0. PREFACE

The comparison is an unfortunate one, but taking up this topic reminds me of how a mortician might feel upon discovering that a cadaver in the advanced stages of rigor mortis continues to show signs of life. About the time one thinks all critical discussions on the history and authorship of the Pentateuch have died a long-overdue death, the topic suddenly sits up again as an interesting point of inquiry or even as a test of critical orthodoxy on the one hand or of Christian piety and scriptural fidelity on the other.

This was brought to my attention again in a conversation just over a decade ago which reminded me of a course I endured early on in my graduate studies. That was in a previous millennium, at a time when the authorship of the Pentateuch was identified in conservative circles as one of four critical issues in the study of the Old Testament by which one’s commitment to the authority of Scripture could be measured (alongside the dating of the exodus, the authorship of Isaiah, and the dating of Daniel). The more recent exchange resulted in my being declined a teaching gig overseas, ostensibly because my views on the authorship of the Pentateuch did not align with the position espoused by the faculty of the school seeking my services as a visiting professor. The present piece, which many of my students have seen in one version or another over the decades, represents a kind of belated peace offering to my recent interlocutor and my earlier seminary professors.

What follows is an attempt to outline where the discussion has wandered over the centuries and where it presently stands, in the genuine interest of highlighting the importance of the journey and of respecting those who have traveled it. In presenting things this way I have in view the serious but nonspecialist reader who wants to listen in on the discussion without getting buried by it. I am not writing for the advanced scholar, nor is it my intent to replace or to duplicate any of the works cited at the end. My purpose further is not to convince anyone of anything, but to trace the contours of an important, albeit tired and exhausted, discussion. In the end it will be clear that my sentiments resonate with those of T. D. Alexander, who concludes:

At this stage there is no telling how Pentateuchal studies will develop. Without new evidence, . . . it is highly unlikely that biblical scholars will be able to uncover with any certainty the process by which the Pentateuch was created. For the present we can but hope that contemporary scholars will learn from the shortcomings of their predecessors, and be more willing to acknowledge the tentative nature of their theories regarding how the Pentateuch came into being. . . . Although human curiosity will undoubtedly prompt scholars to ask how the Pentateuch was composed, it is vitally important that we should not lose sight of the question, why was the Pentateuch composed? While the ‘how’ question is never likely to be answered with complete certainty, the ‘why’ question directs us to the one who is the source of all knowledge (From Paradise to the Promised Land, 80, 93-94; italics mine).

To Alexander’s ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions, I would add a third–the ‘what’ question: What exactly does the Pentateuch say? We will not attempt to answer that question in this short survey, but it should not go
 unnoticed that a critical inquiry of this sort can point in a direction where an answer might be found, as I will attempt to highlight in the final sections.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Let’s begin with a definition or two. Broadly defined, biblical criticism refers to the use of rational judgment in understanding the various features of the Bible, or in other words, to the pursuit of reasonable answers to questions that arise from the existence and nature of Scripture. In this sense, biblical criticism plays a part in all biblical interpretation. More narrowly and until recently, the expression ‘biblical criticism’ was virtually synonymous with ‘historical criticism’—the post-Enlightenment project that fixated on “the world behind the text” (the details of its origin) in the interest of deriving the Bible’s original meaning from “neutral” or “objective” (read: “scientific” or “historical” or “secular”) canons of judgment regarded as superior to and therefore superseding the theological or faith confessions of Judaism and the Church. Pentateuchal criticism encompasses the various approaches to the study of the Pentateuch that derive from its investigation along these lines.

1.2. At least some appreciation of Pentateuchal criticism is valuable to any reader or student of the Pentateuch (and of the whole Bible), and this is true for several reasons:

1.2.1. Pentateuchal criticism sets the agenda for the entire modern enterprise of biblical introduction and criticism. Here is where the various methodologies that continue to influence biblical study were birthed. For this reason, a knowledge of the kinds of questions which critical approaches to the Pentateuch seek to address and of the way they go about addressing them is valuable for entering responsibly into thoughtful discussion about all such matters and evaluating the output of these discussions and debates (including their influence on commentaries, sermons, university classrooms, popular Bible studies, even personal reading habits).

