

Sources for the Pentateuch

Dear brethren, become familiar with the following terms:

The Pentateuch = “five scrolls” (ie Genesis/Exodus/Leviticus/Numbers/Deuteronomy)

The Torah = Law *or* Teaching (= the Pentateuch)

The Hexateuch = “six scrolls” (Pentateuch + Joshua) - a Von Rad production

The Pentateuch holds the same primacy in Hebrew Scripture as do the Gospels in the New Testament. Anarthrously, *Torah* is not just this specific collection of sacred books, but the Word of God as *practised* by a devout believer, therefore something to be *done*, not just *heard*. A famous line, James 1:22, says *Be ye doers of the Word, not just hearers*; this is perfectly exact Christian quotation of Jewish piety.

Reading the beginning of the Bible, it doesn't take you very long to become aware of the complexity of the format before you.

Read Genesis 2: 1-7

If you examine the first seven verses of the second chapter of Genesis, you will soon be aware of crossing over thinly-disguised junctions, revealing to you the presence of more than one authorial hand. The study of these differences goes beyond mere varieties of sentence-structure and vocabulary, into the realm of ideas: there are

- different cosmologies - ways of thinking and speaking of the world:
- different anthropologies - ways of thinking about humanity:
- different conceptions of history, and different ways of telling the story of the past: most vitally, there are
- different theologies - ways of naming and speaking of God.

For example, consider the account given by Gen 2 of Yahweh's taking-up of the dust and breathing into it the breath of life. How does this equate with the creation of man and woman in Gen 1, which is presented as the summit of a pyramidal cosmic structure surveyed from a superterrestrial viewpoint, against the wheeling background of the hosts of heaven? For another example, in historical terms, you will find a similar diversity: for instance, you will find, in the history of Israel which the Bible contains, *diametrically opposed* attitudes to the idea of monarchic government, ranging from determined royalism to the theocratic prophets' violent hatred of the kings as living blasphemies against God's authority. (A tidy, simplistic assumption that “kingship” in Israel bears any likeness to the accepted concepts surrounding the House of Windsor in the British Constitution would be a major handicap to anyone reading the Bible.)

We aren't treating simple contrasts or shades of meaning here, but total contradictions. No-one who studies the Bible should attempt to reconcile these things by simply assuming that they will ever make perfectly smooth reading. They won't and, if all goes well, you won't try to make them.

The first task of students of the Torah, then, is to recognise the complexity of the pages of this part of the Bible. Because it treats of the most vital and significant traditions, it is ground that has been worked and reworked by its (many) authors and editors. When you ask yourself, *What is this text saying?* you will have to cope with the complexity which many authors have woven into the text itself.

The second task is to see how far we can identify and study the work *and the intentions* of these various different hands, and subject them to the techniques we have been using on the Gospel: remember, primarily it is the meaning intended by the writer of Scripture that is the Word of God. So when we ask, *What does the text mean?* we are going to be helped by any knowledge we can accumulate about the who the writers of the Pentateuch were, and what they intended to convey; this helps us to a point of contact with the truth of the Scripture they produced.

We can take very little for granted. One of the synonyms for “Pentateuch” is *the Books of Moses* or, quite simply, *Moses*. The unique authority of these five books is identified with the unique authority of Moses, who thus acquires the title *Giver of the Law*: itself interesting, since in Jewish faith it is clearly *God* who is the true giver of the Torah; yet the activity of Moses as author of the Pentateuch is accorded this semi-divine honour. Moses didn’t just carry the tablets of stone down the mountain, he wrote the scrolls as well. Jesus himself certainly believed this, as did his contemporaries.¹

What, instead, are the signs of *multiple* sources in the Pentateuch? There are repetitions, contradictions, stylistic contrasts, and the massively different modes of thought that I have already referred to. Let’s recall the toolbox of scholarship we used to read the Synoptic Gospels:

1 First, reading the text itself, and coming to understand the words and the sentences as accurately as we can. Dictionaries, concordances, commentaries!

