

Toward a Positive Model for the Composition of the Pentateuch

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THE TORAH (GENESIS, EXODUS, LEVITICUS, NUMBERS, AND DEUTERONOMY), otherwise known as the Pentateuch or the Five Books of Moses, is a group of ancient Israelite compositions that form the foundation of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures and that have profoundly impacted human civilization for millennia.

Influence of the Torah

The magnitude of the Torah's influence is due primarily to the belief that it communicates an authoritative account of the creation of our world, followed by the divine program to establish covenant relationships with humanity generally (as embodied by Noah) and with the people of Israel specifically (as embodied by Abraham). The Torah contains narrative accounts of how God led and provided for his people. Within this narrative framework are various sets of laws and instructions toward maintaining and enhancing the relationships both between God and humanity, on the one hand, and between humans and their fellow humans, on the other.

The Pentateuch has continued to speak to and shape the values and worldviews of Jews and Christians who have believed in God as living and eternal. In our modern world, the principles of Torah—taught through stories, laws, and other literary genres—provide wisdom for navigating the complexities of life.

Quite often, the principles represented in the Torah are not obvious to modern readers because they underlie narratives or instructions that are set in an ancient Near Eastern (ANE) world and culture that is very different from

our own. Particularly challenging to modern ideals are harsh aspects, such as capital punishment by stoning and extermination of the inhabitants of the land of Canaan by divine direction under theocratic rule. Therefore, recognition of beneficial Torah principles requires sensitivity to the biblical text and an understanding of the historical context from which they arose.

Authority of the Torah

Jews and Christians of yore believed that God had a guiding role in the production of the Torah by his human servant(s), with whom he interacted. This traditional belief, accordingly, holds that the Torah reflects God's knowledge and will, and therefore it carries divine authority that ordinary books do not have. True, many believing Jews and Christians may no longer hold to the traditional belief of divine authorship or divine inspiration in the same way their forebears believed, but they still recognize the core teachings and essential authority of the Torah in their respective faith traditions.

Traditionally, the divine authority of the Torah is based on its authorship by the prophet Moses, to whom God directly communicated messages for instructing and leading his Israelite nation. Moses is the dominant human figure from the book of Exodus onward, the speaker throughout the book of Deuteronomy, and the first writer named in the Bible (Exod 17:14). Some passages explicitly describe him as writing or being commanded by God to write documents that comprise small or large portions of the Torah (Exod 17:14; 24:4; 34:27; Num 33:2; Deut 31:9, 19, 22, 24).

However, the Torah books as complete compositions are anonymous in that they do not state who wrote them. Even if one believes that Moses was the original source or primary author, it is clear that the Pentateuch contains editing by other unnamed individuals. Most obviously, someone other than Moses wrote the report of his death (Deut 34). Also, for example, there are historical notices in the Pentateuch that date to periods after the death of Moses, such as (1) the reference in Gen 14:14 to "Dan," the later name of the city that was formerly (including in the time of Moses) called "Laish" or "Leshem" (Josh 19:47; Judg 18:29); (2) a list of kings who ruled Edom "before any king reigned over the Israelites" (Gen 36:31–39; cf. 1 Chr 1:43–50); and (3) the explanation that the "people of Esau" (Edomites) dispossessed the Horites "as Israel did to the land of their possession, which the LORD gave to them" (Deut 2:12), written after the Israelite conquest of Canaan. However, as Richard Averbeck and B. J. Hilbelink write in this volume (ch. 43), "The undisputed post-Mosaic are relatively few in number, and most of them are simply glosses that contemporize the text for a later audience."

The pentateuchal books are complex, including records in various literary styles of events and information over a great number of years, from creation to the arrival of the Israelites at the border of the land of Canaan. So it seems quite certain that the formation of the Pentateuch involved some compilation of oral traditions, written sources, and editing/redaction. As intimated above, even many people who hold that the Torah contains the divine word (per traditional Jewish and Christian belief) recognize that the creation of the Pentateuch involved more than divine revelation at Sinai.

Critical Theory Regarding Authorship of the Pentateuch

Too often, questions about the Pentateuch's historicity, dating, authorship, and coherence have overshadowed all other questions. But they are not the central concerns of the Torah itself. So, why have we again allowed them to take center stage in this volume? The reason is that our answers to these questions have major implications for faith or doubt. Because the Pentateuch claims to contain divine revelation, none of us can remain indifferent to these questions. The answers impact how we think and live.