1.2.2. Pentateuchal criticism illustrates how deeply indebted all interpretive approaches and decisions—including our own—are to prior philosophical and theological assumptions about the nature of the material being studied and the purpose for its existence. This is as true of those who affirm the Bible’s authority as it is of those who deny that authority, of those who naively think they take the Bible at face value (who claim to “read it straight”) as those who knowingly and intentionally read the Bible inhospitably or “against the grain.” In this way, by reflecting thoughtfully on the concerns of Pentateuchal criticism, we are reminded that interpretive virtue does not consist in denying the assumptions that influence our study or in pretending they do not exist (the myth of presuppositionlessness), but in honestly identifying what our assumptions are, humbly interacting with those who have different ones, and willingly exposing our own to revision as the data require. Or as N. T. Wright puts it:

To affirm “the authority of scripture” is precisely not to say, “We know what scripture means and don’t need to raise any more questions.” It is always a way of saying that the church in each generation must make fresh and rejuvenated efforts to understand scripture more fully and live by it more thoroughly, even if that means cutting across cherished traditions (The Last Word, 91).

1.2.3. Pentateuchal criticism aids the interpretive enterprise by bringing to light many of the real complexities presented to us in the scriptural text that call for responsible attention. It is important to understand that biblical criticism, of the Pentateuch and elsewhere, did not arise in a vacuum, among those who had nothing better to do with their time than to think up problems
with the Bible. It is not much ado about nothing. Whatever the interpreter’s methodological stance, there is nothing to lose (or fear) and a great deal to gain in harvesting the fruit of critical observations on the biblical text. (On this note, it is worth reminding ourselves that ignorance of the Bible’s difficulties has never been a prerequisite to or a mark of true spirituality; and pretending that difficulties do not exist, especially when we suspect otherwise, says more about our unbelief and disingenuousness, even our deception, than it does about our piety. “Ignorance,” we are reminded by D. A. Carson, “may be bliss, but it is not a virtue.” Moreover, in the face of deeply perplexing features in the biblical material, interpreters are cautioned to avoid premature dogmatic foreclosure on thoughtful proposals and to dissent where necessary with appropriate grace and humility (unlike one triumphant seminarian: “If Wellhausen had known Hebrew, he would not have said the things he did.”). We are further reminded that, here as elsewhere, responding to real issues does not consist merely in dismissing the critical data or simply in disagreeing with someone else’s proposal concerning it (or even in showing the proposal’s deficiencies), but in offering a better account of the relevant factors.

2. THE TRADITIONAL VIEW OF PENTATEUCHAL AUTHORSHIP AND EARLY DEPARTURES

2.1. Put simply, the traditional Jewish and Christian view up to the 17th century affirmed the divine origin and Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, and so its complete infallibility and essential unity. This presentation of the matter should not be mistaken as naively uncritical, as if no one up to that time was aware of any problems when it came to defending such a view. Indeed, both rabbinic Talmudic and some Christian scholars (e.g., St. Jerome) acknowledged the possibility and presence of at least some “post-Mosaic” additions and later editorial activity in the Mosaic Pentateuch. But defending Mosaic authorship was not at the top of their agenda. Until the 17th century, most people read the Bible, including the Pentateuch, with different motives and values in mind—such as theological Scripture, revelatory of God and of God’s people, plan, and program. To most interpreters in Church or Synagogue, the Pentateuch was “Mosaic” in the sense that its teachings were anchored in the antiquity and authority of Israel’s first and greatest prophet. But they were more interested in hearing God speak through Scripture than in demonstrating and defending who actually wrote the books. The concerns that would come to dominate subsequent critical discussions were not their concerns, and so they were not often debated. Accordingly, we might call them “pre-critical,” but only in the narrower sense of ‘biblical criticism’ noted in 1.1. above.