2 The process of *textual criticism* is the next to apply, so that the textual variations we discern can teach us something about the different sources which lie behind the single text we have to deal with. What does the language - vocabulary, grammar, etc - tell us?

3 Then, when we have said all we can about various sources, we have to turn to *redaction criticism*, to decide how the multiple sources were combined together, and under what principles of editorship. This is very easy in the Synoptic Gospel field, where we possess in Mk the primary source for Mt and Lk; usually we can clearly see how the

¹ *The allegation that the Five Books come to us from the pen of Moses was sustained into the modern age by no less an authority than the Pontifical Biblical Commission, whose comic proceedings you will find chronicled, and should read about, in the Jerome Biblical Commentary. Now that this Commission has been consigned to the dustbin of history, we can join the majority and study these works using the tools of modern scholarship.*

redactors altered Mk. In the Pentateuch, of course, we do not have any evidence about the primary sources as independent realities. We only have the one text which has undergone the redactors' work. This makes everything relatively complicated.

4 On the way we shall constantly have recourse to *form-criticism*, which will help us in the recognition of different *kinds* of literature which have been incorporated, and remind us of the motives for which such recognisable pericopes were first created. In many cases this will take us back to the pre-literary world, the world of oral traditions. (Of its nature this is a conjectural journey since, if the oral sources had come down to us in written form, they would no longer be oral sources.) We should get used to the sudden discovery of a poem in the middle of a story, a proverb in the middle of a speech, a piece of theologising in the middle of an historical survey, and so on.

It's worth remembering, at this stage, that each of these methods of study is evolving, and our understanding of the massive complexity of the Scriptures is always evolving too. Now I'm going to cut a corner.

The Four Sources

A wide consensus of scholarship has reached the conclusion that the sources of the Pentateuch are fundamentally four. It will shorten the agony if we take the most commonly-accepted formulation to speak for all refinements of it, so as to get the main lines established in our thinking. So here are the widely-used generalisations of scholars.

J for The Jahwist, Judah and Jerusalem

The "J" source is a narrative source, associated with Judah - that is, Jerusalem - in the tenth century (the Exodus period, containing Moses, is usually reckoned at about 1300). It is characterised by an earthy realism and a certain studied rusticism. God is named as "Yahweh", and is depicted in strongly anthropomorphic terms: for instance

- with his hands, Yahweh forms a man from the dust of the earth, and breathes into him, so that he becomes a living being.
- Yahweh plants a garden and waters it.
- He walks with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day.
- He makes them garments to hide their nakedness.
- When Noah has taken into the Ark his family and the animals, Yahweh comes down and shuts the door.

E for the Elohist

The second narrative source is not from Judah but from the divided tribes of the north who absconded upon the death of Solomon. In contrast to J, E calls God "Elohim". E tries to shun anthropomorphism, and is sensitive to anything which reduces the status of God as *the Most High*. Perhaps because Judah preserved the Temple, with its imagery of God living among his people, and the Tent of Meeting, where a man might take up his stand before God, and the King, who is entitled "the first-born of God", J's readers were

possibly more open to an *immanent* God, whose closeness to his people is part of his design. In the North, the kings were not divine-right heirs to the Promises to David, but usurpers; the state had no divine sanction, and the Temple of Samaria was of human design, a substitute for the Jerusalem Temple designed and instructed by God (1K12:26ff). To these Northern writers, it is essential that God should *transcend* these unfortunate earthbound realities. Language about God, for E, is thus sacral and exalted; human beings do not approach God, and are not approached by God. Rather the imagery of *angels* as intermediaries comes into high profile, and the theme of confrontation with God being fatal to earthlings is much in evidence. E has in general a high moral tone, consonant with its paramount awareness of the holiness of God.

