

## Leviticus

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ALL SCHOLARS AGREE THAT THE book of Leviticus derives from the priestly school of ancient Israel.<sup>1</sup> Large portions of the book focus on the sacrifices to be offered by the priests (chs. 1–7), the installation of Aaron and his sons as priests (chs. 8–10), skin diseases to be diagnosed by the priests (chs. 13–14), the Yom Kippur ritual performed by the high priest (ch. 16), the laws governing the priesthood (chs. 21–22), and the menorah and table within the Holy Place, which could be entered only by the priests (24:1–9). True, other portions of Leviticus speak to all Israel (e.g., the dietary laws in ch. 11 and the festival calendar in ch. 23), but in the main the book is devoted to priestly concerns. It is for this reason that the book obtained the name *Λευιτικόν* (*Leuitikon*) in the Greek tradition and *Liber Leviticus* in the Latin tradition, especially in light of the status of the tribe of Levi as the priestly class within ancient Israelite tradition.

Within that same tradition there is nothing more priestly than the tabernacle and all it represents; it is, after all, the venue at which the priests of Israel supervised the worship of God on behalf of the people as a whole.<sup>2</sup> It is for this reason that the author of the book of Leviticus used the blueprint of the tabernacle as the design for the literary structure of the composition. This discovery is a relatively

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1. I use the term “priestly school” advisedly, with reference to the ultimate source of the large chunk of material that spans Exod 25 through Num 10, including the entire book of Leviticus. And while most of this material is ascribed to the so-called P source by those who accept the JEDP theory, I distinguish the “priestly school” from the “priestly source,” since the former relates to the texts of a ritual-cultic nature only, while the latter includes (by those who accept the theory) narrative texts such as Gen 1, 17, etc. To my mind, however, the narrative portions of the Bible should not be subdivided into smaller parts (J, E, P, etc.), but rather should be understood as unified literary compositions to be read holistically (see, e.g., Rendsburg 2016).

2. Obviously, the tabernacle venue would be replaced by the temple when constructed by Solomon in the mid-tenth c. BCE.

recent one in the annals of biblical scholarship, as it was not noticed until the brilliant Mary Douglas (1921–2007) observed this pattern in her pathfinding book *Leviticus as Literature* (1999).<sup>3</sup> First, though, some background material.

### Mary Douglas's Proposal: The Book of Leviticus as a Literary Tabernacle

The springboard for Douglas's assertion was the proposal by Nahum Sarna that the tripartite division of the tabernacle reflects the similar tripartite division of Mount Sinai.<sup>4</sup> As laid out in Exod 19 and 24, (a) the people as a whole occupied the lower slopes; (b) Aaron, his two sons, and the elders were permitted halfway up the mountain; and (c) only Moses was allowed on the summit. In like fashion, according to the priestly instructions in Exod 25–40 and the book of Leviticus, (a) the people as a whole were allowed to enter the Outer Court of the tabernacle, including the area surrounding the main altar and the laver; (b) the priests were permitted access to the sanctuary or Holy Place, which contained the table, the lampstand, and the incense altar; and (c) only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies, which housed the Ark of the Covenant. As Moses, the elders, and the Israelites at Mount Sinai (in three separate areas), so Aaron, the priests, and the Israelites in the tabernacle (in three separate areas). In such fashion, the Torah teaches that the people of Israel could take the sanctity of Mount Sinai with them, as it were, in the form of the tripartite tabernacle.<sup>5</sup>

Douglas extended the parallel between Mount Sinai and the tabernacle to the layout of the book of Leviticus.<sup>6</sup> In her analysis, the entire book of Leviticus is laid out on the pattern of the tabernacle; that is to say, once more a tripartite division arises: (a) chapters 1–17 correspond to the Outer Court; (b) chapters 18–24 correspond to the sanctuary or Holy Place; and (c) chapters 25–27 correspond to the Holy of Holies (see Figure 1). Note further that each chunk of literature corresponds in relative size to the different parts of the Tabernacle, with (a) the largest, (b) the middle-sized, and (c) the smallest. See Figures 2 and 3 as a way

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3. Douglas 1999.

4. Sarna 1986, 203; 1991, 105. Sarna, in turn, was inspired by several opaque comments by Nahmanides (1194–1270), also known as Ramban, in his commentary to Exod 25:1 and in his introduction to Numbers.