During the last few centuries, many biblical scholars have come to understand the Pentateuch not as an extended unified narrative (in whole or in large part), but rather as a compositional hodge-podge, especially as embodied in the regnant Documentary Hypothesis.¹ This highly theoretical reconstruction attributes the primary authorship of the Pentateuch to four anonymous "sources" (J, E, D, and P), which are said to have written the material contained within the five Torah books during the course of several centuries in the first millennium BCE, long after the stated historical setting of the Torah narrative.

The Documentary Hypothesis still has many followers in the United States, even as it has come under sharp criticism in the last decades. Now redaction criticism is more dominant in Europe, where scholars are arguing for redactional (editorial) layers in the Pentateuch and suggesting that the proper distinction is between P (Priestly) and non-P material. There is a wide spectrum of approaches in current pentateuchal scholarship, including form criticism, literary criticism, tradition criticism, reception criticism, and feminist criticism, among others. Common to several of these approaches is the view that Moses, the wilderness camp, and the wilderness sanctuary are fictitious inventions and retrojections from much later times, with the name "Moses" used as a pseudonym.

A main driving force behind the source-critical approach just described was the desire for "scientific" inquiry that accepts only empirical evidence—namely,

1. See chapter 2 in this volume.

that which is observable by human means or which can be replicated by human beings in our material world. This approach brackets out the possibility of divine intervention in human experience.

Source critics, followed by form, redaction, and tradition critics, have produced a wealth of valuable research in their close investigations of the Pentateuch. However, the endless variety of reconstructions of the origins of the Torah, whether within the overall Documentary Hypothesis model or accepting only part of it (as European redaction critics do), have been symptomatic of the speculative nature of their quests. True science recognizes the limitations of available evidence.

Within recent decades, new methodological insights and a wealth of additional data (especially from ANE texts) have challenged the Documentary Hypothesis and its presuppositions. These presuppositions include the idea that an author of the ancient biblical text should have written in conformity with modern Western literary standards of coherence, linearity, nonredundancy, and noncontradiction, and could express only one perspective, attributing “one-track minds to the biblical authors.”² Thus, for proponents of the Documentary Hypothesis, a departure from such standards, such as contradiction or duplication in a narrative, indicates another source or redactor. However, the study of extrabiblical ANE texts demonstrates that ancient writers did not think about literary coherence as we do and could prefer repetition for literary effect.

Today, the differences of perspective among scholars regarding the composition of the Torah are so great that scholars with varying views find it difficult or impossible to even engage in productive dialogue with each other, as described by the editors of the tome 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*,

2. Weeks 2011, 68.

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.³

Toward a New Positive Model of the Composition of the Pentateuch

The present book offers a rethinking of the composition of the Pentateuch toward the formulation of a more positive model. It seeks to hear the ancient texts in their own terms, is open to the credibility of their self-testimony, allows them to challenge our assumptions, and recognizes limits of real evidence without a hermeneutic of suspicion that *a priori* brackets out interpretive possibilities. Our goal has been to go as far as available evidence and knowledge allow while exercising restraint and moderation not to go beyond them. Unlike older traditional formulations, the new approach takes much more evidence into account, including recent research on the development of writing, ANE practices of authorship and editing, literary structure and coherence, diachronic linguistics, reuse of biblical texts by other texts and the direction of dependence between them, and other factors in pentateuchal texts that previous interpretations have inadequately incorporated.

This volume has originated from the Exploring the Composition of the Pentateuch (ECP) research project. The first conference of scholars involved in this project was held at Andrews University (Berrien Springs, Michigan) in 2016. It was followed by four more such conferences in subsequent years (2018, 2022, 2023, 2025). The papers from these conferences have been or will be published in volumes titled *Exploring the Composition of the Pentateuch* in the Bulletin for Biblical Research Supplements series by Eisenbrauns, an imprint of Pennsylvania State University Press.

3. Gertz et al. 2016, 2–3.

The present volume brings together Jewish and Christian experts in multiple fields from several continents, especially from the United States, Israel, and Europe—the three aforementioned regions whose scholarly communities often have difficulty communicating with one another. The book has resulted from a collaborative effort by scholars who share a similar general approach. However, the authors of the essays in this volume do not agree on all points, and as editors we have not attempted to harmonize differences. Still, we affirm that there is yet a basis for meaningful and constructive dialogue about the formation of the Torah, which has impacted our lives and traditions.

