

Authorship of the Pentateuch

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Summary

This piece is a concise summary of the historical and contemporary development of Pentateuch studies in Old Testament Theology. This article aims to provide information on the possible confirmation of Mosaic authorship. The purpose is to examine how the Documentary Hypothesis, Fragment and Supplemental Hypotheses, Form and Tradition-Historical Criticism, Canonical and Literary Criticism have helped to reveal or identify the identity of the author of the Torah. To better understand the mentioned hypotheses, this article presents a brief description of the J, E, D, and P sources.

Key words: Pentateuch, authorship, Mosaic authorship, Torah, Documentary Hypothesis, Fragment and Supplemental Hypothesis, Form and Tradition-Historical Criticism, Canonical and Literary Criticism.

In the most literal sense, the Pentateuch¹ (or Torah) is an anonymous work, but traditional views support the belief of Mosaic authorship (Carpenter 1986, 751-52). Yet, with the advent of humanism and the Renaissance, the sense of intellectual freedom and upswing in research have led to the fact that many have begun to read the Bible critically, trying to challenge its text as well as the traditions and beliefs that are formed from it (Alexander 2003, 61-63). One of the most commonly attacked beliefs is Moses' authorship of the Torah. There has been an

1 Taken from the Greek translation LXX. Pentateuch is derived from the Greek word *pentateuchos*, which means a five-book work, known as the Books of Moses (Carpenter 1986).

ongoing debate between conservative theologians representing Moses' authorship of the Pentateuch, and liberals who claim that there are several authors or redactors (Moses possibly participated in the creation of the Pentateuch, perhaps as part of the oral tradition of Israel) (Alexander 2003, 61-63). Therefore, we will briefly summarize the history of pentateuchal research (for lack of space, only the main concepts).

Arguments For and Against Mosaic Authorship

In a period of nearly 3000 years, hardly anyone opposed the Mosaic authorship of the Torah, mainly because there were no critical investigations made; “[i]nstead, its object was to emphasize the Pentateuch’s divine origin and *authority*” (Houtman). A variety of historians, theologians, and thinkers are represented in this view. The Jewish testimony is unique — the Talmud (*b. Sanh.* 21b–22a; *b. B. Bat.* 14b), the Mishnah (*m. Abot* 1:1), and the NT (Luke 24:27, 44; etc.) (Arnold 2003, 622). Philo of Alexandria wrote enthusiastically in defense of Moses’ authorship and his role as God’s interpreter (Soninno 2010, 245). The Jewish historian Josephus (*Ant.* 4.8.48 §326) also confirmed Mosaic authorship (Arnold 2003, 622).²

Christian tradition follows the Jewish view of the Pentateuch’s authorship. The Church fathers (Clement of Rome, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus of Lyon, etc.) have expressed the same belief (Carpenter 1986, 3:743). Nevertheless, around the third century C.E. the concept of Ezra as author became fairly prominent (cf. 2 Esd 14:19–48). It was believed initially that the Torah had been written by Moses, but was later burnt, and then “was miraculously rewritten by Ezra” (Soninno 2010, 247). Later, obvious problems related to the text of the Pentateuch were more and more noted such as why Moses did not write in the first person, the report on the death of Moses and the period of mourning for him in Deuteronomy 34:5–9, and double³ and sometimes triple reports on the same events. Furthermore, other apparent discrepancies and disagreements were noticed, for instance: Gen 7:15 — Noah gathered two of each animal, but 7:2–3 states specifi-

2 This view remained unchanged until the seventeenth century when several prominent philosophers like B. Spinoza and T. Hobbs revealed their results: “Ezra was responsible for the Pentateuch” (Arnold 2003, 622). They were not totally opposed to Mosaic authorship; verses like, Exod 17:14, 24:4; Num 33:2; Deut 31:9 had significance, but they pointed out that the composition of the Pentateuch was too complicated to be the work of one author (cf. Houtman).

3 Two reports on the creation, two descriptions of Abraham’s covenant with God, two events in which Abraham represents Sarah as his sister, two reports of Jacob at Bethel, and two events that Moses runs water from a rock, both times in Meribah, etc.

cally seven pairs of animals; Gen 7:11, 17, 24 and 8:3 specify certain time intervals of the flood that are hard to match, and Gen 14:14 mentions the territory of Dan's tribe, although Dan received his land only after Moses' death (Judg 18). Thus, even in the pre-Enlightenment era, several authors had noticed the discrepancies and soon started to articulate their assumptions more clearly (Carpenter 1986, 3:742–43). With the dawn of the Enlightenment period emerged new studies on the Pentateuch and with it new critical approaches.

Criticisms and Hypotheses

Source Criticism⁴ (or Older Documentary Hypothesis)

As a result of the Enlightenment era, source criticism was born. Jean Astruc⁵ wrote and published his studies on Genesis in 1753. His study led him to believe that “Moses wrote Genesis using ancient memoirs of sources” (Carpenter 1986, 744). Astruc identified two sources which he labeled *A* for Elohim and *B* for Yahweh. The question of authorship and the authority of the Pentateuch was “no dilemma” for him. He followed the traditional view which argued for Moses as the author. Unfortunately, the methodology he used was wrong; it failed to take into account that Near Eastern literature cannot be treated like literature in recent history. Nevertheless, his argument concerning two different sources within Genesis with “the primarily emphasis on the divine names as a criterion for source analysis” (Arnold 2003, 623), laid the foundation for further research.

