

Introduction

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The Pentateuch (or “Torah”) forms the foundation of canonical Scripture. As such, it holds a special place of authority over Jewish and Christian religion. The authority of this group of biblical books depends on the nature of its authorship. Therefore, understanding the composition of the Pentateuch matters. Exploring it is not an intellectual game. The stakes are high.

Identifying the authorship of the Pentateuch is challenging, due to factors such as (but not limited to) the following.

First, this authorship is mostly anonymous, although some passages indicate that Moses wrote several documents (Exod 17:14; Exod 24:4; 34:27; Num 33:2; Deut 31:9, 22, 24). At least some writing by one or more other authors or editors is apparent (e.g., obviously in the Deut 34 account of Moses’s death), but the biblical text does not name them or clearly delineate the extent of their work.

Second, we do not possess the ancient autographs of the documents that were combined to comprise the Pentateuch. The language, scope, and script of such original documents would facilitate locating them in history, thereby enlightening us regarding their relationships to the events that they relate and to the edited and updated final canonical text.

Third, as yet there is no extant archaeological or extrabiblical textual evidence that directly and unambiguously confirms some of the most essential features in the pentateuchal narratives, such as the existence of the patriarchs and of Moses, the exodus from Egypt, and wilderness wandering of the Israelites. Most importantly, we lack empirical proof of the divine role in human history, including authoritative revelations to Moses, that the Pentateuch claims, and acceptance of which has made it normative Scripture for more than two millennia. Not only is such proof of unique divine activities not extant, it is irretrievable. The reader must choose to believe or disbelieve on the basis of other factors.

Fourth, the pentateuchal books are complex literary compilations in several genres and varying styles. They recount events and record speeches that occurred over a long period of time, with some parallel and even duplicating materials that can differ in perspective. These factors raise questions regarding authorial relationships between textual portions that differ in style and viewpoint. There is no question that the compositional development of the Pentateuch involved sources, redactions, forms, and traditions. The problem is how to connect the dots of available data with valid methodology in order to identify these factors without undue speculation.

During the last few centuries, scholars have largely abandoned acceptance of Mosaic authorship of the Torah on the basis of Jewish tradition and New Testament references. The historical-critical quest for an alternative reconstruction of the origin(s) and development of the Pentateuch or Hexateuch coalesced around the Documentary Hypothesis, which long dominated the field, albeit with a plethora of permutations. The heuristic power of this brilliant constellation of syntheses produced a consensus to the extent that an interpreter who did not operate within its framework was hardly regarded as a scholar. However, the relentless march of research has continued to bring new and refined analyses, data (including ancient Near Eastern [ANE] texts and the Dead Sea Scrolls), methodological tools, and criticisms of the older criticism, especially in terms of its assumptions.

Among the fundamental assumptions of the older criticism that are now challenged is the notion that absence of evidence is evidence of absence. This is patently false in the discipline of archaeology, but it is also false when it comes to deriving conclusions from the absence of direct evidence regarding the composition of the Pentateuch (see above). Rather than categorically ruling out possibilities of authorship and dating of texts because direct evidence for them is lacking at present, it is only logical and scientific to leave open the questions for which we do not have truly definitive answers.

Currently under scrutiny is another assumption that underlies the *modi operandi* of source and redaction criticism, namely the idea that textual features such as disjunctures, duplications, or shifts of perspective, including what could be regarded as contradictions, necessarily indicate changes of the authorial hand. Scholars who study ANE texts outside the Bible are beginning to recognize that such features could, at least in some cases, belong to original, unified compositions because ancient writers were not bound by modern conventions of consistency. It is true beyond doubt that biblical books utilize sources, some of which are named and most of which are not, but precisely identifying them and the ways in which they were incorporated into the larger compositions is problematic.

Nevertheless, critiques of documentarian and neodocumentarian studies should not be taken to indicate that such works lack value. Scholars who employ these approaches have uncovered a wealth of literary and linguistic nuances. While their presuppositions, motivation, and conclusions regarding reconstruction of sources can be challenged, their efforts have enriched our understanding of the biblical texts.

It is now generally recognized that the consensus around the once “assured results” of pentateuchal criticism has mostly dissipated. Scholars have been moving beyond previously dominant paradigms to analyze texts afresh in their search for more satisfying models. This situation and its rather chaotic result are described by Jan Christian Gertz et al. in their introduction to the massive recent volume titled *The Formation of the Pentateuch*:

Over the past forty years, the source-critical method has come under unprecedented attack. In many quarters it has been rejected entirely: many scholars claim it no longer provides a secure starting point for investigating the history of Israelite religion or the literary formation of the Pentateuch. Recent decades have witnessed not simply a proliferation of intellectual models but, in many ways much more seriously, the fragmentation of discourse altogether as scholarly communities in the three main research centers of Israel, Europe, and North America increasingly talk past one another. Even when they employ the same terminology (for example, *redactor*, *author*, *source*, *exegesis*), scholars often mean quite different things. Concepts taken for granted by one group of scholars (such as the existence of the Elohist or the Yahwist sources) are dismissed out of hand by other scholarly communities.