For discussions on the composition of the Pentateuch, we find some methodological concepts to be of special significance.

1. *The Final Form of the Text*: The final form of the text of the Pentateuch must be the basis for any compositional theory, and not hypothetical reconstructions or traditions of reading it. This also implies taking into account that the manuscript witnesses indicate some textual fluidity during the biblical period.
2. *Comparative Analysis*: Empirical models and comparative studies help in calibrating our theories to the ancient world, while the complexity of similarities and differences between the Pentateuch and ANE sources needs to be acknowledged and simplistic reductionisms avoided. While social, economic, geographic, and historical information sheds light on the setting and date of the Pentateuch, we need to avoid speculative dating of the Pentateuch based on the historical fallacy that a certain concept could only be thought and expressed in the one period in the evolution of the religion of Israel in which we think it fits best.⁴
3. *Diachronic Linguistics*: Diachronic linguistics provides an objective basis for the dating of the Pentateuch vis-à-vis the other books of the Hebrew Bible and needs to be taken into consideration.
4. *Literary Coherence*: The perception of literary coherence is culturally conditioned. We need to check our inclination to read the Pentateuch based on *our* standards of coherence, linearity, nonredundancy, and noncontradiction. Empirical cultural evidence and comparative studies of ANE literature can assist in better understanding the cohesive nature and readability of passages in the Pentateuch.
5. *Literary Reuse and Direction of Dependence*: A positive assessment of literary reuse and subsequent determination of the direction of depen-

4. See especially Sommer 2011.

dence (source text to borrowing text) should precede any theory concerning the composition of the biblical text. It can aid in establishing the relative chronology between the parts of the Pentateuch, as well as between the Pentateuch and the rest of the Hebrew Bible, if it is used with more rigor and accountability than is frequently seen in the discipline.

6. *Internal Evidence and Historical Context of the Composition:* The Pentateuch claims divine intervention in history and divine revelation of many of its pericopes, as mediated by a historical and an authoritative person by the name of Moses at the time of the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. Whether one adheres to this belief or not, one must attempt to place oneself within the original context of the Pentateuch to fully understand how the people of ancient Israel understood their foundational literature.
7. *Limited Evidence for Textual Pre-History:* The Pentateuch explicitly refers to some literary materials used in its composition and indicates some editing/redaction, but extant evidence is insufficient for precise reconstructions of the pre-history of the biblical text, such as those speculated by form, source, redaction, and tradition criticism.
8. *Dating the Pentateuch:* Evidence indicates that the basic composition of the Pentateuch was accomplished centuries before the Babylonian exile of Judah in the sixth century BCE. Both the contents of the pentateuchal texts and their linguistic dating attest to an earlier, rather than a later, historical setting.
9. *Israelite Literacy:* Writing was available to Israelites throughout the biblical period, not just during the late monarchy and beyond.

Pursuing questions concerning the composition of the Pentateuch is important for understanding its reliability and authority. However, the Pentateuch is first and foremost an invitation into a covenantal relationship with God, who reveals himself through these texts. In their essay, Joshua Berman and Daniel I. Block write:

In the Scriptures we hear the voice of God, not merely the reflections of ancient human authors. Rather than smothering the impulse for rigorous analysis, these presuppositions fuel painstaking work and close readings of texts as we have them. While our interpretations are always in soft lead pencil, subject to modification and correction by the discovery of new data or incorporation of overlooked features in the text, our strategy involves a

sympathetic consideration of alternative viewpoints and rigorous attention to the primary evidence, which is the text as we find it.⁵

Description of the Present Volume

This volume is intended to serve as a user-friendly textbook and resource with short chapters on a wide range of relevant and interesting topics for anyone who wants to explore the composition of the Pentateuch. It is especially designed for seminary or upper-division undergraduate students, including those majoring in Bible, religion, Jewish studies, ancient Near Eastern studies, comparative literature, and linguistics. It could be used in several ways, including as a textbook for a course, a resource for research papers on specific subjects, or a source of information for individuals who are pondering the composition of the Torah and the nature of its authority. Each of the chapters is quite independent on its topic, but the volume is organized so that it can be read from beginning to end in a logical progression.