2.2. Very early on, and certainly by the latter middle ages, doubts began to arise about the adequacy of this position. These centered especially on: (a) dogmatic and ethical objections: Could Moses have authored such offensive material as the stories of Noah’s drunkenness (Gen 9), Abraham’s “lies” (Gen 12; 20), patriarchal polygamy (Gen 29ff.), his own murdering of an Egyptian (Exod 2), and the extolling of his own meekness (Num 12:3)? and (b) dating objections: Did Moses write the many pieces of the Pentateuch which reflect a later date than his own lifetime, including his own obituary (Deut 34:5-12)? (See also Gen 12:6; 36:31; Exod 16:35; Num 34:15; Deut 3:8; 4:1-49.) In due course inquiries of these kinds would result in a situation that was characterized by many stalwart advocates of Mosaic authorship, by some outright denials, and by a few attempts at seeking alternative explanations. The Renaissance of the 15th and 16th centuries, with its interest in the humanities, together with the Reformation of the 16th century and the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries—all helped provide a climate in which traditional views would be tested. Why was this so?

2.3. Today it is not uncommon for Protestants to herald the Reformation and its perceived achievements as un tarnished victory for the cause of Christian faith and biblical authority. What escapes
notice in this presentation, among other illusions, is the extent to which das protestantische Schriftprinzip (“the Protestant Scripture-Principle”) of sola scriptura, whereby biblical interpretation would ultimately be untethered from the Church and its magisterium, and Scripture would stand alone as the only unquestioned religious authority, actually helped pave the way toward the full-flowering of biblical criticism in the following centuries. Whatever the finer nuances of its application, this formal principle to which all the Reformers held rendered inevitable that certain traditional claims about the Bible (claims about authorship, for example) would in due course come under review and possible revision, even rejection. The case for the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, for example, would be weakened by the observation that the Pentateuch is, properly, an anonymous work; and since the Book of Joshua never actually names Joshua as its author, that traditional view might have to be abandoned as well; and so on. The Reformers, it turns out, were biblical “critics,” whose insistence on the primacy of the biblical text in its own right, emancipated from ecclesial authority and consigned to private judgment (whether they actually put matters this way is a question for another day), would pave the way for what emerged as full-blown biblical criticism.

2.4. These factors, together with certain philosophical winds in the “enlightened” European climate of 17th and 18th centuries—most notably a growing confidence in the critical powers of the human intellect (rationalism) to sort out claims to truth, religious or otherwise, and to test all matters at the bar of human reason—would ultimately result in the birth of historical criticism and its almost exclusive focus on the Bible’s human elements, including the Bible’s long and complex history of growth. Prominent names from this period include L. Cappellus, B. Spinoza, R. Simon, H. Grotius, T. Hobbes, J. Le Clerc, and I. de la Peyrere, who brought challenges to everything from the integrity of the Hebrew text (Cappellus), to the traditional Jewish view of biblical composition and authorship (Spinoza, Simon), to the question of whether Adam and Eve were actually the first humans (la Peyrere). As a result, the Bible came to be treated like any other book and subjected to the same canons of criticism. As for the Pentateuch, it would soon be viewed as the product of a long and complex developing history—the work of multiple authors whose contributions were pieced together into a single literary composite—with a date of completion around 400 B.C., many centuries after the time of Moses.

3. THE FULL FLOWERING OF PENTATEUCHAL CRITICISM (18TH AND 19TH CENTURIES)

3.1. The hallmark of Enlightenment influence was, as we have noted, the enthronement of human reason. Proceeding confidently on that platform, critical thinkers set about to engage and answer questions related to various indications of the Pentateuch’s apparent complexity. These included:

- The variable use and relative preponderance of the divine name YHWH (LORD) and title Elohim (God) (also El Elyon, El Shaddai, and others)–Would the same author have used different names/titles by which to refer to the Deity (as in Gen 1:1–2:3 and 2:4ff.)?