P for Priests

The priestly source, as you might expect, includes all that pertains to liturgy and the sanctuary. It has a concern for law and regulation. It also retains much fondness for genealogies and historical lists, surveys and categories. Next to Moses himself, Aaron figures as an important personage². Even when it tells a story, as in the opening Creation-account of Genesis 1, it tells it in an almost liturgical fashion, with its rhythm of evening and morning, and its culminating Sabbath. One of its characteristics is that its roots were in the Jerusalem Sanctuary, but its most fundamental editing took place when the Temple was destroyed, so that priestly contributions to the Pentateuch often bear the marks of the Exile, of the spiritualisation of the religion which took place when Throne, Temple, and Land were lost, and of the confrontation with Babylonian religion. It fell to the priests - because the Kings had perished - to keep the soul of the nation. They had to find spiritual equivalents for the laws and regulations about Temple, Altar, Sacrifice, Cult which could no longer be physically fulfilled. Judaism became a religion of home and heart, not Temple, Palace, and Land; the body of a Jew becomes the Temple, the Jewish Home the Promised Land, the dining-room table the theatre of liturgy. Circumcision is voiced as the personal demarcation of the sacred, and the daily rituals about food and prayer become vital points of contact with fidelity to the Covenant. The Exile leaves massive traces on Judaism. It set the emotional tone and the historical register for Jewish experience up to the present day.

D for Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy has its roots in the pre-exilic forum occupied by the Prophets, who called for a return to the sources of Israel's faith and life. Its style is instantly recognisable, in that it gathers up the variations of history into a single view, based on the original divine vocation of Israel. Persons and events are judged according to the way they can be understood as responding to, or rejecting, God's initiative. Formulaic repetition is one of its features, and the title of the whole enterprise means *second Law*, expressing the deeply conservative trend of its concerns - the return *ad fontes*. The book, Dt itself, is voiced as

² And if Aaron isn't there at the beginning of a text, the P source will sometimes insert him, as if all the important happenings in the history of Israel must include, at the least a priestly witness, and, better still, a starring rôle for a priest. A good example is the story of the Fall of Jericho in Jos 6, where the Jerusalem Bible has helpfully isolated the P insertions. In the Exodus accounts the various descriptions of the rôle of Aaron ("speaking for Moses as a prophet speaks for his god") are also interesting. They found the authority of the priests, who had to speak for the nation during the Exile.

the Last Will and Testament of Moses, as he gazes from Mt Pisgah across the Jordan, into the Land he will never enter. Inevitably, then, it consciously speaks as a voice from the past, the voice of the desert which always lies behind the experience of the Promised Land. The derelictions of the people of God in Canaan, their acceptance of its money, its city life, and its political intrigue, all symbolised by the shameful secret worship of its pagan gods, leaves a nation guilty before the God of the Exodus, whose austere voice reminds them of their past and its meaning. The Deuteronomistic school is of permanent influence in the canon of the Scriptures, since the prophets constantly feed into its tonality, especially in their oracles of doom. Its most recognisable and enduring monument is the great Deuteronomistic History, running through several books of the Bible (Jos, Jg, 1-2Sam, 1-2K)

The Redaction of the Pentateuch

The apparently smooth process of the Pentateuch's account of Israel before its settlement of the Promised Land should not blind us to the fact that the components of the five scrolls were originally independent items of tradition, each with its own provenance and reason for existing. If you want to check on this, try finding a mention of the Patriarchs outside the Pentateuch itself. The first mention of Abraham after the Pentateuch is in Ezekiel (prophesying c.580 BC) 33:24. This is truly a long silence about the supposed "Father of all who believe". No-one will be blind to the difference between the peaceable tribal families of the book of Genesis and the embattled - but secretly mighty - oppressed people at the beginning of Exodus. Quite clearly there is little by way of natural continuity here. The thin statement that *the family of Jacob had become a great people* hardly masks the enormous differences between the two books and their inspirations.

Of the Exodus itself, by contrast, we can say that it is a vital presence in many parts of the OT, and that its story is repeated in very many places throughout its pages (Ex 20:2; Deut 6:20ff; Hos 12:10; 13:4; Is 51:9f; Ps 136:10ff, etc., etc.).