Words in ancient languages, mostly Hebrew, are given in transliteration and with English translation, so knowledge of those languages is not necessary for understanding the chapters. Verse references are those of the Hebrew Masoretic Text, with any differing English verse references following in brackets, for example, Gen 32:1 [31:55].

This book covers several key categories of information in six parts, plus introductory and concluding sections. The introductory section provides background to research on pentateuchal origins and discussions of pseudonymity within the ANE context.

Part One, “Setting the Stage,” explains how textual analysis should take various aspects of a text into account, describes the manuscript witnesses to the Pentateuch and the nature of its text, and explores empirical ANE evidence from Mesopotamia and Egypt that sheds indirect light on the way in which the Torah may have been formed.

Part Two, “The Pentateuch and Ancient Near Eastern Literature,” provides data and discussions regarding the early history of writing in the ANE, indicating the possibility of early writing of pentateuchal material. This section also investigates various genres of ANE literature that are relevant for comparison with the Pentateuch.

Part Three, “Linguistic Dating of the Pentateuch,” introduces a methodology for dating based on the development of the Hebrew language, identifies

5. See chapter 44 in this volume.

loanwords (from other languages) in the Hebrew of the Pentateuch that yield clues to the dating of its language, and examines linguistic dating in different literary genres of the Torah.

Part Four, “Literary Styles in the Pentateuch,” elucidates the nature of coherence and composite texts in the Pentateuch and then analyzes its various literary genres.

Part Five, “Literary Structure and Unity in the Pentateuch,” provides for holistic readings of the individual Torah books, revealing how they are designed as cohesive units, and then synthesizes evidence for the thematic unity of the Torah as a whole.

Part Six, “Innerbiblical Reuse in and of the Pentateuch,” investigates the methodology and application of assessing literary parallels within the Torah and between the Torah and other biblical books, first identifying actual parallels and then seeking to determine the relative chronological order in which the parallel texts were composed.

The opening chapter (ch. 42) of the Final Reflections section discusses passages in the Pentateuch that have been especially significant in discussions regarding its composition. The following chapter considers biblical data regarding an authorial role of Moses in the origin of the Torah (ch. 43). An epilogue (ch. 44) ponders faith commitment and critical analysis of the Pentateuch from Jewish and Christian perspectives. Then an appendix reprints (with permission) a witty and delightful parody on the Documentary Hypothesis by David J. A. Clines, using the story of Winnie the Pooh as his text.

At the end of the book are complete bibliographies organized according to each main section of this volume. In the essays themselves the works are cited by abbreviated references in footnotes. These bibliographies allow the reader with a particular interest in one of the main sections of the volume to gain an overview of the relevant key sources. Finally, indexes of Ancient Texts and Inscriptions and Biblical References enable the reader to easily locate specific items of information.

A Brief History of the Documentary Hypothesis

Benjamin Kilchör and Joshua Berman

The Beginnings of the Documentary Hypothesis (Seventeenth–Eighteenth Centuries)

The inception of modern overall pentateuchal criticism is often attributed to Baruch Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670).¹ In this seminal work, Spinoza posited that the Pentateuch formed part of a larger historical composition, the Enneateuch, which also encompassed the Former Prophets. He contended that Ezra compiled this intricate work from diverse sources.² Since the narrative spanned from Genesis to Kings, Spinoza asserted that it must have been written after the final events of the book of Kings. Despite containing what he believed to be Mosaic materials, such as the Book of Wars: Exod 17:14; Num 21:14; the list of campsites: Num 33:2; the Song of Moses in Deut 32 and various laws, numerous passages suggested that their time of composition postdated Moses, and thus the Pentateuch was a compilation rather than an exclusive work of Moses. Spinoza believed that any attempt to recreate the prehistory of the text could only be speculative.

Responding to Spinoza, Richard Simon, in his *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament* (1678), agreed that the Pentateuch could not have solely originated from Moses.³ Simon acknowledged Moses' use of older sources for Genesis and asserted that scribes and archivists, who were inspired prophets, handed down the documents behind Exodus–Deuteronomy. He countered Spinoza, asserting that the complex origin of the Pentateuch did not undermine the authority of

1. Spinoza 1670.

2. Spinoza 1670, 118–43.

3. English translation: Simon 1682.

the Scriptures. But like Spinoza, he was a skeptic with regard to our capacity to say anything further about the authors and dating of any particular text.⁴

Jean Astruc is considered the father of pentateuchal source criticism. In his *Conjectures* (1753),⁵ he proposed that the names of God, Elohim and YHWH, could serve as distinguishing criteria for the sources in Genesis and the first two chapters of Exodus. However, Astruc aimed to defend Mosaic authorship. He argued that Moses, lacking firsthand experience of events since creation, relied on the written tradition of Israelite forefathers. Astruc ingeniously dissected Genesis into pieces, suggesting that it evolved by stringing together individual parts of older source writings. He organized the texts into four columns, using the two names of God as criteria in the first two columns, while the other two contained unassignable texts.