- Repetition (doublet and triplicate accounts)–Would a single author have told the same story more than once, with variations or deviations in the accounts (as in Gen 1:1–2:3 and 2:4-25; or Gen 12, 20, and 26)?

- Stylistic differences–Would the same author have written in such dramatically different styles and forms (as in vivid narrative, detailed law codes, tedious genealogies, hortatory material, and narratively inset poetry)?
• Internal discrepancies or contradictions—Would the same author have permitted tensions and conflicts in the details of his material without buffing them out (as in Gen 1:24-26 and 2:15-20; Gen 6:19-20, 7:14-16a and 7:2-3; Gen 28:9 and 36:3; Gen 4:26 and Exod 6:2-3)?

• Anachronistic glosses—Would Moses, writing in his own day, have mentioned places and events and perspectives from later times (as in Gen 14:14; 36:31; Exod 6:26-27; 16:35; Num 12:3; Deut 2:12; 34:5-12)?

These indications of textual complexity—indications not dreamed up, but presented by the material itself, “straight off the page”—called for reasonable and more satisfactory explanations, it was felt, than those supplied in the traditional view of compositional unity associated with Moses. Perhaps Moses did not write the Pentateuch “from scratch” or from beginning to end after all. Maybe the Pentateuch is a composite text best explained by a theory of various and divergent source documents of written and/or oral tradition coming together to form the text at hand. In that case, the study of the Pentateuch might best be undertaken by isolating these various “strands” and focusing interpretive attention on their individual character and peculiar emphases—getting into “the world behind the text” and examining the “original” bits of the Pentateuch before it became the Pentateuch. And so the hypotheses developed.

3.2. The Older Documentary Hypothesis—According to this proposal, the Pentateuch consists in two discrete strands of narrative which have been interwoven, a composite text that can be dissected with considerable confidence. Here lie the beginnings of that brand of biblical criticism known as Source Criticism, the attempt to isolate and to identify and, if possible, to date the various (hypothetical) written documents (sources) which lie behind and provide the component elements of the present apparently composite text. Prominent proponents: R. Simon (1678), H. B. Witter (1711), J. Astruc (1753, 1756), J. G. Eichhorn (1780).

3.3. The Fragmentary Hypothesis—This modification of the older documentary hypothesis proposed that rather than complete parallel strands, the Pentateuch consists in a large number of relatively short sources (fragments), independent of one another and without continuity, which an editor pieced together, adding his own comments, to form the long narrative that constitutes the present Pentateuch. Prominent proponents: A. Geddes (1792, 1800), J. S. Vater (1802, 1805).

3.4. The Supplementary Hypothesis—This revision of the older hypothesis contended that underlying our Pentateuch is a work completely or relatively unified (a so-called “E document” which favored the title Elohim for Israel’s God), which was subsequently expanded by one or several hands, rather like the growth of a snowball, as extra materials were added to the original source from other traditions or from the editor’s own imagination. Prominent proponents: W. de Wette (1807), H. Ewald (1831).

3.5. The Newer Documentary Hypothesis—The epoch-making element here is the almost exclusive interest in the dating and relative historical arranging of the various hypothetical sources, together with a corresponding evolutionary rewriting of Israel’s history. Prominent proponents: W. Vatke (1835), H. Hupfeld (1853), K. H. Graf (1869), A. Kuenen (1885), J. Wellhausen (1844-1918).

3.6. The End Result

3.6.1. The Graf-Kuenen-Wellhausen proposal—better known as the Documentary Hypothesis (DH) or the JEDP hypothesis (see next)—ultimately prevailed as the majority view, achieving a virtual consensus among Old Testament scholars at all the major universities in Europe. And since this general presentation of the matter satisfactorily answered all or most of the questions, dissenting
voices were suppressed or ignored. Although widely debated in the particulars and continually revised to the present (Smand, Eissfeldt, Vriezen, Thompson, Van Seters), it is safe to say that the DH remains at least the starting point for almost every critical discussion concerning the origin of the Pentateuch. “Although resisted by the [Catholic] Church’s Magisterium in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Documentary Hypothesis was regnant in Protestant and secular universities, and finally also in Catholic ones, for about a hundred years, from the time of Wellhausen until the 1980s” (Bergsma & Pitre, A Catholic Introduction to the Bible. Vol. 1: The Old Testament, 42).