5. It is important to note here, however, that the holiness of space ranks either second or third in the biblical tradition. First and foremost is the holiness of time inherent in the Sabbath (Gen 2:1–3) (Heschel 1951), followed either by Mount Horeb/Sinai (Exod 3:5, 19:23), and/or by the holiness of the people of Israel (Exod 19:6). As indicated, the former, the holy mountain, would be continued in some fashion via the tabernacle (Exod 40:9–11).

6. Douglas 1999, 218–31, adumbrated in Douglas 1995.

of envisioning these proportions, with the latter highlighting the presence of the two partitions that divide the tabernacle into its component parts.<sup>7</sup>

It is not simply the relative sizes of the three parts of Leviticus that match the sections of the tabernacle, but their contents as well. Thus, for example, section (a) deals with the sacrifices (chs. 1–7), which were performed in the Outer Court, and the laws of purity (chs. 12–15), which governed who could enter the tabernacle; section (b) includes laws specific to the priests (chs. 21–22), who alone could enter the sanctuary or Holy Place, and details concerning the lampstand and table (24:1–9), which were located therein; and section (c) focuses on the blessings and curses that will arise if Israel either observes or disobeys the covenant (ch. 26), which is embodied by the Ark housed in the innermost sanctum.

In light of the above, Douglas proposed that the individual chapters of Leviticus are to be placed on the tabernacle floorplan, thereby providing the reader with a virtual tour of the locus of Israelite worship as one proceeds through the book. The layout, according to Douglas, looks like this:<sup>8</sup>

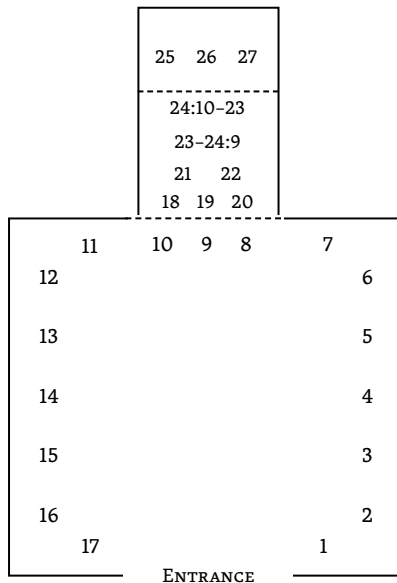


FIGURE 1

7. Douglas 1999, 222, fig. 11.2. Note that Douglas referred to both partitions as “screens” (and I followed her lead in Rendsburg 2008). Herein I prefer to reserve “screen” for the first one, the *masak*, and to use “curtain” for the second one, the *paroket*, if only to distinguish the two similar partitions.