Johann Gottfried Eichhorn brought this version of the Documentary Hypothesis to prominence with his three-volume introduction to the Old Testament (1780–1783).⁶ He posited two main sources in Genesis, supplemented by numerous other documents. Eichhorn predicated his assignments not only on the basis of the names of God, but also on considerations of content and style, such as duplication and seeming contradictions. He assumed Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch apart from Genesis, which occurred before his time. The distinctive style of Deuteronomy, he explained, was a result of its nature as a speech.

The Development of the Classical Documentary Hypothesis (Nineteenth Century)

While through the eighteenth century, Genesis had been the focal point of Pentateuch research, Wilhelm Martin Leberecht de Wette shifted the focus to Deuteronomy. In his *Dissertatio critica-exegetica* (1805),⁷ de Wette contrasted Deut 12 and Exod 20:24–26, interpreting them as contradictory laws about the place of sacrifice.⁸ He argued that Deut 12, demanding cult centralization, must be from a later time, specifically the era of King Josiah, who introduced such centralization (2 Kgs 23). Additionally, de Wette postulated that the law of Lev 17, mandating meat consumption exclusively at the sanctuary, must have been unknown during the time from Samuel to Solomon, as Scripture attests

4. Simon 1682, 27, 29.

5. Astruc 1753.

6. Eichhorn 1780–1783.

7. Edited with commentary in Mathys 1805, 170–211.

8. See, however, Kilchör 2019, 455–67.

to sacrifices being offered at various sites during these periods. Otto Eissfeldt, in his *Introduction to the Old Testament* (1934), highlighted de Wette's Josianic dating of Deuteronomy as an Archimedean point for pentateuchal criticism as it provided, in his mind, an absolute time as a reference for dating other parts of the Pentateuch. The Judeo-Christian tradition had always conceived of the Pentateuch as composed by Moses. For Eissfeldt, that claim had been at times doubted and at times defended, but de Wette's observations settled the issue once and for all and allowed for a new model to be adduced.⁹ Even the late dating of P by the Graf–Kuenen–Wellhausen paradigm, and indeed the entire construct of four documents—J (Yahwist), E (Elohist), D (Deuteronomy), and P (Priestly)—was conceivable only once one began with the axiom that Deuteronomy was composed in the time of Josiah.

Despite de Wette's assumption that Deuteronomy was the latest piece, voices emerged as the nineteenth century progressed suggesting that large parts of the Law were later than Deuteronomy. Karl Heinrich Graf took center stage in this discussion with his work *Die geschichtlichen Bücher des Alten Testaments* (1866).¹⁰ Graf particularly considered priestly-ritual laws and some priestly narratives from Exodus and Numbers to be later than Deuteronomy.¹¹ Nonetheless, he still believed that the foundational Priestly narratives were early.

In various publications, the Dutch theologian Abraham Kuenen took up Graf's considerations but criticized him for dating only the priestly laws and not the priestly *Grundschrift* after Deuteronomy.¹² He introduced the familiar labels for the most familiar version of the Documentary Hypothesis—J, E, D, and P. Kuenen regarded P (the Priestly source) as the *Grundschrift*—the foundational document—of the Pentateuch, to which everything else was subsequently added. E (the Elohist source) originated in the Northern Kingdom, while P was believed to be a product of the Jerusalem Temple, representing priestly interests. Thus, texts in which non-priests offer sacrifices, such as the accounts of Noah and of the patriarchs, are assigned to JE. Kuenen proposed a chronological sequence: J, otherwise known as the Yahwist (Northern Kingdom, ninth/eighth c. BCE) was supplemented by the Elohist (Northern Kingdom, ca. 750 BCE) to form JE in the seventh–sixth century BCE. This was then supplemented with D, the

9. Eissfeldt 1934, 202.

10. Graf 1866.

11. However, there are still good reasons to believe that the priestly-ritual laws are presupposed in Deuteronomy. See Kilchör 2020, 213–25.

