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CHAPTER 2

The Nature of the Pentateuchal Narrative

The Pentateuch appears in our Bible as a single continuous narrative but clearly includes very diverse materials. In this chapter we discuss problems with the traditional attribution of the Pentateuch to Moses and indications of multiple authorship. We will also consider what has been the dominant explanation of the Pentateuch's composition among modern scholars, the Documentary Hypothesis, and criticisms that have been raised against it.

MOSAIC AUTHORSHIP

The first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy; collectively known as the Pentateuch) tell the story from creation to the death of Moses. These books are traditionally known as the Torah, and as the books of Moses. The Torah is commonly, but not quite accurately, translated as "Law." Much of the Pentateuch is a presentation of laws, but Genesis and the first half of Exodus consist of narratives.

The problematic nature of Mosaic authorship was noticed at least as early as the Middle Ages. The medieval Jewish scholar Ibn Ezra (twelfth century) noted that Gen 12:6, "the Canaanites were then in the land," must have been written at a later time, when this was no longer the case. Similarly, Gen 36:31, which refers to "the kings who reigned in the land of Edom, before any king reigned over the Israelites," must have been written after the establishment of the monarchy. Others noted that Moses could not have written the account of his own death, at the end of Deuteronomy. Attention was gradually drawn to various repetitions and contradictions that suggested that the Torah was not the work of any one author but was rather a compilation long after the time of Moses. Such observations proliferated in the wake of the Reformation, when the Bible was subjected to a new level of scrutiny.

A major advance in the study of the Pentateuch is credited to Jean Astruc, a convert to Catholicism who became private physician to King Louis XV. In 1735, Astruc observed



Sculpture of Moses by Michelangelo Buonarroti, in the church of San Pietro in Vincoli, Rome, Italy.

that in some passages God is called by the general Hebrew word for God, *Elohim*, while in others he is called by the proper name Yahweh. (It is often written without vowels, YHWH, so as not to profane the name by pronouncing it. Jewish tradition substitutes the word *Adonai*, “the LORD.” The mongrel form “Jehovah” is a combination of the consonants of YHWH, or JHVH, with the vowels of *Adonai*.) Astruc supposed that different source documents had been woven together in the composition of Genesis.

Astruc’s observation was gradually developed into a theory of the composition of the entire Pentateuch. The book of Deuteronomy was recognized as a distinct source. A distinction was made between passages that refer to God as *Elohim*. Some of these (e.g., Gen 1:1—2:4a, and various passages dealing with genealogies) were recognized as part of a Priestly source (P) that is represented extensively in Leviticus. The remaining narrative material was seen as a combination of Yahwistic source (J, following the German spelling *Jahweh*) and an Elohist one (E). From the 1860s, P was viewed as the latest (or next to latest) document, and the order was established as J, E, D, P (or J, E, P, D). The theory received its classic formulation from Julius Wellhausen in the 1870s and 1880s.

The “Documentary Hypothesis,” the view that the Pentateuch is a combination of (at least) four different documents, enjoyed the status of scholarly orthodoxy for about a century. Many variations of the theory were proposed, but the four-source theory was by far the dominant view. Only in the last quarter of the twentieth century did it come to be widely questioned. Before we can evaluate these objections, however, we need to appreciate the observations on which the hypothesis was based.

INDICATIONS OF MULTIPLE AUTHORSHIP

In Exod 6:2-3: “God also spoke to Moses and said to him: ‘I am YHWH. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but by my name YHWH I did not make myself known to them.’” Yet in Gen 4:26 people began to call upon the name of YHWH in the time of Enosh, grandson of Adam. God is often called YHWH in his dealings with the patriarchs, especially with Abraham. It is apparent, then, that Exod 6:2 comes from a different source than these passages in Genesis.

