

Introduction

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DURING THE THREE DAYS of March 25–27, 2018, on the campus of Andrews University, a number of scholars met for the second Exploring the Composition of the Pentateuch (ECP) conference. The present volume contains the edited essays from this conference. The essays from the first conference in 2016 were published as *Exploring the Composition of the Pentateuch*, BBRSup 27 (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2020). A third ECP conference was also held on September 11–13, 2022.

These conferences have aimed to evaluate present models of the composition of the Pentateuch and to begin developing a new model. Amid the present plethora of divergent approaches to the composition of the Pentateuch, critique of existing models has its place. However, there is a need to move beyond such critique in order to formulate positive proposals regarding how the Pentateuch was composed as allowed by verifiable data and sound, logical argumentation. This process involves addressing three essential questions: (1) What are key strategic areas of research that need attention? (2) In what areas can we make conclusions? (3) What are the limits of available, relevant evidence?

The following observations have emerged from the ECP project thus far. First, it seems necessary to acknowledge that linguistic, rhetorical, and conceptual literary coherence is culturally conditioned and that assessments of literary coherence should be based on solid exegesis. Too often scholars appear to judge ancient texts on the basis of modern Western standards of literary coherence. Thus, it seems necessary both to clarify what we mean by terms such as “coherence,” “continuity,” and “harmonization” as well as to address the variety of questions that arise from such terminological analysis. For example, what are indicators of incoherence and discontinuity versus continuity within the primary textual material itself? What are methodological controls for recognizing the synchronic readability of a pentateuchal text versus the need to recognize diachronic redactional layers? What empirical evidence regarding ancient Near Eastern composition and editing can contribute to such controls? Investigation of these questions is constrained by the limited corpus of

extant ancient texts, the lack of author attribution in most of the texts, and the lack of definitions of coherence in the texts.

Second, there is a need for a more rigorous approach to the question of literary reuse between the texts included in the Hebrew Bible. Speculative theories based on meager evidence discredit the field of innerbiblical reuse. How do we better differentiate between common cultural traditions and intentional literary reuse? To determine the latter, it is necessary to establish a positive case of reuse before attempting to determine the direction of dependence. We should begin with analysis of clear cases of literary reuse and test our approaches against these before dealing with the more unclear cases, resisting the temptation to speculate beyond the available evidence. At the same time, given that much of this field is dependent on indirect evidence in ancient texts written with literary conventions very different from our own, there is a need for much caution as we proceed in this area of study.

Third, we should further develop empirical criticism that considers comparison, contrast, and transformation (i.e., different use of the same material). We need more studies that investigate authorship attributions, literary authority, and the rationale behind the lack of indications of authorship in the Bible and in ancient Near Eastern literature. How should we better understand the ancient beliefs in divine involvement in the production of texts as well as the role of the author and the redactor? While doublets in the structure of the pentateuchal text are often taken as an indication of multiple sources, we find similar phenomena in ancient Near Eastern texts that are typically considered to be unified compositions. How do we therefore better understand ancient literary doublets?

Fourth, there is a need to further pursue diachronic linguistics. This area is often overlooked in pentateuchal studies, but its results have come to challenge conventions concerning the dating of pentateuchal texts. For example, is an exilic or postexilic dating of “priestly” material still a viable position on the basis of diachronic linguistics? It is important to further explore the distinction between Classical and Archaic Biblical Hebrew and to move from a predominant focus on lexical matters to paying more attention to syntax, as the latter may indicate more stable developments in the language.

Fifth, it seems appropriate to read the innerbiblical evidence for textual composition “generously” before beginning a critical evaluation of this evidence. The Pentateuch itself claims divine intervention in history and in the production of the text, and it attests to an active human agent in its composition, with original involvement by a person it calls “Moses.” It appears that the composition of the Pentateuch also involved the use of some sources. What is the evidence within the text itself of stages of composition up through its final canonical form? What are the implications of cultic practices attested by later

biblical texts, which are not mentioned in the Pentateuch? Is the common scholarly distinction between P (Priestly source) and non-P material still sustainable? How do we evaluate the plausibility of the theory that the authorship of the Pentateuch is pseudepigraphical (i.e., attributed to Moses) in light of innerbiblical and ancient Near Eastern scribal practices? A challenge here is that the overall authorship of the Pentateuch is anonymous. Only parts of the text are directly attributed to Moses.