Fragment and Supplemental Hypothesis

Consequently, further research developed various hypotheses like the Fragment Hypothesis (FH). All pentateuchal studies leading up to this hypothesis considered the Pentateuch work to be a collage of several documents (*J*, *E*, and *D*). However, the FH advocated another theory — the Pentateuch is a large number of fragments which were then interlaced by one editor (sixth century B.C.E.) into the form we have today (Whybray 1995, 14). Alexander Geddes (a Catholic priest), J. S. Vater, and W. M. L. de Wette were the main scholars who established this theory. Later, de Wette acknowledged only some parts of this particular hypothesis and used it in combination with the Documentary Hypothesis (Whybray 1995, 14).

Later, in 1823, Georg Heinrich August von Ewald proposed a new method

- 4 Other main representatives of Source Criticism were Johann G. Eichhorn and K. D. Ilgen, both German scholars from the eighteenth century who continued to work with Astruc's approach (Carpenter 1986, 744).
- 5 Jean Astruc was born in 1684 and died in 1766. He was a French physician and the founder of modern Pentateuch Criticism (Arnold 2003, 622).

commonly named supplementary hypothesis (SH). The premise of his theory is “a single core E document was supplemented by J and strands from the book of Deuteronomy” (Arnold 2003, 624). Next, according to Alexander, von Ewald adjusted his theory and found that some portions could not have been part of the three sources (E, J, and D). Furthermore, he argued for two united E documents which were later complemented by a Yahwistic editor. In this way, the Older Documentary Hypothesis and the SH were connected (2012). Unsatisfied with those discoveries and given explanations, scholars produced a new Documentary Hypothesis which was commonly accepted at first.

(New) Documentary Hypothesis

This new hypothesis of Graf, Kuenen, and Wellhausen⁶ had the most success, but not in all aspects. In Julius Wellhausen’s deduction, the Pentateuch was formed of four originally independent documents from various periods and different regions: the Yahwistic (J), Elohist (E), Deuteronomistic (D), and Priestly documents (P). These documents were, on several occasions, by a number of editors and publishers, connected into a single unit (Odljin 2005, 272).

The New Documentary Hypothesis (DH), which eventually became, more or less, generally acknowledged, well explains the existence of duplicates and parallel texts that speak about the same subject, but in a different manner. Albeit, it should also be emphasized that this theory was and is in some aspects questionable (Odljin 2005, 272). In his article, Jonathan Huddleston gives a plain description (taken from Wellhausen’s book *Prolegomenon to the History of Israel*):

The Documentary Hypothesis is complex, but its basic outline is fairly simple:

- J and E produced early versions of Israel’s founding traditions some time between the tenth and the early eighth centuries B.C.
- D extensively revised these laws and stories in the seventh century, creating most of Deuteronomy; D-related editors combined this work with J–E, adding a few “D” touches to the earlier sources
- A sixth-century exilic or postexilic P adapted and systematized J–E–D for the hierarchy that restored the Jerusalem temple.
- Finally, fifth-century priestly editors, perhaps including Ezra, reintegrated the P and non-P (JED) versions into a single JEDP whole - the Pentateuch (Huddleston 2013, 196).

The J, E, D, and P Sources

6 Karl Heinrich Graf (1815 – 1869) was a German Old Testament scholar and orientalist. Abraham Kuenen (1828 – 1891) was a Dutch Protestant theologian. And Julius Wellhausen (1844 – 1918) was a German biblical scholar and orientalist.

For the purpose of better understanding, it is necessary to briefly explain what those four sources are about and where they came from. Huddleston voices that “[e]ach source has its own historical setting, its own favorite words, its own theology or agenda — even its own personality” (Huddleston 2013, 197). First, the J document is the narrative from Gen 2 through Num 22–24 (some also include the record of Moses’s death, Deu 34, in J); the designation J comes from the German word *Jahweh*. One of the specifics about this source is that God is portrayed as almost human, and that creates an image of his presence among the people. The J story begins with creation and goes all the way to the fulfillment of God’s plan for Israel through the patriarchs (LaSor et al. 1996, 10). Second, source E, unlike J, uses the name Elohim (up until Exod 3; 6); God is presented as flawless and perfect. The E story goes along with the J narrative, but from the perspective of the northern kingdom,⁷ and most scholars agree that E begins with Gen 20 (LaSor et al. 1996, 10). Third, D stands for the Deuteronomist tradition, and thus is the central document of the Book of Deuteronomy. It differs in style from the other sources; its main concern is the preaching of the Law according to von Rad, and encouraging the people to serve God. It starts with the tale of Joshua and concludes with 2 Kings (LaSor et al. 1996, 11). Finally, fourth, P (for Priestly source) “focuses on genealogies, cultic laws, covenants, high days like the [S]abbath, blueprints of cultic buildings, and procedures for sacrifices and ceremonies.” Like in E, God’s transcendence is not only underlined, but the source points to His “holiness and sovereignty” (LaSor et al. 1996, 11) as well. The majority of biblical scholars follow these definitions.