The question arises, how did the four sources identified above become woven together into the five scrolls we now know? Here the scholars go into overdrive, and there are almost as many theories to choose from as scholars who have tried to answer the question. The NJBC gives a full survey of the scholarly process in section 69 which is well worth reading, especially the account of the magisterial work of Julius Wellhausen, who codified and synthesised the work of his predecessors.

One of the most influential contributions of Wellhausen was his dating of the composition of the four sources. He set J at about 870 BC, E at 770, with a programme of redaction to unite them into the composite source JE in about 680. He saw Deuteronomy coming through at the point of Hilkiah's discovery of the Law in the Temple (621 BC). The P source runs from the Exile until about 450 BC when the entire Hexateuch was finally edited. Remember always that these are dates for *literary production*. The actual

material contained in these works is far older, and may have existed, not only in oral tradition, but in independent scriptural forms which we have never possessed.

Wellhausen places the P influence chronologically last of the four waves of influence, but he does not consider it as the summit of the process, or even as an advance on the earlier sources; he thought of it as initiating the descent of Jewish religion into the formalism and ritualism connoted in the popular image of Pharisaism today. Of the four sources, it would seem to be the least positively attractive. Yet in the context of the Exile, the priestly contribution to Israel's survival was absolutely central and decisive. If Wellhausen is right, the J source is connected to the royal court, the E source, fed from the prophet-led religion of the North, largely the contribution of Northern Levites who fled south after the Assyrian invasion of Samaria, and Deuteronomy a source intimately connected with the work of the great prophets of Israel. The Priestly source may not have the power and glory of the other three, but it represents the only cohesive force to survive the fall of Jerusalem and the deportation. We may well owe a great debt to these often prosy and less than exciting priests.

The four sources were united into a single consecutive series by recognisable but at the same time a very respectful means. The opening chapters of Genesis treat of the so-called primal traditions - pre-history, stories of creation and of early humanity - but in clearly various source-material: the first Genesis creation-account is P, the second JE; the literary form of these stories is what is called *saga*. The conditions of life on earth is explained, principally from the point of view of a farmer: man is ordered to the earth, to till it (*adam* and *adama* are clearly the same word), the transgression in the garden results in the more burdensome details of agricultural life (work, harvesting, disappointment, etc) and the cursing of Cain is in terms of separating him from the land - and thus from God - along with those who will be his descendants: city-dwellers, nomads, smiths, and musicians. The independent section of the Noah saga guarantees the continuance of the human project; the future is once more clearly described from the point of view of the farmer. The illicit coupling of women with heavenly beings is punished with a reduction in human life-span, and finally God corrects human hubris by confusing human language.

It is worth noticing that there are two clear passages of P origins visible in the first twelve chapters of Genesis: I've already mentioned the opening Creation account; the second P passage is in Gen 9:1-17, and it reiterates many of the same themes as the Creation account, amplifying the first text considerably. The two sections are not narratives in the sense of the sagas between them, but passages whose basis is theology. You will also notice in three of the chapters the presence of genealogies, inserted with the clear intent of providing the separate sagas with a connecting thread; I've already identified the genealogy as a favourite genre of the P source.

The Abraham cycle begins the second great section of Genesis, the Patriarchal Narratives. Those about Abraham are separate sagas, only very thinly connected by narrative phrases. Gen 13, 18 and 19 form an Abraham/Lot collection. Gen 14 also deals with Abraham and Lot, but is obviously a quite different saga, since Abraham has

become a warrior king, totally unlike the meditative and humble figure in the rest of the tradition.

The Isaac tradition is conspicuously thin by comparison with the Abraham or Jacob traditions, and soon gives way to the Jacob saga - describing his conflicts with Esau his brother and Laban his father-in-law. The two theophanies at Bethel and at Penuel act as high-points in the tradition. But all the other strings in the harp are short compared with the Joseph story, which is not a saga, but almost a small novel. Note the almost total absence of God from the account, by contrast with the forms that surround it. Here the pre-eminence of the Joseph tribe is being established; but there are other marks in the Pentateuch, for example, of the pre-eminence of Judah over his brothers, which has proceeded from a different source.