Sixth, on the basis of the available evidence it seems reasonable to conclude that the basic composition of the Pentateuch took place in the preexilic period, allowing for some later editing, and that the contents of the Pentateuch attest to its origin before the Israelites settled in the land of Canaan. The text of the Pentateuch witnesses to a historical, authoritative Moses at the time of a historical exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. However, the precision of our conclusions is limited by insufficient evidence regarding the dating of the pentateuchal texts, which is partly due to the late date of the earliest extant manuscripts.

Seventh, we need additional studies of the sociological and geopolitical profiles reflected in Pentateuchal texts. Does the cultural profile, historical setting and intended audience fit the claimed dating of the texts? How can we distinguish between presettlement, monarchic, exilic, and restorationist settings of the texts? What are the methodological controls for identifying an anonymous ancient Near Eastern author on the basis of indications or implications regarding whose interest(s) their text serves or suppresses?

The chapters in the present volume address several of these questions. Other issues need to be addressed in future studies. In part 1, entitled “The Readability of the Pentateuch,” Roy E. Gane (“Case Studies of Some Apparent Inconsistencies in the Pentateuch”) critiques Joel Baden’s claim that there are contradictory features in the pentateuchal texts that warrant seeing it as composed by four separate sources (i.e., J, E, P, and D). He argues for a more cautious approach in regard to neo-documentarian claims about contradictions or inconsistencies in the text.

Kenneth Bergland (“Contradiction, Coherence, and Composition”) questions placing the principle of noncontradiction and coherence at the forefront of our evaluation of the unity or disunity of pentateuchal books, as is often done in both source-critical and complementarian approaches. He argues that the biblical authors do not seem to have shared the same concern for noncontradiction and coherence as that which is held in modern scholarship.

Noel K. Weeks¹ (“Sophisticated Narrative Technique of the Pentateuch”) shows how ascriptions of date, purpose, and context to ancient Near Eastern

1. Noel K. Weeks sadly passed away on March 8, 2020, during the time between the conference and publication of the present volume. His insights and contributions to the discussion of

literary texts are the exceptions in our source material rather than the rule. This uncertainty calls us to caution. Weeks argues that the critical scholarly dating of the Pentateuch often rests on the assumption that it belongs to a primitive stage, but he counters this by identifying sophisticated narrative techniques in the Pentateuch. According to him, the biblical authors did not aim at completeness of description, but rather they illustrated or made particular points, leaving many loose ends. Scholars have often erroneously taken such a style of writing to indicate different sources.

Richard Averbeck (“The Coherence and Internal Rationale of the Priestly Legislation in the Pentateuch with Special Attention to the ‘Guilt Offering’”) argues against the proposal by Israel Knohl, and followed by Jacob Milgrom, that the guilt offering for trespass upon a fellow Israelite’s property in Lev 5:20–26 is in tension with the corresponding regulation in Num 5:5–10. Instead he argues that they form complementary views. He finds that the theology of the “kingdom of priests” crosses the boundaries between the supposed sources.

In part 2 of this volume, entitled “The Dating of Deuteronomy,” Felipe A. Masotti (“Selective Literary Representation of Vassal Obsequiousness and Responsive Awareness in the Amarna Letters, the Hittite Treaty Prologues, and Deuteronomy 1–3”) argues for common literary conventions underlying the Hittite treaty prologues, Amarna Letters, and Deut 1–3. He finds correlations between their diplomatic signaling and the obsequious language of vassals relative to the geographical distance to their suzerains. This helps us better understand the literary milieu of some of the editorial shifts we find in the desert narratives of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Mark Steven Francois (“Borrowed Curses: The Loyalty Oath of Esarhaddon, Deuteronomy 28:20–44, and a Premonarchic Date for the Earliest Edition of Deuteronomy”) argues against the commonly accepted assumption, following the dissertation of Hans Ulrich Steymans, that both the sequence and subject matter of the curse formulas in Deut 28:20–44 were borrowed from the Succession Treaty of Esarhaddon (EST). He finds the evidence for a noncoincidental relationship and large-scale borrowing from EST in Deut 28 not plausible. Therefore, the composition of the earliest edition of Deuteronomy should not be restricted to a time between 672 and 22 BCE.