8. Douglas 1999, 223, fig. 11.3.

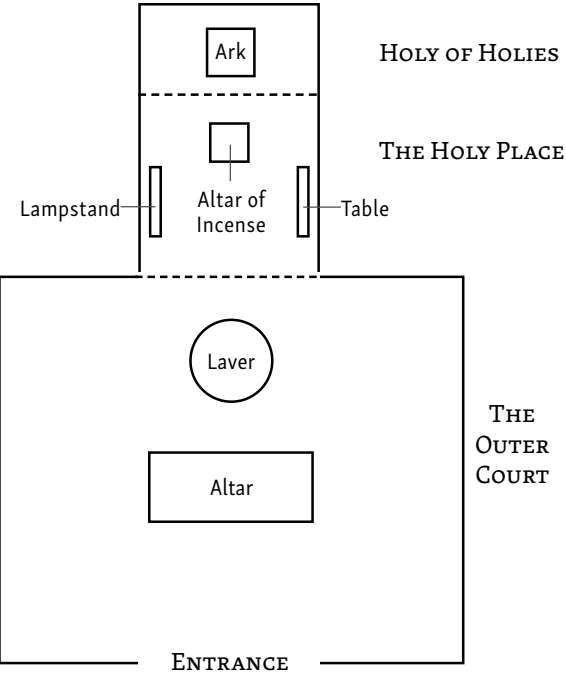


FIGURE 2

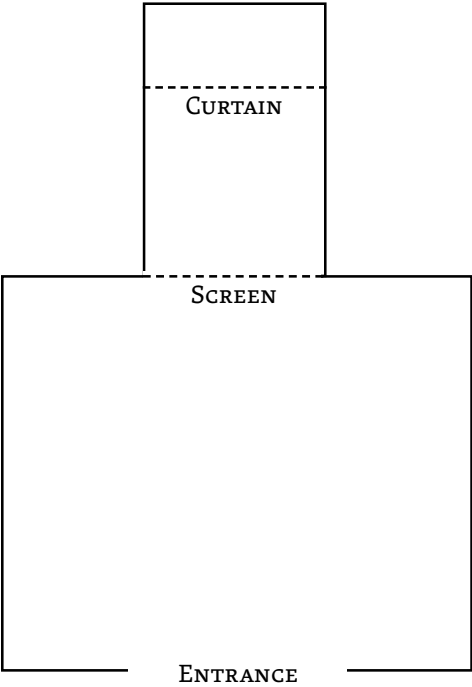


FIGURE 3

## The Two Narrative Portions of Leviticus as Support for Mary Douglas's Proposal

Support for Douglas's analysis is forthcoming from the presence of the two narratives in the book of Leviticus, one longer (chs. 8–10), one shorter (24:10–23). As Figure 1 shows, the two narrative units stand before the two partitions that divide the tabernacle into its three constituent parts. Chapters 8–10 relate the investiture of Aaron and his sons (chs. 8–9) and the strange fire that consumed Nadab and Abihu (ch. 10); while Lev 24:10–23 is the rather extraordinary tale about the blasphemer. The larger of these two is situated before the screen that separates the Outer Court and the sanctuary, called the *מָסָךְ* *masak* 'screen' (Exod 26:36–37; 36:37–38), while the smaller of these units is positioned before the curtain that separates the sanctuary from the Holy of Holies, called the *פָּרֹכֶת* *paroket* 'curtain' (Exod 26:31–35; 36:35–36). Note that the latter, shorter narrative has raised the eyebrows of biblical scholars over the years. For what purpose is served by the puzzling inclusion of the short tale concerning the blasphemer?<sup>9</sup> Douglas's scheme provides an explanation—for not only its inclusion, but for its placement as well, as it stands at the bridge between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies.

A close reading of these two narrative components, with special attention to particular passages, confirms Douglas's proposal.<sup>10</sup> First, the narrative of Lev 8–10 includes four references to the screen and the general area that separate the Outer Court and the sanctuary. Note the following:

1. Lev 8:31–36, where we read that Aaron and his sons remained at *פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד* *petah 'ohel mo'ed* 'the entrance to the tent of meeting'—that is, in the area between the screen and the altar—for seven days;
2. Lev 9:23, where Moses and Aaron entered and exited *אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד* *'ohel mo'ed* 'the tent of meeting'—that is, they went through the screen and then back out again;<sup>11</sup>
3. Lev 9:24, with reference to the fire that came forth *מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה* *millipne yhwh* 'from before the LORD,' which clearly must have emerged from the sanctuary<sup>12</sup>—that is, through the screen;

9. By way of example, see Friedman (2001, 399), who writes, "It is curious that this single story occurs here in a section fifteen chapters long that otherwise simply states the law without any accompanying narratives." I assume that Friedman's "section fifteen chapters long" refers to Lev 11–25, though one cannot be sure.

10. For what follows, see Rendsburg 2008.

11. Note the comment by Milgrom (1991, 588): "For what purpose did Moses and Aaron enter the Tent? None is cited, and it can only be conjectured," after which several suggestions are given. To which I now would add: to allow a passage through the first partition.

12. See Milgrom 1991, 590.

4. Lev 10:2, with reference to the second fire that came forth מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה *millipne yhw* 'from before the LORD,' this time the destructive one that consumed Nadab and Abihu, and which once more clearly must have emerged from the sanctuary,<sup>13</sup> that is, again passing through the screen.

Such a concentration of passages focusing on this particular locus within the greater tabernacle structure cannot be a coincidence. Their placement here in chs. 8–10 accords with Douglas' view that the reader of this narrative is, so to speak, walking the perimeter of the Outer Court and halts for a moment in front of the first partition, or *masak*, which separates the Outer Court from the sanctuary.

In the second case, within the much shorter narrative of Lev 24:10–23, there are no references to the second partition that separates the sanctuary from the Holy of Holies. But in the passage that immediately precedes this episode, there is a specific reference to the curtain, and in the passage that immediately follows there is the most subtle of references thereto. The former of these is Lev 24:3, where the word *paroket* is specifically used, in fact, in a unique expression, פָּרֹכֶת הָעֵדֻת *paroket ha-'edut* 'the curtain of the pact.' The scene, as Douglas emphasized,<sup>14</sup> places us within the sanctuary itself, as God commands Moses concerning the lampstand (vv. 2–4) and the table and its loaves (vv. 5–9).

