

The Documentary Hypothesis

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How did the Pentateuch or Torah come to be written?¹ What process was involved in its composition?² That is, did the author simply receive visions and write out word for word exactly what he or she³ had heard and seen in vision? Did he make use of written sources? Did he incorporate oral traditions? Who was the principal author anyway? Do these questions really matter? If so, why?

While many average church members consider Moses the author of the first five books of the Bible, most biblical scholars of the last century have maintained that questions related to the composition of the Pentateuch are best answered by referring to the documentary hypothesis. This is the popular label for the theory of pentateuchal authorship and composition that has dominated most liberal biblical scholarship for the past century. In fact, so thoroughly has it dominated the field that some scholars simply assume it to be correct and feel no need to offer evidence to support it.⁴ This in spite of the fact that recently penetrating critiques from both

¹The term Pentateuch refers to the first five books of the Bible and is a transliteration of a Greek term meaning “five scrolls.” The term Torah, though it has other meanings also, is sometimes used to denote the same five books and is a transliteration of a Hebrew word meaning “instruction.” See the discussion of these terms in Barry Bandstra, *Reading the Old Testament* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1995), 24.

²It is worth noting that the meaning of authorship had a broad meaning in ancient times as it does in modern times. For example, according to Jer. 36:4, Jeremiah dictated to his scribe Baruch the words which the Lord had spoken to him, and Baruch was the one who actually wrote them down. So who should be considered the author—God, Jeremiah or Baruch? While many would call Jeremiah the author—correctly, I believe—we should remember the messages actually originated with God and were placed in written form by Baruch. So in this case there were three parties involved in the writing process. Thus, the term composition is helpful because it conveys the broad meaning of the word authorship operable in this paper.

³Don’t laugh. Harold Bloom and David Rosenberg’s widely distributed volume, *The Book of J* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), contends that the author of the J document, the earliest major literary source of the Pentateuch, was a woman of King Solomon’s court.

⁴For example, one of my professors at the doctoral level used to refer to the Yahwist creation account and simply assume that everyone knew what he was talking about.

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evangelical and liberal scholars have exposed its major weaknesses.⁵

But what is the documentary hypothesis anyway? Is it a convincing theory of pentateuchal origins? Is it a viable alternative for Christians who take the Bible seriously? The purpose of this paper is to present a brief historical sketch concerning the authorship of the Pentateuch, explain and evaluate the documentary hypothesis, and set forth some suggestions as to how Christians who take the Bible seriously should view this matter of pentateuchal composition.

For most of the first eighteen centuries of the Christian era, pentateuchal authorship was considered pretty much a settled matter. Most people accepted the view that the Pentateuch was composed by Moses, the great lawgiver and deliverer of Israel from Egyptian bondage.⁶ It seemed rather obvious. Several verses of Scripture, both inside and outside the Pentateuch,⁷ appeared to support this position, and there seemed to be no reason to question it. Thus, the traditional position of the church and the synagogue was that Moses wrote the first five books of Scripture.

However, with the onset of certain intellectual currents in Europe in the eighteenth century, opinion about this matter began to undergo a change. The rise of deistic philosophy, with its belief in an absentee God and corresponding disbelief in supernatural intervention and the inspiration of Scripture, along with a growing tendency to question the traditional assumptions of the Christian establishment, resulted in skepticism toward the traditional view that Moses wrote the Pentateuch and provided fertile soil for the growth of a new view of pentateuchal origins, the documentary hypothesis.

One of the forerunners of the documentary hypothesis was Jean Astruc, a French physician who became interested in the way in which God is referred to by two different names, Yahweh and Elohim, in Genesis and the early chapters of Exodus. In his book he argued that in composing these chapters Moses quoted from one source who knew God only as Elohim and another source who referred to God only as Yahweh.⁸ It is worth noting that Astruc did not dispute that Moses

⁵From an evangelical perspective, Duane Garrett's *Rethinking Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) has been called "the most convincing refutation of the documentary hypothesis now in print" (see back cover of book). He notes (13) that though its weaknesses have been exposed, the documentary hypothesis continues to "hover over Old Testament studies and symposiums like a thick fog, adding nothing of substance but effectively obscuring vision." For a strong critique from a liberal perspective, see Rolf Rendtorff, *The Problem of the Process of Transmission in the Pentateuch*, trans. by John Scullion, JSOT Sup 89 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic P, 1990).