Daniel I. Block offers two chapters in this volume. The first (“The Tribes of Israel [Part 1]: Their Significance for Assessing the Provenance of the Book of Deuteronomy”) discusses the vocabulary of Deuteronomy in describing the

the composition of the Pentateuch will be greatly missed, but we are happy to be able to include one of his last publications in this volume. We are grateful to his son, Keith Weeks, for helping to edit his father’s essay.

tribes of Israel and how these tribes are perceived. Comparing this with other biblical and extrabiblical material, he argues for a much earlier dating of Deuteronomy than is commonly offered in present scholarship. His second chapter (“The Tribes of Israel [Part 2]: Their Significance for Assessing the Provenance of Deuteronomy 33”) focuses in on Deut 33, again analyzing the representation of the tribes, and concludes that such analysis favors an early dating for the book. He argues against Eckart Otto’s suggestion to see Deut 33 as an apocalyptic *Völkerkampf* fictitiously written in the Persian period and instead argues that the immediate setting is rather that of the Israelite campaigns against the Canaanites, who occupy the land promised to their ancestors.

In part 3, entitled “The Dating of the Pentateuch,” Joshua Berman (“The Biblical Criticism of Ibn Hazm the Andalusian: A Medieval Control for Modern Diachronic Method”) calls for empirical evidence regarding the way in which premodern readers would have assessed the texts that they received, even when they were committed to identifying fissures in these texts, as modern scholars are. He finds such a case in the biblical criticism of the eleventh-century Muslim theologian Ibn Hazm the Andalusian. Berman’s analysis of his writings challenges the idea of the universal and timeless “canons of narrative prose and its rules,” as expressed by Baruch Schwartz.

Richard S. Hess (“Questions Concerning the Covenant Code in Light of the Hazor Legal Fragments”) compares the traditions surrounding the Laws of Hammurabi, the Covenant Code of Exod 20–23, and the recently discovered Bronze Age legal fragments at Hazor. He finds that the Covenant Code and Hazor legal fragments share similarities in contents and in elements of form and structure with the Old Babylonian Laws of Hammurabi. But they also attest a degree of freedom, creativity, and specific cultural application not attested in the Neo-Assyrian reception of the Laws of Hammurabi. The Covenant Code thus shows closer affinity to Canaanite Bronze Age legal traditions than to those found in the Neo-Assyrian period.

Benjamin Kilchör (“Three Turning Points in Research History Toward a Farewell to the Mosaic Origin of the Pentateuch: How Strong Are They?”) explores the scholarly history of the shift from a commonly accepted Mosaic origin of the Pentateuch to the default view of an eighth- to fourth-century BCE dating of the Pentateuch. He identifies three major turning points, namely, the dating of D (Deuteronomy), the dating of P, and the assumption of Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian backgrounds of the remaining materials. He argues that none of these shifts was based on unambiguous evidence and a clear argumentative process but rather followed a certain scholarly dynamic. Therefore, all three of the pivotal issues should be open for discussion.

A. Rahel Wells (“Direction of Dependence in the Animal-Related Sabbath Laws in the Pentateuch”) addresses the question of the direction of

dependence between the animal-related Sabbath laws within the Pentateuch in Exod 20 and 23, Lev 25, and Deut 5. Even if other interpretations of the relationship between these laws are possible, she finds that the canonical order of direction of dependence remains plausible.

John S. Bergsma (“Did Postexilic Judaism Really Abandon Jerusalem and the Temple? A Discussion with Jean-Louis Ska on the Absence of Zion Theology from the Pentateuch”) commends Jean-Louis Ska for recognizing how the failure to mention Jerusalem, Zion, or the Jerusalem Temple poses a problem for the assumed Persian period priestly context of the final redaction of the Pentateuch. But he finds no biblical support for Ska’s theory that this can be accounted for by postexilic Judean embarrassment over the destruction of Jerusalem, resulting in the nonmention of the city in the Pentateuch, and the replacement of the temple with the Torah in the literary composition of the postexilic works. Instead, Bergsma finds that the absence of Zion theology speaks to a common patrimony of both Judeans and Samaritans reaching back into the preexilic period.

Because of the diverse background of the contributing scholars, it is natural to expect some differences in emphasis or interpretation of details. However, the authors included in this volume are in harmony in their firm conviction that the data support an early composition hypothesis and that it needs a fair evaluation in scholarship. As the editors of this volume, it is our hope that the collection of essays presented here will aid future research in exploring the composition of the Pentateuch.