The latter reference, Lev 25:1, is to a great extent the coup de grâce of the author of our text: וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בְּהַר סִינַי לֵאמֹר: *waydabber yhw 'el-moše ba-har sinay le'mor* 'and the LORD spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai saying.' The rabbis of old noticed the odd usage of the phrase בְּהַר סִינַי *ba-har sinay* 'on Mount Sinai' at this point. In their wording (Sifra, BeHar 1:1), מה עניין שמיטה לעניין הר, 'what is the connection between sabbatical and Mount Sinai?' (with reference to the sabbatical law which follows in Lev 25:2–7). Which is to imply, have not all of God's instructions to Moses been at or on Mount Sinai according to the priestly source? Would not the standard introductory formula וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: *waydabber yhw 'el moše le'mor* 'And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying' (appearing 27x in Leviticus) suffice?<sup>15</sup>

By now, the reader of this essay may be able to anticipate the answer. As indicated above, the vertical Mount Sinai has been laid horizontally on the plan of the tabernacle (per Sarna), and the tabernacle in turn has been displayed on the text of Leviticus (per Douglas). Accordingly, at this very point in our text,

13. Milgrom 1991, 599.

14. Douglas 1999, 227–28.

15. See the convenient chart in Warning 1999, 40–41.

the reader enters the Holy of Holies, corresponding to the summit of Mount Sinai, and thus the text brings Moses to that point, or returns him to that point, as it were, by stating explicitly that YHWH spoke to him בְּהַר סִינַי *bə-har sinay* ‘on Mount Sinai.’ Or to put this in other words, in order to reach “Mount Sinai,” that is, the summit of the mountain, Moses must have passed through the curtain in order to enter the Holy of Holies!<sup>16</sup>

In the short narrative of Lev 24:10–23, there is no room for even a single reference to the partition between the sanctuary and the Holy of Holies—in contrast to the extended narrative of Lev 8–10, which, as noted above, contains a series of references to the *masak* ‘screen.’ Nevertheless, the author of our text has managed to surround the short narrative with two reminders of where the reader stands at this point in his or her journey through the tabernacle, the one as explicit as can be (via the word *paroket*), the other as allusive as can be (via the phrase בְּהַר סִינַי *bə-har sinay* ‘on Mount Sinai’).<sup>17</sup>

The previously cited references to the *masak* and the *paroket*—five of them explicit, or nearly so, and the sixth and last of them implicit—substantiate, in my opinion, Douglas’s discovery of the literary structure of the Torah’s most inscrutable book.<sup>18</sup> The chapters guide the reader through the tabernacle, while the two narrative units allow one to stop at the boundaries between the three sections (chs. 8–10 regarding Aaron and his sons at the *masak*; the account of the blasphemer in ch. 24 at the *paroket*).

## Final Thoughts

As readers of this essay may know, many scholars prefer to divide the book of Leviticus into two major component parts: chs. 1–16, which emanates from the core priestly school, and chs. 17–26 (with ch. 27 as an appendix), known as the Holiness Code, due to the very frequent use of the verbal root ק-ד-ש *q-d-š* ‘be holy,’ the noun קֹדֶשׁ *qodeš* ‘holiness’ or ‘holy-place,’ and the adjective קָדוֹשׁ *qadoš* ‘holy’ (about 80x altogether in these chapters). Both of these large chunks

16. There are three other instances of the expression בְּהַר סִינַי *bəhar sinay* ‘on (or at) Mount Sinai’ in Leviticus: 7:38; 26:46; 27:34—each of which appears at the end of a unit, including the last two words of the book. Space does not allow further comment here, and thus I direct the reader to my longer treatment (see n. 10 above).

17. This is not to say that other explanations for the presence of בְּהַר סִינַי *bə-har sinay* ‘on Mount Sinai’ in Lev 25:1 are not valid as well. For the views of John Hartley, Yohanan Muffs, and Matityahu Tsevat, I again direct the reader to my more detailed treatment (see n. 8 above).

18. For an alternative view, which I find far too complicated to countenance, see Kline 2015.

of literature are assumed to derive from priestly circles, though there is debate as to which section was written first, either P (the former's designation) or H (the latter's designation).<sup>19</sup> The present writer is agnostic on the various issues, including a) whether or not an H source can be isolated as distinct from P, and b) if there are two discrete compositions incorporated into the final form of Leviticus, whether H or P was written first.