The variation in divine names is by no means the only criterion. In numerous cases we have doublets, or variant forms of the same story. The account of creation in Gen 1:1—2:3 is quite different from the story of Adam and Eve. Two versions of the flood story are intertwined in Genesis 6–9. Abraham identifies his wife Sarah as his sister to a foreign king in two separate stories (in chaps. 12 and 20). In a third story, Isaac identifies his wife Rebekah as his sister (chap. 26). There are two accounts of God’s covenant with Abraham (chaps. 15 and 17), two accounts of Abraham’s dealings with Hagar and Ishmael (chaps. 16 and 21), two accounts of the naming of Beersheba (chaps. 21 and 26). There are variant accounts of the crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus 14–15, and different accounts of the revelation of the commandments in Exodus 19–20 and in Deuteronomy. The mountain of the revelation is variously named Sinai or Horeb. The

Decalogue (Ten Commandments) is given three times, with some variations (Exod 20:1-17; 34:10-28; Deut 5:6-18). The list of forbidden animals is given twice (Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14). Many further examples could be given.

The argument that these duplications result from the combination of different documents can be well illustrated from the story of the flood, where J and P versions of the story can be separated. The two versions have not been preserved in full. Noah is never instructed to build the ark in J. But the outline of the two stories is clear. In one account Noah takes only one pair of animals into the ark. In the other he takes seven pairs. In one account the flood lasts 150 days; in the other, 40 days and 40 nights. Moreover, these two accounts can be aligned with strands or sources elsewhere in Genesis. There are clear links between the Priestly version and the Priestly account of creation in Gen 1:1—2:3, typified by the command to be fruitful and multiply. The anthropomorphic character of God in the J account (he regrets that he made humankind, and is pleased by the odor of sacrifice) is typical of the J source.

The example of the flood should suffice to show that sources are combined in the Pentateuch at least in some cases. It also shows that it is possible to line up consistent features of these sources in different passages. Proponents of the Documentary Hypothesis insist that consistent profiles can be established for each of the four sources, with strands that run through several biblical books.

Profiles of the Sources

The Priestly document is the easiest source to recognize. The dry, formulaic style is familiar from the account of creation in Genesis 1. God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. It is marked by a strong interest in genealogies, in dates, and in ritual observance (the Creator observes the Sabbath by resting on the seventh day). The book of Leviticus is quintessential Priestly material, as is the description of the tabernacle in Exodus 25–31 and 35–40. In P, history is punctuated by a series of covenants, with Noah, Abraham, and finally Moses. P has no angels, dreams, or talking animals. There is little dispute about the identification of P, although its date remains very controversial. I shall examine this strand of the Pentateuch in more detail in chapter 7.

THE FLOOD STORY IN GENESIS 6–9

J, the Yahwist	P, the Priestly source
6:5-8, 9b	6:9a, 10-22
7:1-5, 8a, 10, 12	7:6-7, 8b-9, 11, 13-16a
7:16b-17a, 23; 8:2b-3a	7: 17b-22, 24—8:2a; 8:3b-5
8:6, 8-12, 13b	8:7, 13a, 14-19
8:20-22	9:1-19

P: "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light."

(Genesis 1:3)

The D source is also relatively unproblematic. It is found primarily in the book of Deuteronomy, although some scholars now try to identify Deuteronomistic passages also in Genesis and Exodus. There are a few independent passages in Deuteronomy 32–34, but the main body of the book constitutes the basic D corpus. This material is written in a distinctive style. YHWH is said to love Israel, and Israel is commanded to love YHWH "with all your heart and soul," to listen to his voice, and to do what is right in his sight. YHWH brought Israel out of Egypt "with a strong hand and an outstretched arm." The central theme in Deuteronomy is the covenant, and its most distinctive commandment is that it forbids sacrifice outside of the central sanctuary. Since the work of W. M. L. de Wette at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Deuteronomy has been associated with the reform of King Josiah in 621 B.C.E. Deuteronomy is also the subject of chapter 8 below.

D: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

(Deuteronomy 6:5)



"Noah builds the ark with his sons. From the Catalan Haggadah, c. 1330 C.E."