12. See Houtman 1994, 104–7.

oldest form of Deuteronomy from Josianic times (seventh c. BCE), and finally with P, the Priestly writing, dated sometime after the reign of Josiah. While the four-source theory gained acceptance, the late dating of P was not immediate. Julius Wellhausen's *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels* (1878)¹³ played a crucial role in solidifying the Graf-Kuenen thesis (JEDP).

Wellhausen's work, strongly influenced by an evolutionist worldview and Hegelian philosophy, also contained an undercurrent of anti-Judaism. In his view, the primal essence of religion embodied traits of authenticity and effortless expression. Subsequently, prophets emerged as heralds of ethics, gradually formalizing ethical ideals into legalistic structures. Judaism, in turn, evolved from this legalistic framework, marking a transition from a nomadic faith characterized by freedom to a more settled, agrarian ethos, then to a prophetic tradition, finally culminating in a rigid, dogmatic adherence to law. His work was enthusiastically received and made his name the best known in pentateuchal criticism to this day. However, it should be noted that this was not because his contentions were backed with rigorous scholarship, but because his hypothesis had the sheen of elegance: through it one could believe to have discovered the intellectual and spiritual development of ancient Israel.

Consider this example: According to Wellhausen, cultic sites were the starting point, connecting with de Wette's stages. The first stage, JE (including the Covenant Code), allowed sacrifices anywhere (Exod 20:22–26) and emerged from the early times of Israel, reflecting a spirit of spontaneity. The second stage, D, demanded cult centralization but had not yet been implemented (Deut 12). This demand emerged gradually under the influence of prophetic preaching (Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah), eventually leading to the Josianic reform in a period of greater rigidity. The third stage, P, presupposed a central sanctuary in the postexilic period. The tabernacle was a back projection from this time (especially Lev 17). Wellhausen posited a process from orality to writing, from spontaneity to institution, which would be later encapsulated in the famous formula *lex post prophetas*: The law comes after the prophets.

Despite the discovery of vast archives of inscriptions from Egypt and Mesopotamia in the mid-nineteenth century, scholars of the Wellhausen school largely refrained from relating to these finds.¹⁴ Scholars have since demonstrated time and again that the compositional and editorial practices evident in these sources are at odds with those hypothesized by the Documentary Hypothesis.

13. Wellhausen 1878.

14. Houtman 1994, 117.

The Establishment and Crisis of the Documentary Hypothesis (Twentieth Century)

Nonetheless, within German Protestant circles and the Anglo-Saxon world, strongly influenced by Samuel R. Driver, Wellhausen's system gained prominence. Catholic scholars also ascribed to it, but the Pontifical Biblical Commission's decree *De Mosaica authentia Pentateuchi* (1906) temporarily hindered this trend.¹⁵ However, the papal encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943) largely repealed this decree.¹⁶ Jewish researchers held diverse opinions, with some rejecting the Documentary Hypothesis entirely (e.g., Jacob, Cassuto),¹⁷ some aligning with Wellhausen (Auerbach),¹⁸ and others aligning with the Kaufmann¹⁹ school, recognizing J, E, D, and P but placing P as the oldest source, dating back to pre-state times in the history of ancient Israel.²⁰

Post-Wellhausen, research delved into intricate source divisions and redactions. Herman Gunkel's Genesis commentary (1901) marked a shift toward exploring the oral pre-stages of traditions preceding written sources.²¹ Gunkel viewed Genesis as a collection of sagas originating as small oral units. J and E represented a late stage in development, with sagas forming during the time of the judges, and then transforming up to the early kingdom. The Yahwist and the Elohist, who produced J and E in the ninth–eighth centuries, served as collectors who transcribed the sagas. P, in contrast, was seen as the product of an original writer and educated priest, with its late dating considered one of the secure results of criticism.