⁶My comments here and in other places throughout this paper reflect the insights of Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 11-12.

⁷We will look at some of these verses below.

⁸The English translation of the title of Astruc's book is *Conjectures Concerning the Original Memoranda Which It Appears Moses Used to Compose the Book of Genesis*. It was published anonymously in 1753. (Note: Titles for books originally published in other languages will be translated into English so the intent of the titles is readily understandable.)

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was the author. He simply wanted to explore what sources Moses may have used in doing his composition.⁹ However, one of the major features of Astruc's work, assigning passages to different sources using different divine names as a criterion, became an important feature of later scholarly theories.

Among the many scholars who followed Astruc and devoted attention to the matter of the composition of the Pentateuch, the most notable is Julius Wellhausen. While most of the features of his views had been anticipated by previous scholars, he is widely credited with providing the definitive formulation of the documentary hypothesis due to the great skill and persuasiveness with which he stated his views.¹⁰ Demonstrating the influential nature of Wellhausen's arguments is the fact that within a mere decade of the publication of his 1878 volume, "Wellhausen's reconstruction of Israel's religious history captured the academic chairs of all British and European Old Testament scholarship."¹¹

This hypothesis or theory, in its most basic form, is not complicated. It maintains that though the Pentateuch may appear to the average reader to be a unity, it is actually a compilation of at least four major literary sources, the compilation of which took some four hundred years. These four source documents are the J or Yahwist source,¹² the E or Elohist source, the D or Deuteronomic source, and the P or Priestly source. A brief description of each of the four sources, as well as a sketch of when they were purportedly written and joined, follows.¹³

The J source is the oldest. In our current Pentateuch, it begins with the so-called second creation account in Gen. 2:4b and traces the history of Israel through the patriarchal times to the preparation for the people's entry into Canaan. It was written by an anonymous author in the southern kingdom of Judah around 900–850 B.C., and was characterized by the almost exclusive use of the name Yahweh for God.

Then the E source was written. It follows the same basic story line as J, except it begins with the patriarchs rather than with creation. (Gen. 15 is allegedly the earliest E text in Scripture.) It was also written by an anonymous person, sometime about 750 B.C. However, unlike J, it originated with an author in the northern kingdom of Israel and was characterized by the use of Elohim as the name for God. The next major step in the formation of the Pentateuch occurred sometime around 700–650 B.C. when J and E were joined by a redactor, making JE. However, this

⁹G. J. Wenham et al, eds., *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994), 48.

¹⁰In fact, so influential is he considered in establishing this viewpoint that the documentary hypothesis is sometimes called the Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis, named after Wellhausen and K. H. Graf. Wellhausen's most important volumes were *The Composition of the Hexateuch*, which appeared in 1876, and *Introduction to the History of Israel*, which first came out in 1878. See the discussion in Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 95.

¹¹Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 71.

¹²The label J comes from the German spelling Jahveh instead of Yahweh.

¹³Hamilton, *Genesis 1–17*, 14, and Duane A. Garrett, "The Documentary Hypothesis," *The Bible and Spade* 6 (1993): 35, are helpful on this matter.

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redactor left out much of E, which is thus lost to posterity.

The third major source, the D source, is largely confined to the book of Deuteronomy in the Pentateuch. It was produced about 622 B.C., at the time of the Josianic reformation described in 2 Kings 22. It is characterized by a distinctive sermon style. Also, it restricts the worship of the Lord to one central sanctuary and is marked by an adherence to strict blessing and curse terminology. The D source was then joined with the already combined source JE.

The fourth and final major source is the Priestly code. It begins at Gen. 1:1 and serves as the source for major chunks of Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers, along with nearly all of Leviticus. It was produced in the exilic or post-exilic period, around 500 B.C., and focuses on genealogies, chronological matters, and priestly regulations. About 450 B.C., P was redacted into JED, thus forming the Pentateuch. This, in its most basic form, is the process by which the Pentateuch was formed—according to the documentary hypothesis.