As such, I put the issue aside, preferring instead to treat the canonical book of Leviticus as a literary whole. In so doing, we are able to discover, via the brilliant analysis of Mary Douglas, the inherent literary structure for the book as a whole.

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19. The majority of scholars, it seems, hold to the priority of H, which then was incorporated by P in the canonical version of Leviticus. For a major voice in favor of the priority of P, to which H was added at a later stage, see Knohl 2007.

# RETHINKING THE COMPOSITION OF THE PENTATEUCH

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EDITED BY Kenneth Bergland, Roy E. Gane,  
Gary A. Rendsburg, and A. Rahel Wells

## **Rethinking the Composition of the Pentateuch**

© 2026 by Kenneth Bergland, Roy E. Gane, Gary A. Rendsburg,  
and A. Rahel Wells

Published by Hendrickson Publishers  
3 Centennial Drive  
Peabody, Massachusetts 01960  
[www.hendricksonpublishers.com](http://www.hendricksonpublishers.com)

Print: 979-8-4005-0158-6  
ePub: 979-8-4005-0159-3  
Kindle: 978-8-4005-2593-3  
Apple: 978-8-4005-2597-1

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Cover design by Karol Bailey.  
Cover art is a medieval “carpet” page from the The Burgos Bible.

*Printed in the United States of America.*

*First Printing — April 2026*

Library of Congress Number: 2025950865

# Contents

|                               |             |
|-------------------------------|-------------|
| <i>Acknowledgments</i>        | <i>xi</i>   |
| <i>Abbreviations</i>          | <i>xiii</i> |
| <i>Archaeological Periods</i> | <i>xix</i>  |
| <i>Ancient Near East Map</i>  | <i>xxi</i>  |
| <i>Ancient Israel Map</i>     | <i>xxii</i> |

## **Introduction**

1. Toward a Positive Model for the Composition of the Pentateuch 1  
*Kenneth Bergland, Roy E. Gane, Gary A. Rendsburg,  
and A. Rahel Wells*
2. A Brief History of the Documentary Hypothesis 10  
*Benjamin Kilchör and Joshua Berman*
3. Pseudonymity in the Torah?: An Assessment of the Evidence  
for the Composition of Deuteronomy 1:1–4:44 17  
*Daniel I. Block*

## **Part One: Setting the Stage**

4. A Multi-Lens Approach as Reading Strategy 31  
*J. Caleb Howard*
5. The Textual Evidence 39  
*Sidnie White Crawford*
6. Scribal Practices in Mesopotamia 48  
*Alan R. Millard*
7. Scribal Practices in Ancient Egypt 55  
*James K. Hoffmeier*
8. Composition Dating Through Content Analysis 62  
*L. S. Baker Jr.*

## **Part Two: The Pentateuch and Ancient Near Eastern Literature**

9. Literary Culture in the Biblical World: Linear Alphabetic Script 71  
*Richard S. Hess*

|     |                                                                |     |
|-----|----------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 10. | Literary Culture in the Biblical World: West Semitic Cuneiform | 80  |
|     | <i>Richard S. Hess</i>                                         |     |
| 11. | Narrative Texts                                                | 88  |
|     | <i>Gary A. Rendsburg</i>                                       |     |
| 12. | Legal Texts                                                    | 95  |
|     | <i>Shalom E. Holtz</i>                                         |     |
| 13. | Cultic Texts                                                   | 101 |
|     | <i>Roy E. Gane</i>                                             |     |
| 14. | Poetic Texts and Myths                                         | 109 |
|     | <i>Richard E. Averbeck</i>                                     |     |
| 15. | Hortatory Texts                                                | 116 |
|     | <i>Ada Taggar Cohen</i>                                        |     |