Gunkel's theses found continuity in the work of Albrecht Alt and his students, Martin Noth and Gerhard von Rad. These scholars allowed the tracing of much pentateuchal content back to the pre-state, nomadic era (second millennium BCE). The Albright school's archaeological theses, primarily in the English-speaking world, further supported this perspective. Gerhard von Rad, in *Das formgeschichtliche Problem des Hexateuch* (1938),²² expanded Gunkel's question to the entire Hexateuch. He noted that in texts such as Deut 25:5b–9,

15. Pius X 1906.

16. Pius XII 1943.

17. Jacob 2000; Cassuto 2005.

18. Auerbach 1953.

19. Kaufmann 1960.

20. For a history of voices fundamentally dissenting from the mainstream of Pentateuch scholarship, see Bergsma and Morrow 2023, 3–78.

21. Gunkel 1901.

22. Von Rad 1938.

we find references to the patriarchs, the exodus, the wilderness trek, and the conquest of the land, but no reference to a Sinai covenant event and the giving of the law. Von Rad suggested that the Sinai tradition, distinct from the exodus and land conquest tradition, was an originally independent tradition complex. By his account, the Yahwist, during Solomon's era, combined traditions into a salvation-historical draft, integrating the Sinai tradition and placing the Israelite prehistory before it.

From Wellhausen to the 1960s, a consensus around the Documentary Hypothesis with the sources JEDP was established.²³ However, in the 1970s, this consensus fractured, notably with the works of John Van Seters and Rolf Rendtorff. Van Seters, in *Abraham in History and Tradition* (1975),²⁴ argued (against the Albright school) that the patriarchal stories reflected Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian period conditions, not those of Israel's pre-state era. Against von Rad, he argued that the Yahwist dated to the exilic period and not the time of Solomon. E, moreover, he maintained, had never existed; the Elohistic pieces were different traditions taken up by J. Arguing from another perspective, Rendtorff, in *Das überlieferungsgeschichtliche Problem des Pentateuch* (1977),²⁵ deemed Wellhausen and Gunkel incompatible. Either there were composed sources with their own linguistic and content profiles, or there was a collection of sagas of various origins. Rendtorff argued for the latter and declared the Documentary Hypothesis to be pure fiction. In his view, J and E never existed, and what we find in the narrative portions of the Pentateuch are a collection of only non-Priestly traditions combined by one, or perhaps two postexilic editors.

The Current Situation: No Agreement in Sight (Twenty-First Century)

The current landscape is one of fragmentation. P is generally accepted as postexilic, sometimes viewed as a newly composed source, a redaction of pre-existing materials, or a blend of both. There are scholars who date P much earlier or reject the P/non-P distinction altogether. The majority still adheres to the Josianic dating of the basic stock of D, with a trend toward later dating in Europe. Diverse positions exist on J and E, with European research largely abandoning J and E in favor of detailed, competing models in the wake of Rendtorff,²⁶ but

23. See Römer 2014, 61–63.

24. Van Seters 1975.

25. Rendtorff 1977.

26. On J, see Römer 2006, 29–50. E has already been disputed earlier.

dating the sources to a later period than suggested by the Documentary Hypothesis.²⁷ Neo-Documentarians in the United States advocate for a revival of the Documentary Hypothesis, resembling the old consensus with a tendency toward later dating.²⁸ The fragmented situation of the current scholarship may be summarized by the testimonies of two prominent pentateuchal source critics. One notes, “Each [scholar] operates with [their] own set of working assumptions, each uses different methods, and each produces [their] own results. In every other academic discipline, such a situation would be felt to be untenable.”²⁹ And as another has observed, “Scholars tend to operate from such different premises, employing such divergent methods, and reaching such inconsistent results, that meaningful progress has become impossible. The models continue to proliferate, but the communication seems only to diminish. . . . [Scholars] tend to talk past one another; not to hear what one another is saying, not reading one another’s work sufficiently.”³⁰

Perhaps it is time to critically reassess the remaining majority opinions surrounding P and D and approach the composition of the Pentateuch in a novel way. This reevaluation should place greater emphasis on empirical research, often neglected in the speculative research history of past centuries.³¹ Such a renewed focus would attend to the ways ancient writers and editors worked with their texts as potential models for how the biblical writers worked. Further, advances in stylistics and machine learning allow us today to identify authorial strands in many modern works. It is high time that rigorous linguistic analysis take a central place in the diachronic study of the Hebrew Bible, and with it, of the Pentateuch.

27. E.g., Levin 2007, 209–30; Van Seters 2013.

28. E.g., Baden 2009.

29. Dozeman, Schmid, and Schwartz 2011, xi.

30. See Levinson 2013.

31. See, e.g., Berman 2017; Ziemer 2020.