as suitable for the survivors of the Assyrian crisis as for those of the Babylonian crisis. This argument for the northern origins of PN begs several questions, not the least of which is the unified nature of an original PN source and our ability to trace such broadly defined and stated themes to such a narrow historical context. While the volume to this point has much to commend it, this portion of the argument is least convincing.

King’s contribution to the discussion is not only that PN originated in the north prior to the Assyrian crisis, but, building on the work of Knohl and Milgrom, he argues that a Holiness redactor attached PN to P, extending its themes into the Priestly literature in Exodus–Numbers. Without doubt, the Knohl-Milgrom conclusion that H is the redactor of P deserves widespread consideration by source critics, but the hypothesis that an independent northern source existed, containing the Priestly narratives now known to us in Genesis, and that it was incorporated into the legislative Priestly materials of Exodus–Numbers is not persuasively established, it seems to me.

King has highlighted the problems with our understanding of P, especially as this relates to the Priestly narratives of Genesis (to Exod 6) versus the legislation of Exodus–Numbers. Others have handled the disjunction between Priestly material before and after
Exod 6 in different ways, including Israel Knohl’s influential view that these were two different periods of divine revelation within P itself (The Sanctuary of Silence: The Priestly Torah and the Holiness School [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994], 125 and passim). King offers an alternative solution, which is to postulate a new source, $P^N$, and to assert an extensive redaction by H incorporating $P^N$ from the northern priests with the original P from the south. In fine, his solution seems unnecessarily complex, although it is well-presented and undoubtedly merits further consideration.