



WELLHAUSEN, JULIUS

WELLHAUSEN, JULIUS (b. Hameln, Germany, 17 May 1844; d. Göttingen, 17 January 1918, [Figure 1](#)), scholar of Biblical studies, who primarily gained renown as an Old Testament scholar and Semitist.

Following in the footsteps of his father August Wellhausen, who was a Lutheran pastor (d. 1861), he studied Protestant theology in Göttingen from 1862 to 1865, during which time, except for two digressions into German history prior to his ecclesiastical examination, the only lectures he attended were in theology.

After graduation, he worked for two years as a private tutor. He subsequently returned to Göttingen, where he became a tutor in a theological seminary (*Stift*) and studied with Heinrich A. Ewald (1803-75), focusing on Oriental languages. In addition to Semitic languages, Ewald offered also courses in Sanskrit in the Faculty of Philosophy, and occasionally Persian and Turkish. After receiving his doctorate in theology, Wellhausen taught for two years in Göttingen before being appointed professor of theology at Greifswald University. His teaching contract included only theological courses and Hebrew, but his research efforts involved intense scrutiny of Arabic.

Over time, the training of theologians to serve the Church became increasingly burdensome to him, so he requested and ultimately convinced the Ministry of Education to transfer him to Halle in 1882 as an associate professor in the Faculty of Philosophy. In addition to Arabic and Syriac, Wellhausen sometimes taught the basics of Persian, but he deplored the lack of a Persian



chrestomathy that he could use and make available to his students (Letter to Albert Socion, 6 June 1885; Smend et al., p. 179). In 1885, he was appointed at Marburg University, where he joined the Faculty of Philosophy and taught the Semitic languages, including Arabic and Syriac. Persian was taught by his Indo-Europeanist colleague [Ferdinand Justi](#), with whom Wellhausen developed a close friendship bond and thanks to whom he enriched his knowledge of Persian. When Paul de Lagarde, a biblical scholar and orientalist, died in 1891, Wellhausen was designated as his successor in Göttingen. After some hesitation, he accepted the appointment to take over the professorship of his former teacher Heinrich A. Ewald, and he remained there until 1913, the year of his retirement.

Although he cast doubt on the “abstract antithesis of Semites and Indo-Europeans,” he continued to focus on Semitic languages and only sporadically offered lectures on Persian. This focus was the result of both his teaching duties and his research interests.

He first concentrated his research on the history of the sources of the Old Testament, working intensively on the Book of Job and teaching the history of Israel and Judaism. During the years at Greifswald University, as already mentioned, Wellhausen had developed an antipathy towards theological education, and he came to view working on the history and languages of the Semitic peoples as a way out of this drudgery. Due to his good knowledge of Arabic, he directed his research toward the early history of Arabic and Islam. The first fruit of this effort was “Muhammed in Medina,” which he published in 1882, the year of his move to Halle. He explained his pursuit of Arabic studies with the intention of gaining familiarity with the “wildling” upon which “the scion of the Yahweh’s Torah is grafted” (Wellhausen, 1882, Preface, p. 5).

From this point on, Wellhausen’s bibliography increasingly displays work on the history of early Islam, drawing on Arabic sources, whether written in poetry or prose. He always extracted the very essence from his sources and subjected it to intense critical investigation in order to draw attention to possibly tendentious accounts, a process that drew comments of admiration from his colleagues.

His methodological approach, which is sometimes called Wellhausen’s immanentism, is based on the concept that all the seeds of future development were to be found in the earliest times. This led him to focus his biblical studies



on the ancient Hebrews. In his scientific investigations of Islam, he knowingly set his magnifying glass on the ancient Arabs, with the songs of the Hoḍayl, a tribe of the Arabian peninsula (Wellhausen, 1884), constituting a base through which he sought to grasp the mindset of the Bedouins. He saw their importance for Arab antiquity on a par with those of the Roman and Greek inscriptions. By examining the construct of communities in early Islam, he anticipated being able to explain the role of religion in the creation of a community. According to him, through Prophet Moḥammad and the way in which he organized his community, religion became the foundation of the community, replacing blood, which had previously functioned in this role for the tribes (Wellhausen, 1887, pp. 228, 234; idem, 1902, p. 4; tr., p. 6).

His studies of the Arabs proceeded from the earliest history of Islam and ended with the fall of the Omayyads. In his work, he traces the development of strategic alliances and parties to religious sects, as well as their limits. In his most comprehensive historical work about the Arabs, Wellhausen described how the various alliances and fractions in which the tribes were involved contributed to destabilization of the Omayyad dynasty (Wellhausen, 1902, pp. 306-52; tr., pp. 492-566.). He saw the beginnings of destabilization of the Islamic empire in the [Battle of Karbala](#). In his eyes, this event launched the resistance against the Omayyads, which thereafter could no longer be prevented by changes in the system of taxing the non-Arab Muslims (*mawāli*). He regarded the revolt of the Shi'ite Iranians in [Khorasan](#) as decisive for the final overthrow of the Omayyads and thus for the end of the Arab aristocracy's dominant role. The link between Arabism and Islam was dissolved, and the *mawāli* gained important positions in the government, becoming part of the official court hierarchy.

Their successors, the 'Abbasids, were not an Arab dynasty, but rather a theocracy interspersed with Persians. This, however, no longer fell within the range of Wellhausen's interests since the original Arabism was now overshadowed or adulterated. In a letter, he expressed his view somewhat casually, saying "to hell with the 'Abbasids" (Letter to Ferdinand Justi, 26 March 1901; Smend et al., p. 395).

His occupation with Persian language and history was one of the concomitants of his study of the history of "the Arab empire" (*das arabische Reich*). It was based primarily on Ṭabari's *Ta'riḳ al-rosol wa'l-moluk*, a multi-volume historical work that had been edited by a number of orientologists at the end of the 19th century. In general, Wellhausen was against any historiography that



conceded to the Persians what, in his view, was excessive influence on history. After all, he viewed the province of Khorasan as the empire's "storm center" and the region in which developments played a greater role in the history of the Arab empire than other areas that had been conquered by the Muslims.

After his study of the fall of the Arab empire, Wellhausen never published another major work on the Arab region. He continued to lecture on Semitic languages, especially Arabic and Syriac, and he remained actively present within the academic arena of his orientalist colleagues by the wealth of reviews of works on Arab studies that emanated from his pen during those years. To his colleagues' amazement, his own publications after the turn of the century dealt with topics from the Old and the New Testaments; he never explained why he decided to return to theological subjects. In the words of Otto Eissfeldt (pp. 194-95), there is a need for a biography of Wellhausen that demonstrates the oneness of the researcher and the man. In addition to the scholar's letters, this could illustrate how his "humanness" unfurls in his works.

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