3.6.2. According to this proposal in its broadest strokes, the Pentateuch as we know it is the product of the bringing together of four independent, identifiable, datable strands or sources that can be arranged in a clear historical sequence as follows:

- **J** = Jahwist (c. 950 B.C.)–narrative; refers to God as *YHWH* (German, Jahweh); about 1/2 the material of Genesis 2 to Exodus 24 and fragments of Numbers
- **E** = Elohist (c. 850 B.C.)–narrative; refers to God as *Elohim*; about 1/3 the material of Genesis 15 to Exodus 24
- **D** = Deuteronomist (622/621 B.C.)–sermons; the book of Deuteronomy
- **P** = Priestly (c. 450 B.C.)–lists, genealogies, laws on worship; about 1/6 the material of Genesis; most of Exodus 25 through Numbers

“Simply put, Wellhausen argued that two original sources, J(ahwist) and E(lohist), were combined to make one document, which he labeled JE. D(euteronomy) was later attached; and, finally, the P(riestly Document) was added in the post-exilic period to JE + D to create our Pentateuch” (W. Schniedewind, How the Bible Became a Book, 10).

3.6.3. The real focus and resultant innovation of the DH is its reconstructing of Israel’s history and religious development along evolutionary lines. In this rewritten history of Israel’s religion, (a) the complexities of cultic and priestly regulations presupposed by the P stratum (much of Exodus-Num) do not lie at the beginning but at end of the development (Israelite religion evolved from the primitivism of animal worship and polytheism to a more refined monotheism, for which latter development the prophets are to be credited); (b) the bulk of the Mosaic Law is postexilic, and so also post-prophetic (i.e., Pentateuchal laws come later than, and reflect the influence of, the prophets, not the other way around); and (c) Deuteronomy is assumed to be the lawbook of Josiah’s reform, and so dates from about 622/621 B.C. (cf. 2 Kgs 22-23).

3.6.4. It is important to understand that Wellhausen, who was responsible for the most definitive formulation of the DH, actually intended to develop an instrument for the deeper understanding of the Old Testament, a methodologically superior exegesis to the pre-enlightened canons of biblical and ecclesial “fundamentalism.” But the evolutionary Zeitgeist, German intellectual domination, almost uncritical acceptance of certain presuppositions, and thoroughgoing application to the entire Old Testament—all led to the widespread endorsement of his essential program, even if it came at a price. (At one point Wellhausen was forced from his post as professor of theology and had to teach Arabic instead. And reportedly, he was to have conceded just before his death in 1918 that “the rationalism which he had embraced so avidly in earlier years had made havoc of his own faith in the authority and authenticity of the Old Testament” [cited in R. K. Harrison, Introduction to the Old Testament, 26]).

3.6.5. Today, while few scholars or churchmen actually devote time and energy to arguing the case for the DH or the JEDP hypothesis, it is fair to say that most critical scholars whether Protestant or
Catholic, university religion departments, and mainstream Protestant denominations operate on the assumed premise of its essential correctness, this despite the absence of any firm evidence in its support. No one has ever seen an actual J strand, and no E document has ever appeared–other than those constructed by the ingenuity of critical scholars, of course. In other words, none of these four hypothetical sources, or others added in more recent years, has a known existence apart from the construct itself. We have a mature Pentateuch, fully formed, and nothing at all resembling an embryonic stage in its earlier development. Sternberg puts it more sharply:

Rarely has there been such a futile expense of spirit in a noble cause; rarely have such grandiose theories of origination been built and revised and pitted against one another on the evidential equivalent of the head of a pin; rarely have so many worked so long and so hard with so little to show for their trouble. Not even the widely accepted constructs of geneticism, like the Deuteronomist, lead an existence other than speculative (M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 13).