### *Part Three: Linguistic Dating of the Pentateuch*

|     |                                                         |     |
|-----|---------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 16. | Methodology for the Linguistic Dating of the Pentateuch | 125 |
|     | <i>Aaron D. Hornkohl</i>                                |     |
| 17. | Loanwords                                               | 133 |
|     | <i>Benjamin J. Noonan</i>                               |     |
| 18. | Narrative Texts: Linguistic Dating                      | 139 |
|     | <i>Gary A. Rendsburg</i>                                |     |
| 19. | Legal Texts: Linguistic Dating                          | 146 |
|     | <i>Gary A. Rendsburg</i>                                |     |
| 20. | Cultic Texts: Linguistic Dating                         | 155 |
|     | <i>Roy E. Gane</i>                                      |     |
| 21. | Poetic Texts: Linguistic Dating                         | 163 |
|     | <i>Elizabeth Robar</i>                                  |     |
| 22. | Hortatory Texts: Linguistic Dating                      | 171 |
|     | <i>Aaron D. Hornkohl</i>                                |     |
| 23. | Strata in Classical Biblical Hebrew                     | 180 |
|     | <i>Yoel Elitzur</i>                                     |     |

### *Part Four: Literary Styles in the Pentateuch*

|     |                               |     |
|-----|-------------------------------|-----|
| 24. | Coherence and Composite Texts | 193 |
|     | <i>Kenneth Bergland</i>       |     |

|                                      |     |
|--------------------------------------|-----|
| 25. Narrative Texts: Literary Styles | 201 |
| <i>Gary A. Rendsburg</i>             |     |
| 26. Legal Texts: Literary Styles     | 207 |
| <i>Michael LeFebvre</i>              |     |
| 27. Cultic Texts: Literary Styles    | 214 |
| <i>Gerald A. Klingbeil</i>           |     |
| 28. Poetic Texts: Literary Styles    | 220 |
| <i>Elizabeth Robar</i>               |     |
| 29. Hortatory Texts: Literary Styles | 230 |
| <i>Daniel I. Block</i>               |     |

### ***Part Five: Literary Structure and Unity in the Pentateuch***

|                                        |     |
|----------------------------------------|-----|
| 30. Genesis                            | 243 |
| <i>Gary A. Rendsburg</i>               |     |
| 31. Exodus                             | 252 |
| <i>Richard M. Davidson</i>             |     |
| 32. Leviticus                          | 259 |
| <i>Gary A. Rendsburg</i>               |     |
| 33. Numbers                            | 267 |
| <i>C. John Collins</i>                 |     |
| 34. Deuteronomy                        | 273 |
| <i>Benjamin Kilchör</i>                |     |
| 35. Toward the Theme of the Pentateuch | 280 |
| <i>Roy E. Gane</i>                     |     |

### ***Part Six: Innerbiblical Reuse in and of the Pentateuch***

|                                                                      |     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 36. Methodology for Determining Reuse and Direction<br>of Dependence | 291 |
| <i>Kenneth Bergland and Felipe A. Masotti</i>                        |     |
| 37. Intertextual Networking in the Pentateuch                        | 301 |
| <i>Benjamin Kilchör</i>                                              |     |
| 38. Innerbiblical Reuse Between the Torah and the Former Prophets    | 309 |
| <i>Koert van Bekkum</i>                                              |     |
| 39. Innerbiblical Reuse Between the Torah and the Major Prophets     | 316 |
| <i>John Bergsma</i>                                                  |     |

|                                                                                                            |     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| 40. Innerbiblical Reuse Between the Torah and the Minor Prophets                                           | 322 |
| <i>A. Rahel Wells</i>                                                                                      |     |
| 41. Innerbiblical Reuse Between the Torah and the Writings                                                 | 328 |
| <i>Kenneth Bergland</i>                                                                                    |     |
| <i>Final Reflections</i>                                                                                   |     |
| 42. Reflections on Key Passages in the Pentateuchal Material                                               | 339 |
| <i>Koert van Bekkum</i>                                                                                    |     |
| 43. The Role of Moses in the Composition of the Pentateuch                                                 | 347 |
| <i>Richard E. Averbeck and B. J. Hilbelink</i>                                                             |     |
| 44. Faithful Inquiry: Faith Commitment and Critical Analysis<br>of the Pentateuch                          | 355 |
| <i>Joshua Berman and Daniel I. Block</i>                                                                   |     |
| <i>Appendix</i>                                                                                            |     |
| <i>New Directions in Pooh Studies: Überlieferungs- und<br/>religionsgeschichtliche Studien zum Pu-Buch</i> | 362 |
| <i>David J. A. Clines</i>                                                                                  |     |
| <i>Bibliography</i>                                                                                        | 371 |
| <i>Contributors</i>                                                                                        | 423 |
| <i>Index of Ancient Texts and Inscriptions</i>                                                             | 425 |
| <i>Index of Biblical References</i>                                                                        | 429 |