

# The Pentateuch dissected and revised

Peter Ruest (25 Nov 2002), listserv of the American Scientific Affiliation, archived under <http://www.calvin.edu/cgi-bin/archive>

The question of how to interpret the early chapters of Genesis has been discussed repeatedly on this list. Unfortunately, more often than not, these discussions have terminated in an impasse. One side insisted that biblical texts reflect the knowledge and errors of the time and culture of the writers, to which God accommodated Himself, even in ethical questions. The other side insisted on wanting to find more than that in divine inspiration of the biblical writers. The corollary of this is that the former, when interpreting a biblical text, endeavor to sort out (valid) theology from (often erroneous) packaging. The latter, on the contrary, try to find out what God wants to tell us in the text as a whole, as it stands, including the way it was formulated. (Of course, a belief in strong divine inspiration doesn't imply any naive dictation theory.)

As a consequence, some are trying to find interpretations which harmonize between various biblical texts, and between these and what extra-biblical information we have. But this whole approach is rejected by those who are convinced that the "scholarly consensus" is that of the results of the Historical-Critical Method, which sees mainly myths (giving us, nevertheless, some valid theological truth) in the early Genesis chapters.

A short introduction (of about 140 pages) into the way the Pentateuch is usually interpreted in those scholarly circles using the historical-critical and similar methods is: "Introduction to the Composition of the Pentateuch" (Sheffield Academic Press, 1999, ISBN 1-85075-992-8) by Alexander Rofé, a Jewish scholar. Paul Seely recently recommended it.

Rofé shows how the observation of some difficulties like duplications, contradictions, inconsistencies in the text, combined with differences in use of words and expressions (such as names for God), style, and genre (laws, narrative, etc.) led scholars during the last 250 years to divide up the text of the 5 books attributed to Moses, as well as Joshua, Judges, Samuel, etc. into mainly 4 sources (J, E, P, D), which were dated to between about the 8th and 5th centuries BC. The resulting schemes were called the Documentary Hypothesis. Using many dozens of biblical references (often giving the relevant expressions in Hebrew), he shows how one such observation can lead to the next, until most of the text is divided up, in a seemingly self-consistent system.

He then proceeds to discuss the dating of the different sources found, some more recent alternative hypotheses, additional sources identified (such as the "Holiness Code"), and some challenges to the Documentary Hypothesis by the Form Criticism and History of Tradition methods. Rofé indicates that such later criticisms not only make the standard hypothesis practically superfluous, but also show that the original model was strongly influenced by the unrealistic romanticism of 19th century Germany, which produced 4 ingenious "heroes" J, E, P, D. He then presents Cassuto's view that there never were any such 4 documents, but rather some traditions, which were merged and given a new unity in the Pentateuch. Rofé himself opts for a new variant of a fragments hypothesis recognizing many different early and late traditions, "adequately reflecting the richness of Israel's literature", which were merged together mainly after Israel's Babylonian exile.

Finally, Rofé summarizes by saying that the Documentary Hypothesis will remain a hypothesis and that many of its assumptions and conclusions have been shaken. But he maintains that its 4 elements will endure: (1) real difficulties in the text, (2) caused by combining different sources, (3) style and content analysis sometimes identifies authors, (4) some of the texts can be dated.

He also emphasized that today there is at least some "real" evidence supporting the historical-critical method, in that a few cases of combining and mending texts, such as the method postulates, have been found: the (heretical) Samaritan Pentateuch combines Ex.18:13-27 and Deut.1:9-18 into its Ex.18 text, and the Septuagint (Greek translation) misses Josh.20:4-6, which the theory predicts to have been added later (did the scholar proposing this know of the Septuagint lacuna beforehand?).

After a thorough study of this book, I was impressed by the fact that the great majority of the difficulties presented allowed for alternative interpretations in line with an integer and harmonious inspired text, while I

trust that for the few remaining difficulties, for which I was unable to find a harmonization, there could very well be one I didn't see. Of course, each one of these many points raised by Rofé would have to be discussed individually, but on the other hand, much of this harmonization has been done repeatedly by people more competent than I am. This much for Rofé's element (1), on which the other 3 elements depend.

As a consequence, there is much less need for different sources (2). It might be sufficient to postulate earlier sources for the whole book of Genesis - earlier than Moses -, as well as some minor added remarks for the other 4 books of Moses.

Undoubtedly, there are differences in content and style (3) between different passages in the monumental work of the Pentateuch. Now, differences in content are a completely invalid argument for dividing up any text between different authors, as the same author certainly may have written about different things. Differences in diction and style may be occasioned at least in part by the differences in content, in part by differing circumstances, in part by a desire for variety, and in part by the fact that 40 years elapsed during Israel's wilderness journey, in combination with the linguistic competence of the author.

In order to make a compelling case for attributing different parts of a text to different authors, a statistical text analysis with significance testing on the basis of other texts whose authors are known, and taking into account the different subject matters, circumstances, etc. would have to be conducted. I have never heard of such an analysis, and I suspect we don't have the necessary Hebrew texts of known authorships (or at least of known unity) and sufficient lengths, dating to Moses' time, to do the required significance tests. Unless this can be done, any definition of different sources is more or less arbitrary, and consequently, the attempts under (4) to date the different texts will also be futile.

Therefore, I feel at ease to treat the Documentary Hypothesis as one hypothesis among others, rather than "the assured result of scientific investigation, with which all competent scholars agree". I don't think we have sufficient evidence to discard all alternative hypotheses out of hand.

Furthermore, we must not forget the destructive effect this historical-critical method - or at least the way it was applied - has had. It has destroyed virtually all of Israel's history until the Babylonian exile, together with much of the divine instructions and commandments in the Pentateuch, not to mention all of the promises and prophecies contained therein. Since both the OT and the NT faiths are squarely history-based, it will never do to sort out (valid) theology from (possibly or presumably) erroneous history. As for the early chapters of Genesis, which form the theological basis of the OT and NT revelations, their mythologization has handed over to man the job of deciding what represents divine revelation and what does not, resulting in many different "theologies". I don't think this is a sound way of doing theology.

In various respects I don't agree with Luther, but I fully sympathize with his exclamation, "Das Wort sie sollen lassen stahn, und kein' Dank dazu haben!" ("They must not tamper with the Word, and shall not earn any praise for that!" is my feeble attempt at translating it - maybe you'd better look it up in an official translation, or ask George [Murphy]).

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"..the work which God created to evolve it" (Genesis 2:3)