An analogy might be helpful in understanding this process. Often electrical and phone cords consist of several wires that run parallel to one another. However, to guard against damage to the wires or electrical shock to someone touching them, these wires are covered by an outer casing. The outer casing, which is the only portion visible to the onlooker, makes these cords look like a unity. However, should the outer casing be removed, several distinct wires would be visible underneath. Even so, while the Pentateuch may look like a unity, once it is carefully examined, several distinct strands become visible to the astute observer.¹⁴

To take one passage as an example, Gen. 46 alone is said to come from three different sources, with v. 1 coming from the J source, vv. 2–5 from the E source, vv. 6–27 from the P source, and then vv. 28–34 from the J source again.

Having outlined the basics of the documentary hypothesis and before proceeding to evaluate it, it is appropriate to consider the following question. If this theory is correct, what would the implications be for our understanding of the Pentateuch? How would it affect our view of the value and relevance of the first five books of the Bible?

Several implications come to mind (and you can probably think of some additional ones). First, as one can see, according to the documentary hypothesis, the Pentateuch is a very human document. There is little if any emphasis placed on divine inspiration. While it is true that the Bible, like Jesus Himself, has both divine and human components, the documentary hypothesis magnifies the human component at the expense of the divine. In fact, someone might observe that this theory views the Pentateuch as being produced like any other human document, except for the fact that there is no other document I am aware of that has been produced with the splicing and intertwining of several major sources to make one work with a grand thematic unity that rivals the Pentateuch. To conclude this

¹⁴Hamilton, *Genesis 1–17*, 15, gives a similar analogy.

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point, it should be noted that devotees of the documentary hypothesis are at variance with Christians down through the centuries in the way they view the divine role in the production of the Pentateuch.

Another implication is the theological fragmentation of the Pentateuch that results from this view. According to proponents of the documentary hypothesis, the various sources from which the Pentateuch is composed set forth a variety of competing and contradictory theological ideas, and these ideas jostle and contend and conflict with one another within the total fabric of the theology of the Pentateuch. This view has led to books being written about the perspectives of a certain one of the four literary sources¹⁵ and even to a color-coded Bible which uses a different color of highlighting to indicate which pentateuchal material comes from which source.¹⁶ Since the Pentateuch is, in my view, literally bursting with unity, this is an unfortunate result, but a logical one if the documentary hypothesis is adopted.

A third implication is that the author of the historical incidents recorded in the Pentateuch is removed by many centuries from the events he writes about. Now this is already the case for some of the events recounted in Genesis, even if Moses is the author, but if the Priestly source did not come along until 500 B.C., its author is nearly a millennium removed from the giving of the sanctuary service at Mt. Sinai. For some people, this gives rise to doubts about the reliability of the account, since in the minds of many people there is a direct correlation between the amount of time lapsed before the recording of an event and the degree of inaccuracy found in the written account.

Arguments Used by Proponents

I now move to a listing and evaluation of the arguments set forth by those who favor the documentary hypothesis.¹⁷ It is worth mentioning that the following lines of evidence can be found in most any book that deals with this subject, whether it favors the theory or argues against it. First, one of the main arguments is the fact that different names for God are used in the Pentateuch, with the two main names being Yahweh and Elohim. As noted above, this feature was what led Astruc to divide a portion of the Pentateuch by sources in the first place.

Now it cannot be gainsaid that the Pentateuch does use different names for God. This is visible even in most English translations, which generally render Elohim as “God” and Yahweh as “the Lord.” However, that this feature indicates different sources is far from clear. In fact, several weaknesses are inherent in this assumption. One, the source critics are not always consistent in assigning names to the various sources. For example, Gen. 22:11, which uses the name Yahweh, is

¹⁵For example, see Bloom and Rosenberg, *The Book of J*, which seeks to uncover the perspectives of the author of the J source.

¹⁶Hamilton, *Genesis 1–17*, 17, states that it is known as “the Rainbow Bible.”

¹⁷My listing and critique is taken in part from Garrett, “The Documentary Hypothesis,” 38ff.