The most problematic part of the Documentary Hypothesis is the distinction between the narrative sources, J and E. The distinction emerges clearly in three doublets in Genesis: Gen 12:10-21 (J), with its parallel in 20:1-18 (E; the wife-sister motif); 16:4-14 (J) and parallel in 21:8-21 (E; Hagar and Ishmael); and 26:26-33 (J) and parallel in 21:22-34 (E; controversy at Beersheba). The E accounts use the name Elohim for God, and associate revelation with dreams. They reflect on problems of guilt and innocence, and emphasize the “fear of God.” E has no primeval history; it begins with Abraham in Genesis 15. Abraham is called a prophet in 20:7 and is said to receive revelations in visions and dreams. Jacob and Joseph also receive revelations in dreams. The call of Moses closely resembles the call of prophets in the later books.

The J source is more colorful. It is familiar from the story of Adam and Eve, with its anthropomorphic God and talking snake. God is described in very human terms. He walks in the garden, regrets that he made humanity, is pleased by the odor of sacrifice, and gets angry. Abraham argues directly with YHWH over the fate of Sodom, and the deity is also represented by “the angel of the LORD” who appears on earth. The call of Abraham in Genesis 12 and the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15 are ascribed to J. The theme of promise and fulfillment is prominent in this strand. Abraham is told that in him all the families of the earth will be blessed (Gen 12:3).

J: “Then they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze.”

(Genesis 3:8)

While J and E are clearly distinguished in some passages, they are more difficult to disentangle in others. The narratives of the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 and of Jacob’s dream at Bethel in Genesis 28 are mainly E stories, but they also mention YHWH. It is possible that different forms of the stories were spliced together. The story of the burning bush in Exodus 3 is especially difficult. Moses was guarding the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, when he came “to Horeb, the mountain of God (Elohim). There the angel of YHWH appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush. . . . When YHWH saw that he had turned aside, God (Elohim) called to him out of the bush.” It is possible to explain this passage as the close intersplicing of J and E narratives, but we would need to assume that the editor took half a verse from one source and the other half from the other. Some scholars prefer to speak of JE, without attempting to separate the sources. The distinction between J and E becomes even more elusive in the book of Exodus, after the revelation of the name YHWH to Moses, but the Decalogue and the Book of the Covenant in Exodus 24 belong to the E source. Some scholars dispute whether E ever existed as a distinct, coherent source, while granting that J incorporated fragmentary E traditions.

E: “Then God said to him in a dream. . . .”

(Genesis 20:6)

“Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness and came to **Horeb, the mountain of God**. There *the angel of the LORD* appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, ‘I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.’ When *the LORD* saw that he had turned aside to see, **God called to him** out of the bush. . . .”

(**bold** = E; *italics* = J)

Dating the Sources

Once it became clear that the Pentateuch was not written by Moses, the dates of its various parts became matters of speculation. One fairly firm point of reference is provided by the date of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy 12 restricts sacrificial worship to the one “place that YHWH your God will choose,” and calls for the destruction of all the places of worship at the “high places.” Yet there were still multiple sacrificial sites after Moses, according to the books of Joshua, Judges, and Samuel. Leaders of Israel (Samuel, in I Samuel 7; Elijah, in I Kings 18) build altars and offer sacrifices at various locations. Even prophets such as Amos, who are very critical of cultic practices, never mention a law forbidding worship at more than one place. We only know of two attempts to centralize the Israelite cult. The first was by King Hezekiah, at the end of the eighth century (2 Kings 18), and the second was by his great-grandson, Josiah, in 621 B.C.E., roughly a century later (2 Kings 22). Only Josiah’s reform was based on a written law—the “book of the Torah” that had just been found in the temple. It appears that the law of centralization was an innovation of Josiah, and that the “book of the Torah” was Deuteronomy, or at least parts of it. This datum provides a fixed point for the dating of biblical narratives and laws. Texts that allow or endorse worship at multiple sanctuaries are probably older than the time of Josiah. Those that reflect knowledge of this law are presumably later.

Until recent years, most scholars have assumed that the narratives ascribed to J and E are pre-Josianic. Julius Wellhausen put J in the ninth century, E in the eighth, D in the seventh, and P in the sixth or fifth, but he paid little attention to the dates of J and E. His main argument was that P was later than D. This argument was controversial, and remains so more than a century later. I will consider it in detail in chapter 8 when I discuss the relation between P and D.