Form and Traditio-Historical Criticism

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Hermann Gunkel played a major role in establishing a different technique known as Form Criticism (FC) (*Formgeschichte*) (Carpenter 1986, 3:748–49). Arnold (2003, 627) writes that Gunkel argued that “behind the J and E sources of Genesis were collections of sagas preserved orally for centuries, instead of relatively late writings of a few great individual writers.” Specifically, his approach to the text is trying to define the individual life setting (*Sitz im Leben*) to each section which was previously overlooked (Carpenter 1986, 3:748–49).

As successor of the FC came Traditio-Historical criticism. Albrecht Alt and Martin Noth (later also Gerhard von Rad) were the leading scholars of this method. They strove to “describe the process leading up to the formation of the longer written source documents” (Alexander 2012). It was Noth who reasoned for a

7 It is generally assumed that this document is a fabrication of the northern kingdom because of its focus on “Bethel, Shechem, and Joseph tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh” (see LaSor et al. 1996, 10).

“common–base text (or ‘G’ for *Grundlage*)” which was used by separate authors of the J, E, and P sources (Arnold 2003, 628). Houtman writes, “Both von Rad and Noth have, each with his own emphasis, directed attention to the various stages of the process by which the Pentateuch came into being (*Überlieferungsgeschichte* [tradition history])” (Houtman).

Canonical and Literary Criticism

Despite all of these new discoveries, new criticisms appeared and old ones further developed in order to provide better insights from different angles into the creation and development of the Pentateuch. One of them was Canonical Criticism (CC) with its prominent scholars Brevard S. Childs and James A. Sanders. This approach seeks to focus “on the final form or received, canonical shape of the biblical witness” (Arnold 2003, 629-30). CC is trying to use all the other critical methods, but in a sensible and restricted way (they omitted inquiries like, “minute analysis of the text or detailed identification of J, E, D, etc.”) (Carpenter 1986, 3:749–50). Although most experts have more or less accepted the thesis *JEDP*, through the CC “they seek to explore the theological message of the received form of the canon, not only the individual source or literary traditions behind the text” (Arnold 2003, 629–30).

In some way similar to the previous approach is Literary Criticism (LC) which seeks to take the text as a whole and thus to study it in its present form and not as in the previous approaches, disassembled into parts (Alexander 2012). The concern here is to read and examine the document synchronically (at the same time), and not diachronically (through time), which was the case up to that point (Arnold 2003, 629). Furthermore, Alonso Schökel (in 1960) and Muilenburg (in 1953) used a modern version of LC as a tool for HB investigations (Whybray 1994, 233–34). As a result, subsequent research from 1974 onwards used this technique and hence gave birth to the *atomistic* movement (Alter) that strove to explain “the possibility that the same techniques which were used to create the smaller narrative unites might also have been used on a larger scale” (Whybray 1994, 233–34).

The Current State of Pentateuchal Studies

All of this above brings us to the present, and according to Norman Whybray (1995, 12-13), current pentateuchal studies have “no consensus whatever about when, why, how, and through whom the Pentateuch reached its present form, and opinions about the dates of composition of its various parts differ by more than five hundred years.” This is a somewhat discouraging outcome. After reviewing various methods in the study of the Torah, it seems that it is necessary in some

way to “unite” several research methods in order to obtain solid results. Therefore, the DH — although criticized and in some segments all together rejected — has been adopted again and further developed by the majority of American scholars (Baden 2012). Additionally, Baden reports in his article on a new research system which “David Wright has termed the recent source-critical approach, the ‘Neo-Documentary Hypothesis,’ a label which is gaining some use among its adherents and others” (Baden 2012). What the Neo-Documentary Hypothesis seeks to explain in an extensive and efficient way is “why the Pentateuch is incoherent” (Baden 2012).⁸ On the other hand, European scholars have also presented several new and very complicated methods in pentateuchal studies since most of them do not agree with the DH anymore (Baden 2012).

Concluding Thoughts

After reading through extensive materials and summarizing the findings from different researchers, my verdict is that all of these theories are just that: theories—with tentative conclusions. Or, as Whybray (1995, 26-27) writes, “It is important to realize that in such a matter as this we are dealing entirely with hypotheses and not with facts. Proof, either in the mathematical or in the logical meaning of that word, will never be attainable. The only *fact* available to us is the text of the Pentateuch itself in all its complexity.”

Ultimately, one has to accept what most biblical scholars have accepted — that the Pentateuch is a combined work of numerous pre-existing sources (irrelevant if Moses was or was not one of the author[s] or editor[s]) (Alexander 2012). That said, it seems likely that the quest of authorship and creation of the Pentateuch in its present form will remain an unsolved mystery unless new archaeological discoveries are found in the future.

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8 Because of lack of space, please read the whole article by Dr. Joel S. Baden (Professor of Hebrew Bible, Yale Divinity School) for a more detailed explanation of this hypothesis.

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