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considered an E text. Also, the so-called Yahwist creation account speaks of God not simply as Yahweh but as Yahweh Elohim. Rather than viewing the names as indicative of different sources, it is best to view them as communicative of different attributes and characteristics of God, with Elohim being more of a title, telling what God is, and Yahweh, the personal covenant name of God, telling who He is. Additionally, there are numerous Egyptian and Mesopotamian texts which have the same god being called by several names in the same text, and these texts are not viewed as coming from different sources.

A second argument offered in favor of the documentary hypothesis is the presence of doublets in the Pentateuch. Doublets are stories that seem to either cover the same subject matter or that parallel one another very closely and are thought to have come from different sources. It is widely held, for example, that there are two creation stories, the first coming from the Priestly source (Gen. 1:1–2:4a), and the second coming from the Yahwist (Gen. 2:4b–25). Also, the story of Abraham encouraging his wife to tell the Egyptians she was his sister in Gen. 12:10–20 and the story of Abraham telling the same lie to Abimelech in Gen. 20 are said to come from different sources (the J source and the E source respectively).

What should be said about these supposed doublets? While the first two chapters of Genesis and their so-called two accounts of creation are challenging to understand, recent scholarship supports the concept that there is an underlying unity, that the accounts are complementary rather than contradictory.¹⁸ Regarding Abraham's lack of honesty, it should be noted that the two stories occur in different geographic locations and also differ in other respects. It is not farfetched to assume that Abraham, having used this strategy previously, somewhat successfully, simply decided to employ it again. As to the larger issue of repetition in the Pentateuch, Duane Garrett has observed that "if two or more separate events were perceived to be similar to one another, ancient writers tend to give accounts of the events in parallel fashion."¹⁹ In other words, this is characteristic of ancient literature and only to be expected. Perhaps a warning is in order. We need to be careful about judging an ancient corpus of literature by the strictures and rules we apply to modern writings.

A third argument offered by the proponents of the documentary hypothesis is the supposed contradictions that exist within the Pentateuch. For example, the two creation accounts are said to contradict one another regarding the order of creation and the method of forming man. Additionally, there is allegedly a conflict between the number of animals taken aboard the ark, with the Priestly source stating one pair of each kind of animal (Gen. 6:20) and the Yahwist source indicating seven pairs (Gen. 7:2–3).

¹⁸Garrett, in *Rethinking Genesis*, 195, speaks of "unity in the structure and message of Genesis 1–2" and praises the work of Seventh-day Adventist scholar Jacques Doukhan, saying that thanks to his work "any reading of Genesis 1–2 as two unrelated texts juxtaposed to one another is impossible."

¹⁹Garrett, "The Documentary Hypothesis," 41.

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In response, it might be noted that some of these contradictions are more apparent than real. As observed above, it is possible to see the two creation accounts as complementary to one another. As for the number of animals taken aboard the ark, Gen. 7:2 can be taken as providing further details to Gen. 6:20, in that it specifies seven pairs of “all clean animals.” Now this is not to say there are no interpretive challenges faced by those who take the position that the Pentateuch is a unified document. The identity of the sons of God in Gen. 6 is one such example. However, in my view, it is better to suspend judgment on such issues while awaiting further evidence instead of assuming a contradiction because the information came from two conflicting sources.

A fourth argument is that the different religious understandings found in the Pentateuch testifies to different sources. The style of the Yahwist is said to be more formal and simple. He presents the contact between God and the patriarchs as being very direct, as in Gen. 17:1, “The Lord appeared to Abram.” The Priestly source is supposedly more formal and repetitious, recording lists, numbers, and genealogies. And the Elohist tends to dilute the contact between God and humans, introducing angels and dreams as the means of communication (Gen. 28:12).

In response, it should be said that literary style is determined, at least in part, by subject matter, and that different literary styles do not necessarily indicate different authors. A modern example of this is the different literary styles used by the great Christian writer C. S. Lewis. *The Chronicles of Narnia*, a set of highly allegorical “children’s” books, are stylistically different from *Mere Christianity*, Lewis’s classic defense of the Christian faith, yet both are by the same man. Regarding whether God directly communicates with humans or uses angels or dreams, this seems to me a minor quibble. Perhaps it is enough to simply say that God has more than one means of communication (see Heb. 1:1), just as humans today can converse in person, by telephone, by ham radio, and in other ways as well.