Gerhard von Rad popularized the view that J should be associated with the reign of Solomon, which he held to be a time of enlightenment. It is widely agreed that J originated in Judah, in the southern part of Israel. Abraham is associated with Hebron, a village near Jerusalem. There are analogies between J’s account of Abraham and the story of David. Both are associated with Hebron (David was crowned king there) and both are given covenants that require only that they be faithful to their God. Both Abraham and Isaac are associated with the cult at Beersheba, in southern Judah. Judah is especially prominent among the sons of Jacob. Only J includes the long story from the life of Judah

found in Genesis 38, which ends in the birth of Perez, the supposed ancestor of David and the kings of Judah. Judah is said to save Joseph from the older brothers who plan to kill him. In the J account of the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15, God promises that Abraham's descendants will rule over the land "from the river of Egypt to the river Euphrates." It has been claimed that these were the bounds of the kingdom of David and Solomon, although recent historians have been very skeptical about this claim. In von Rad's view, the Yahwist was a court historian, who wrote to explain how a people that had been slaves in Egypt became a kingdom. The Solomonic empire was the fulfillment of a promise made to Abraham centuries earlier.

Von Rad's hypothesis has not stood the test of time. On the one hand, scholars have been increasingly troubled by the lack of any evidence outside the Bible for the glory of Solomon. On the other hand, even if Solomon's empire extended from the river of Egypt to the river Euphrates, at most this would mean that Genesis 15 was written no earlier than the time of Solomon. It would not guarantee a Solomonic date.

The Elohist source has usually been dated a little later than J, on the assumption that it was created as a northern alternative account of the prehistory of Israel, after the separation of the northern kingdom (Israel) from Judah after the death of Solomon. There are good reasons to associate the E source with the northern kingdom. In Genesis 28 Jacob names the place where he has a dream Bethel, the "house of God." Bethel was one of the state temples of the northern kingdom, set up by Jeroboam I, the secessionist king. Jeroboam also built the city of Peniel, which is the site of a struggle between Jacob and God or an angel in Genesis 32. In the E story of Joseph, it is Reuben, rather than Judah, who saves Joseph from his brothers. There is a close analogy between the forced labor imposed on the Israelites in Egypt in Exodus 1 and the labor draft, imposed by Solomon and his son Rehoboam, which led to the revolt of the northern tribes. Some stories in the E source are critical of Aaron, the supposed ancestor of the Jerusalem priests. It is plausible, then, that E was composed in the northern kingdom. The prominence of the Arameans in the Jacob story may suggest a date in the ninth century or early eighth century, when the Arameans were the most significant foreign power in relation to Israel. J is generally thought to be slightly older, but the evidence is not conclusive.

Neither J nor E shows any awareness of the Deuteronomic prohibition of worship outside of the central sanctuary in Jerusalem. It is most probable, then, that these sources were compiled before the reform of King Josiah in the late seventh century B.C.E., although some additions could still have been made later.

CRITICISM OF THE DOCUMENTARY HYPOTHESIS

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, many of the established certainties of the Documentary Hypothesis were called into question. It has been argued that the migration of Abraham would make best sense in the period after the Babylonian exile, when Jewish exiles in fact returned from Babylon to Israel. Abraham is not described as a returning exile, however, and so the analogy is imperfect. Nonetheless, the early chapters of Genesis

(both J and P sources) show extensive points of contact with Mesopotamia, and while these contacts are not incompatible with an early date they can be explained more easily in the exilic period or later than in the early monarchy. The story of Adam and Eve is never cited in the preexilic prophets and becomes prominent only in the Hellenistic period. This does not prove that the J source was written late, but it does create some misgivings about the supposedly early date of the J strand of Genesis. It may be that the primeval history in Genesis I–II, where most of the Babylonian analogies are found, was a late addition to the J source.