During the book of Genesis *God's promises* form an element of sustaining continuity between the collected sagas and stories: comparison between 13:14-17 and 28:13-14 should be instructive. We can read the four speeches from God found at 12:1ff, 26:1ff, 31:11ff, and 46:1ff. The overarching message of all of them is that each of the patriarchs is destined for the Holy Land, even when God commands them to leave it.

Gen 12:7; 16:10; 22:16ff; 24:7; 26:3-5, 24; 28:15; 31:3; 32:10-13; 50:24 belong together by reason of their formulaic similarity and continuity. They relate to the strange and well-delineated Gen 15, which Rendtorff identifies as a kind of "promise narrative", culminating in the language of the Covenant to give the Land to the people. This is clearly "Deuteronomistic" in inspiration, and gives us a clue to the "D" revision of the whole Pentateuch. Because Deuteronomy is so much involved with the Exile and the return from the Exile, the theme of returning to the land promised to the Patriarchs is a major sign of the "D" source, and the frequent image of a guiding angel (Gen 24:7, Ex 32:34, 33:2) who takes the people safely back is also a Deuteronomistic motif.

We can also discern the concern of the P source to link the Mosaic tradition with the Patriarchs, in Ex 2:23ff, and most clearly in 6:2-8, where a full account is given of the patriarchal past. Otherwise Abraham are markedly absent from Exodus.

The Attack on von Rad's concept of the Yahwist as an individual theologian

The idea of a single theologian-author behind the J-source implies a connected theme/plot imposed upon the material at a very basic level. Traces of such an overarching design are to be found, but upon a learned student such as yourself it will dawn that they belong quite evidently to the *redactional* level - a comparatively superficial level - rather than to the separate elements of the tradition itself - the stories, the pericopes.

For instance, *the promises of God to the Patriarchs* Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob provides a connecting framework for the whole book of Genesis. But after this first book of the Pentateuch these promises only appear in a very superficial way. The enslaved Hebrews

betray not the slightest knowledge of the promised land as a country which had once belonged to their ancestors: nor does the account of the Sinai revelation, the wandering in the desert, or the settlement and conquest of Canaan refer to this tradition *except at a superficial, redactional level*.

That the God of the Exodus is “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” is clearly an *editor’s* device rather than an integral part of the Exodus story. The Genesis stories never refer forwards to those of Exodus-Numbers as to a sequel, nor (except in the superficial way already conceded) do the Exodus-Numbers series refer back to Genesis. The freedom resulting from these realisations enables us, for instance, to accept that the accounts of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are probably drawn from three *separate* cycles, arguably gleaned from traditions or even archives at the various confederate sanctuaries (Mamre for Abraham, Bethel for Jacob, etc): or to see that the themes of promises to Patriarchs, oppression in Egypt/Exodus, Sinai revelation, wilderness wanderings, and settlement of the land all contribute in different ways to the Hexateuch, and each convey subordinate clusters of traditions within themselves - for instance, the Exodus account contains sequences involving *oppression - plagues - deliverance*. That can be recognised as a separate genre, probably emanating from a separate source.

Clearly all these various elements have been drawn together into a unity; but not at the time (tenth or ninth century?) conjectured for the J source. Scholars have toyed with the idea of the P source doing the lion’s share of this editorial work; but Rendtorff thinks that the true quality of the editorial framework of the whole massive work is to be traced in the style of the Deuteronomistic school of the exilic, or even post-exilic age. Further scholarship (Schmid, Tengström) have modified the position, attributing the framework to the pre-exilic Deuteronomy of the eighth century, but they are agreed that the alleged literary work of the Jahwist could never be thought of as a single campaign of the tenth century BC.