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Wellhausen's Admission that his Theory
Unfitted his Students for the Ministry

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Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics, edited by Claus Westermann. Eng. trans. ed by James Luther Mays (John Knox Press: Richmond, Va.). Originally pub. as Probleme alttestamentlicher Hermeneutik by Chr. Kaiser Verlag, München, 1960. First Eng. ed. 1963

"The Scientific Study of the Old Testament" by Alfred Jepsen, translated by John Bright. pp. 246-284

p. 246 The University of Greifswald has celebrated its five-hundredth anniversary, and in the Festschrift prepared for the occasion, treatments of the most outstanding figures in the university's history were to be included. Among the theologians the name of Julius Wellhausen was not to be omitted, for Wellhausen was professor of theology at Greifswald from 1872 until 1882, and it was during this interval that he wrote his basic works on the literature and history of Israel: Die Komposition des Hexateuch; the fourth edition of Bleek's Einleitung; Geschichte Israels, Vol. I (later the Prolegomena); and his preliminary sketch of the history of Israel. But this very man, who had given such a decisive impulse to the scientific study of the Old Testament, in 1882 withdrew on his own initiative from the theological faculty and transferred to Halle as extraordinary professor of Semitic languages. He explained his action as follows: "I became a theologian because I was interested in the scientific treatment of the Bible; it has only gradually drawn upon me that a professor of theology likewise has the practical task of preparing students for service in the Evangelical Church, and that I was not fulfilling this practical task, but rather, in spite of all reserve on my part, was incapacitating my hearers for their office."²

With these words Wellhausen placed the "scientific" treatment of the Bible and the practical task of preparing students for service in the Evangelical Church over against one another, and came to the opinion that he was, through his scientific treatment of the Bible, rendering his hearers unfit for their future office.

² Cf. the full text of the letter in the article "Wellhausen in Greifswald," Festschrift der Universität Greifswald, Vol. II (1956), pp. 47 ff.