A different line of critique was developed by Rolf Rendtorff, a student of von Rad. Rendtorff noted that Gunkel, the founder of form criticism, treated the stories of Genesis as discrete units, akin to folklore, and paid little attention to the major sources, although he did not deny their existence. Martin Noth, a contemporary of von Rad, analyzed the Pentateuch in terms of five major themes, which both J and E formulated in their different ways. Implicit in Noth's analysis was the insight that the patriarchal stories are different in kind from the story of the exodus, even if one recognizes J and E strands in both. For most readers, the differences between these blocks or themes are more obvious and more significant than the difference between J and E.

Rendtorff went further than Noth and questioned the entire validity of the J and E sources. His student Erhard Blum has proposed an elaborate alternative to the Documentary Hypothesis. Abandoning J and E, Blum finds two main stages in the composition of the Pentateuch. The first he calls the "D-Komposition" (K^D), which was the work of editors from the Deuteronomistic tradition. He dates this composition to the generation after the Babylonian exile. The second stage is the "P-Komposition" (K^P), the work of Priestly writers who edited K^D , and so worked even later. This is not to suggest that all of the pentateuchal narratives are as late as the exile. The authors of K^D inherited two main documents. One was an edition of Genesis 12–50. The second was a "Life of Moses," which had been composed some time after the fall of the northern kingdom. Both stories incorporated elements from the early monarchy. There have been several other proposals along the lines of Blum's work, but differing in details.

It is clear enough that the patriarchal stories and the Exodus tradition present different accounts of the origin of Israel. The question is whether they were combined already in J and E, or only later by the Priestly writers and Deuteronomists. Perhaps the main issue raised by the work of Rendtorff and Blum is whether the composition of the pentateuchal narratives can be ascribed to Deuteronomistic editors, no earlier than the Babylonian exile. There is an obvious problem with this thesis. The signature element of Deuteronomy was the insistence that sacrifice should be offered only at the central sanctuary in Jerusalem. Yet much of Genesis consists of stories of the founding of other cult sites, including the northern sanctuary of Bethel, by the patriarchs. Such stories could only lend legitimacy to the sanctuaries that were condemned to destruction in Deuteronomy. Blum allows that the narratives of Genesis 12–50 had already been put together before the exile, but it is still difficult to see why Deuteronomistic editors would let so much of this material stand. It is surely more plausible that the pentateuchal narrative was already established and authoritative before Deuteronomy was added. Also, Blum's argument does not do

justice to the clear distinction between J and E in the patriarchal stories noted above. It remains likely that J and E were composed, before the Deuteronomic reform, although some material in the primeval history may have been added later.

The recent debates about the Pentateuch show that the reconstruction of earlier forms of the biblical text is a highly speculative enterprise. Perhaps the main lesson to be retained is that these texts are indeed composite and incorporate layers from different eras. The biblical text is not a consistent systematic treatise. Rather it is a collection of traditional materials that places different viewpoints in dialogue with one another and offers the reader a range of points of view.

The Pentateuch cannot have reached its present form earlier than the postexilic period. There is good evidence that the Priestly strand was added as an editorial layer. It provides the opening chapter of Genesis and connects the narrative with its genealogies and dating formulae. It is not apparent that there ever was a coherent Priestly narrative about the patriarchs. We shall also see that some elements in the Priestly strand were added quite late, long after the Babylonian exile. Nonetheless, it is not clear whether Priestly or Deuteronomic editors should be credited with establishing the shape of the Pentateuch as we have it. The evidence for Priestly editing of Genesis and Exodus is much clearer than that for Deuteronomic editing. This suggests that the first four books of the Pentateuch were edited by Priestly writers before Deuteronomy was added. The fact that Deuteronomy stands as the last book of the Pentateuch gives the impression that it was added last. There were certainly some Deuteronomic additions in the earlier books, but their extent remains in dispute. Ultimately there is much to be said for the view that the Pentateuch as it stands is a compromise document, in which Priestly and Deuteronomic theologies were presented side by side, without any clear indication that one should take precedence.

In the following chapters I do not attempt to extrapolate theologies of J or E to any significant degree. P and D, in contrast, correspond to well-defined blocks of text and present clear and well-developed theologies. These sources will accordingly be treated in separate chapters.

FOR FURTHER READING

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