

# Authorship of Pentateuch

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## 1.0 Introduction

This paper presents authorship of Pentateuch. The first part deals with description of the key term, namely Pentateuch. The second part presents authorship based on documentary hypothesis followed by mosaic authorship. The paper winds up with a conclusion.

## 2.0 Description of Pentateuch

The key term in this paper is “pentateuch”. The term is used interchangeably with “torah” which refers either to the Five Books of Moses (or Pentateuch) or to the entirety of Judaism's founding legal and ethical religious texts. These books include Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy (Malick, 1999).

These five books form a backbone for the rest of the Old Testament and New Testament theologically:

**Genesis:** The origins behind the founding of the theocracy, the promised blessing of the seed in the land and of all peoples through the seed.

**Exodus:** The redemptions of the seed of Abraham out of bondage and the formation of this people to be a nation with a constitution.

**Leviticus:** Israel's culture is established by providing a manual of ordinances to help with their needs when approaching God who is going to live among His people in holiness (Lev 26:11-12)

**Numbers:** YHWH orders Israel's walk (the military arrangement, census of the tribes, transport of the sacred palladium), but Israel disrupts YHWH's order; Nevertheless, the promised blessing cannot be frustrated from within or from without.

**Deuteronomy:** The reconstitution of the nation under YHWH to enter the land through a covenant renewal in legal-prophetic form.

### **3.0 Authorship of Pentateuch**

Authorship of Pentateuch is discussed briefly based on two main approaches, namely authorship by Moses and Documentary Hypothesis.

#### **3.1 Mosaic Authorship of the Pentateuch**

Mosaic authorship is the tradition attributing the five books of the Torah or Pentateuch to Moses, the legendary leader, lawgiver, and prophet of the Israelites who figures as the main protagonist in the Book of Exodus.

Mosaic authorship was accepted in scholarship throughout Late Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and most of the Early Modern period, from at least the 3rd to the 17th century AD. The rise of secular scholarship eventually led to its scrutiny and ultimately rejection by the 19th century.

Outside scholarly mainstream, Mosaic authorship continues to be defended by some conservative religious scholars, who seek to reconcile it with modern scholarly findings. Such authors tend to place Moses as a historical figure at some time during the Late Bronze Age.

##### **3.1.1 Biblical Evidence of Mosaic Authorship**

According to **Lyons (1999)**, there are various scriptural verses that show Moses wrote the Pentateuch.

**Deuteronomy 31:9 and Deuteronomy 31:24-26** describe how Moses writes "torah" (instruction) on a scroll and lays it beside the Ark of the Covenant.

**Exodus 17:14**, "And YHWH said unto Moses, Write this for a memorial in a book, and rehearse it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven;"

**Exodus 24:4**, "And Moses wrote all the words of YHWH, and rose up early in the morning, and built an altar under the mount, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel;"

**Exodus 34:27**, "And Yahweh said unto Moses, Write thou these words, for after the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with thee and with Israel;"

**Leviticus 26:46** "These are the decrees, the laws and the regulations that the LORD established on Mount Sinai between himself and the Israelites through Moses."

### **3.1.2 Objections to Mosaic Authorship**

Prior to the 17th century both Jews and Christians accepted the traditional view that Moses had written the Torah under the direct inspiration, even dictation of God. A few rabbis and philosophers asked how Moses could have described his own death (Deuteronomy 34:5-10), or given a list of the kings of Edom before those kings ever lived (Genesis 36:31-43), but none doubted the truth of the tradition, for the purpose of scholarship "was to underline the antiquity and authority of the teaching in the Pentateuch, not to demonstrate who wrote the books (Gordon, 2003).

Even in the middle Ages some rabbis had voiced doubts about the traditional view, but in the 17th century it came under increasing and detailed scrutiny. In 1651 Thomas Hobbes, marshaled a battery of passages such as Deut 34:6 ("no man knoweth of his sepulchre to this day," implying an author living long after Moses' death); Gen 12:6 ("and the Canaanite was then in the land," implying an author living in a time when the Canaanite was no longer in the land); and Num 21:14 (referring to a previous book of Moses' deeds), and concluded that none of these could be by Moses. Others, including Isaac de la Peyrère, Baruch Spinoza, Richard Simon, and John Hampden came to the same conclusion, but their works were condemned, several of them were imprisoned and forced to recant, and an attempt was made on Spinoza's life (Friedman, 1989).

Development of documentary hypothesis came in to shed more light on the authorship of Pentateuch.

### **3.2 Documentary Hypothesis**

The idea that Moses did not write the Pentateuch actually has been around for more than a millennium. However, until the mid-seventeenth century, the vast majority of people still maintained that Moses was its author. It was in the mid-1600s that the Dutch philosopher Benedict Spinoza began to seriously question this widely held belief (Longman, 1994). French physician Jean Astruc developed the original Documentary Hypothesis in 1753, and it went through many different alterations until Karl Graf revised the initial hypothesis in the mid-nineteenth century. Julius Wellhausen then restated Graf's Documentary Hypothesis and brought it to light in European and American scholarly circles (McDowell, 1999). It thus has become known to many as the *Graf-Wellhausen Hypothesis*.

Since the "Period of Enlightenment," the Graf-Wellhausen explanation of the origin of the Pentateuch has been thrust consistently into the faces of Christians. Liberal scholars teach that the Pentateuch was compiled from four original "source documents" designated as J, E, D, and P. These four documents supposedly were written at different times by different authors, and eventually were compiled into the Pentateuch by an editor (McDowell, 1999).

#### **3.2.1 J, Jahwist source**

The J, or Jehovahist, document (usually known as the Yahwehist document) supposedly was written around 850 B.C., and was characterized by its use of the divine name Yahweh. It is the oldest source, concerned with narratives, making up half of Genesis and half of Exodus, plus fragments of Numbers. J describes a human-like God, called Yahweh (or rather YHWH) throughout, and has a special interest in the territory of the Kingdom of Judah and individuals connected with its history.

#### **3.2.2 E, Elohist source**

E parallels J, often duplicating the narratives. Makes up a third of Genesis and half of Exodus, plus fragments of Numbers. E describes a human-like God initially called Elohim, and Yahweh subsequent to the incident of the burning bush, at which Elohim reveals himself as Yahweh. E focuses on the Kingdom of Israel and on the Shiloh priesthood, has a moderately eloquent style. It was purportedly written around 750 B.C.

### **3.2.3 D, Deuteronomist source**

D in the Pentateuch is restricted to the book of Deuteronomy, although it continues into the subsequent books of Joshua, Judges and Kings. It takes the form of a series of sermons about the Law, as well as recapitulating the narrative of Exodus and Numbers. Its distinctive term for God is YHWH Elohimu, traditionally translated in English as "The Lord our God." Originally composed c. 650-621 BCE

### **3.2.4 P, Priestly source**

P is preoccupied with lists (especially genealogies), dates, numbers and laws. P describes a distant and unmerciful God, referred to as Elohim. P partly duplicates J and E, but alters details to stress the importance of the priesthood. P consists of about a fifth of Genesis, substantial portions of Exodus and Numbers, and almost all of Leviticus. According to Wellhausen, P has a low level of literary style. It was allegedly written around 500 B.C.

This hypothesis dominated biblical scholarship for much of the 20th century, and, although increasingly challenged by other models in the last part of the 20th century, its terminology and insights continue to provide the framework for modern theories on the origins of the Torah.

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