

"Exploring the Composition of the Pentateuch"

Conference takes place at Andrews University

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The Siegfried H. Horn Lectureship Series presented the "Exploring the Composition of the Pentateuch" conference from March 25-26, 2018. (Photo by Shiekainah Decano, IMC student photographer)

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In April of 2016, leading scholars specializing in the Pentateuch (Genesis to Deuteronomy) from several religious groups gathered at Andrews University to present papers and dialogue about the composition of the Pentateuch. The title of the conference was "Exploring the Composition of the Pentateuch."

Conservative scholarship regarding the origins of the Pentateuch has tended to focus negatively on responding to the speculative reconstructions of higher-critical scholars who claim that the Pentateuch was composed during the first millennium B.C. by a number of individuals or groups, rather than by an historical Moses during the second millennium B.C.

However, this March 2018, two years after the first conference, a number of the same Pentateuchal scholars, along with others, gathered again to share research papers and continue working toward a positive approach to understanding the composition of the Pentateuch. These Protestant (from several denominations), Catholic and Jewish scholars came from Israel, Australia, Switzerland, Norway, Spain and various parts of the United States to join some Seventh-day Adventist scholars at Andrews University. They sought to identify some commonly held conclusions, areas that need more study and limitations of evidence.

The participants in the 2018 “Exploring the Composition of the Pentateuch” (ECP) conference agreed on several key points as bases for further progress. First, conclusions regarding the origins of the Pentateuch should be built on solid exegesis, letting the existing form of the biblical text, rather than hypothetically reconstructed documentary sources, speak for itself. Second, the literary features of the Pentateuch should be interpreted in light of ancient Near Eastern conventions of composition relevant to its background, rather than judging it by modern assumptions of literary coherence, as historical-critical scholars have done. Third, at least the core of the Pentateuch reflects conditions before the Hebrews settled in Canaan, so basic composition of these books took place before the entrance of Israel into their promised land, although addition of some elements (such as the account of Moses’ death in Deuteronomy 34), some editing and updating of language could have occurred later. Fourth, the Pentateuch claims divine intervention in history and in the revelations recorded in the text by the agency of an historical Moses, who is described as writing messages that he received from the Lord. Fifth, composition of the Pentateuch likely involved some synthesis of pre-existing source materials, such as orally transmitted records of earlier history, but identification of these sources is beyond the scope of available evidence.

The participants in the conference expressed their enjoyment of warm friendship, a safe environment for open discussion of sensitive issues, spiritual and intellectual enrichment, and stimulating discussion pointing to interesting directions for future investigation. After the conference, a scholar from Israel wrote, “I wanted to thank you again for an incredible experience this week. Even if we have not yet gelled with conclusions from our deliberations, I know that I come away fortified spiritually and intellectually and am certain that this will pay dividends in my work going forward; I have no doubt that many others present feel the same way.”

An evangelical scholar wrote, “I must express again my own deep gratitude for the privilege of participating in the ECP conference at Andrews. While the effect of our work may not be felt for some time, I do believe we are on to something extremely significant and am grateful for the leadership you and the rest at Andrews are providing. The organization, logistics and implementation of the conference were first-class.”

The group looks forward to a third conference at Andrews University in the fall of 2020.