... Yet, the lack of shared intellectual discourse hampers what might otherwise be a moment of opportunity in the creative development of the discipline. In the three major centers of research on the Pentateuch—North America, Israel, and Europe—scholars tend to operate from such different premises, employ such divergent methods, and reach such inconsistent results that meaningful progress has become impossible. The models continue to proliferate but the communication seems only to diminish.¹

On the one hand, perhaps the present lack of scholarly unity could be viewed as “the worst of times” for pentateuchal scholarship. On the other hand, maybe the moment could be seized as a good time of opportunity for potential openness to new ideas, although it is not yet “the best of times” while discourse remains so dysfunctional.²

The present volume has developed from a thirst for interaction regarding new ideas that arise from careful analysis of the biblical text itself against its ANE background, in hope of continuing dialogue in the future. It consists of edited and in some cases expanded papers from a stimulating and enjoyable conference on “Exploring the Composition of the Pentateuch,” which was held at Andrews University, April 3–5, 2016. Participants in the conference were scholars (including some PhD students) from several religious affiliations (Protestant, Catholic, Jewish) and five continents.

Paper topics covered a wide spectrum, relevant to the research foci of the individuals who presented. This variety is reflected in the chapters of the book,

1. Jan Christian Gertz, Bernard M. Levinson, Dalit Rom-Shiloni, and Konrad Schmid, “Convergence and Divergence in Pentateuchal Theory: The Genesis and Goals of This Volume,” in *The Formation of the Pentateuch: Bridging the Academic Cultures of Europe, Israel, and North America*, ed. Jan Christian Gertz, Bernard M. Levinson, Dalit Rom-Shiloni, and Konrad Schmid, FAT 111 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 2–3.

2. Borrowing language from the opening of *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens (1859).

which are grouped in two parts. The first part is primarily on methodology: the history of scholarship and alternative approaches regarding the development of the Pentateuch. The second part focuses on exegesis of particular texts relevant to the composition of the Torah.

These chapters represent the viewpoints of their authors, which vary in some respects from those of other authors or from those of the editors. This is healthy. Our project is to foster penetrating investigation and friendly dialogue in a spirit of humility, openness, and frankness, without imposing uniformity or pretending that all of our conclusions are definitive. Our exploration of the composition of the Pentateuch is a work in progress, so another conference was held on March 25–27, 2018, also at Andrews University.

The conference and resulting book arose from a project that began in a very small way with a conversation between myself and two doctoral students—Kenneth Bergland from Norway and Felipe Masotti from Brazil—during a break in my Ugaritic course at Andrews University in the summer of 2014. Kenneth recollects that “we were inspired by some of the phenomena we saw in the Ugaritic texts we were studying. Phenomena that are taken as signs of compositional layers in pentateuchal texts are observed also in other ANE texts.” So we started talking about the possibility of opening a venue at our university to probe the composition of the Pentateuch in detail.

Our ideas progressed while the three of us were studying the Hittite Laws in my Hittite class in the fall of 2015. Meanwhile, in the fall of 2014 Kenneth and Felipe initiated “the Torah Group,” an interdisciplinary group of doctoral students and one teacher (A. Rahel Wells, Department of Religion) at Andrews University. Others participated from distant locations via Skype. Meetings of the group included paper presentations and subsequent discussions between the members, who included biblicists, linguists, and archaeologists. After some time, the Torah Group developed the idea of organizing the “Exploring the Composition of the Pentateuch” conference. The central members of the planning committee for this event were Kenneth Bergland (chair), L. S. Baker Jr., Sarah Burton, Felipe Masotti, and A. Rahel Wells. The committee and participants are grateful to the sponsors of the conference (see preface) and to Richard S. Hess for his support and assistance in publishing this book in the *Bulletin for Biblical Research Supplements* series. We want to thank Barbara Weimer for preparing the indexes. We also want to thank the Penn State University Press team for their gracious and experienced hand in the completion of this volume: John Morris as the copyeditor, Amy Becker as the compositor, and Matthew Williams as the project manager.

Please note that throughout this volume verse references are those of the Hebrew Masoretic Text, with any differing English verse references following in brackets, e.g., Lev 6:20 [27].