Conclusion

In light of the lack of supporting evidence, Duane Garrett is correct when he states, “The Documentary Hypothesis must be abandoned.”²⁰ Though it raises a number of issues that need to be considered, the conclusions it draws are not warranted by the evidence.

But if the documentary hypothesis is unsound, what can be said about the authorship and composition of the Pentateuch? Making the question especially acute is the fact that when the text of Genesis through Deuteronomy is carefully examined, it doesn’t seem that every word came original and fresh from Moses. In light of this, what stance should Bible-believing Christians adopt regarding this matter?

Several points should be kept in mind. First, in determining our views on this

²⁰Garrett, “The Documentary Hypothesis,” 49.

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matter, we should begin with the text of Scripture itself. At least three of the five books of the Pentateuch contain references to the writing activity of Moses.²¹ In my view, the incidental nature of the reference in Num. 33:2 makes it all the more valuable, suggesting that perhaps Moses kept a travel diary of some kind that could have later been used as a source for information in writing the Pentateuch. Reading further afield in the Bible, it is worthy of note that Jesus supports the concept of Mosaic authorship in John 5:46. Jesus does not say, “Moses spoke about me,” but He states, “He wrote about me.” As a Christian, the view of Christ on this issue matters to me a great deal. It seems that the view of the Christian community on various issues should mirror that of the Lord they profess to follow.

Second, Christians who support Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch should be aware that there will probably never be any discovery of overwhelming evidence to convince the skeptics of this position. I don’t think it is likely that an original copy of Genesis or Exodus will ever be found that says “by Moses” on the first or last page. On the other hand, it is good to be aware that there is some helpful evidence that is consistent with the position of Mosaic authorship. I am referring to the way in which the text reflects an Egyptian background. This, of course, should not be surprising if the author spent the first forty years of his life in the land of Egypt.²²

Another point to be kept in mind is what I do *not* mean when I take the position that Moses was the author/compiler of the Pentateuch. I do not mean that Moses wrote every single word so that the current form of the entire Hebrew Pentateuch is exactly the same as it came from his pen. It is clear that there are some post-Mosaic elements in the text. Not only the account of Moses’ death in Deut. 34, but also other statements reflect post-Mosaic editorial activity.²³ A high view of inspiration does not preclude editorial work by someone other than the original author.

I also do not mean that every word was original with Moses. It is not only possible but likely that Moses made use of written sources (see Num. 21:14), even as Luke would later do in constructing his gospel (see Luke 1:1–4). It also seems probable that Moses made use of oral tradition in composing the Pentateuch.²⁴ It bears emphasizing that originality is not a prerequisite for inspiration. All truth belongs to God, and He has the right to inspire His prophet to make use of it, even if it is derived from another source, whether oral or written.

²¹ See Exod. 24:4; Num. 33:2; Deut. 31:9, 24,

²² E.g., Egyptian loan words and knowledge of Egyptian customs and practices; see Archer, *Survey of Old Testament*, 118–125.

²³ For example, see Gen. 13:6b; Gen. 36:31.

²⁴ Ellen White, in the Introduction to *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), comments, “During the first twenty-five hundred years of human history, there was no written revelation. Those who had been taught of God communicated their knowledge to others, and it was handed down from father to son, through successive generations. The preparation of the written word began in the time of Moses.”

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Of course, I do affirm the possibility of special revelation through vision as the likely source from which Moses gained some of his information. It seems to me that the creation account would be a likely candidate for being revealed through special revelation. Moses' forty days on Mt. Sinai certainly allowed time for special revelations from God that could later have been recorded in Scripture. By way of contrast, Moses would have needed no vision to record the events he experienced himself as he led the Israelites.

In conclusion, in light of the weaknesses inherent in the documentary hypothesis, this is certainly not the time for Bible-believing Christians to be flocking to its banner. Rather, it is an auspicious time for them to affirm a more traditional view, one which is in harmony with the perspective of their Lord, with the teachings of Scripture itself, and which is consistent with the concept of the divine inspiration of the sacred writings.²⁵

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²⁵Mathews, in *Genesis 1–11*, 76, contends that traditionalists may now have their best opportunity in two centuries "to contend for a viable alternative in the topsy-turvy environment of pentateuchal studies that has arisen."