4. TWENTIETH-CENTURY DEVELOPMENTS AND REACTIONS

4.1. By the end of the 19th century and continuing into the 20th (to about 1975), interest had shifted from a preoccupation with the sources themselves to the religious ideas and oral traditions which supposedly lay behind these sources and to the stages of transmission that led from these traditions to written texts. This change in focus did not represent an abandoning of the basic premises set forth in the DH but a reaction against source criticism’s too narrow fixation on literary matters (the source documents that make up the Old Testament) and insufficient attention to oral and cultural factors (the pre-literary origins of these source documents and their path of transmission en route to the Old Testament). This shift away from literary atomization (breaking up the present text along lines of hypothetical source strata) to the prior stages of oral development and transmission was accompanied by increased interest in ancient Near Eastern studies and the observation that written texts were the product of oral cultures which gave rise to stereotypic speech forms that came in due course to literary expression. Alas, the various kinds of material we have in the Pentateuch (e.g., creation and flood narratives, genealogies, laws) had analogies in the world around Israel. An analysis of the various life settings which gave rise to those forms might shed light on the Old Testament material and its meaning. And so we arrive at Form Criticism and Tradition Criticism and their assessment of the Pentateuch.

4.2. Form Criticism and Tradition Criticism

4.2.1. Form Criticism attempts to analyze and interpret the biblical literature through a study of its literary forms or types (genres), with a view to determining the initial historical-cultural “life setting” (*Sitz im Leben*) out of which these forms developed in oral, pre-literary tradition. It draws on the insights of comparative literature and religion to help reconstruct the oral history which shaped the various kinds of materials that make up the biblical text. The basic methodology of Form Criticism is fourfold: (a) define the form-critical unit or “pericope”; (b) describe the literary genre; (c) determine the historical-cultural social setting; and (d) delineate the function in that original setting. The principal underlying assumptions of Form Criticism are obvious: (a) literary materials have formal features; (b) formal features reflect social settings of use; (c) social settings are assumed to be common to ancient Israel and her neighbors. In this way the creation and flood stories of Genesis, for example, are understood to have emerged from the ancient Near Eastern culture in which Israel found herself, where such stories were generated and shaped, eventually making their way into Israel’s own writings where they had an analogous
function. Prominent names: H. Gunkel (1895) and his followers, H. Gressmann (1913, 1921), A. Alt (1929/34).

4.2.2. Tradition Criticism goes one step further. It attempts to trace the development of a hypothetical oral tradition from its initial existence through the stages of its transmission en route to its functioning, together with other such oral traditions, as documentary sources of the Pentateuch. In this way, tradition criticism “attempted to serve as a kind of theoretical ‘bridge’ between form criticism and source criticism” (Bergsma & Pitre, 44). Prominent names: G. von Rad (1938), M. Noth (1943/1948).

4.3. Reactions to the Historical-Critical Approaches to the Pentateuch

4.3.1. It is important to underscore that ‘history’ in the historical-critical methods does not refer, in its usual sense, to the study of past events, but to a reconstruction of the history behind the final form of the biblical text. As practiced in biblical studies, in other words, historical criticism focuses on the various (hypothetical) stages in the composition of a text with a view to deciphering its original meaning. From the 17th century onward, not all Jewish and Christian scholars had bought into this obsession with textual prehistory, or with the largely German liberal Protestant assumptions and biases on which the method was based. By the last quarter of the twentieth century, a growing number of scholars were expressing doubts about the standard critical program represented in source, form, and tradition criticism. Reservation and sometimes wholesale rejection have come from various quarters and have targeted a number of perceived deficiencies.

4.3.2. Some problems with Source Criticism:

- The problem of logical fallacy (circularity)–The conclusion is built into the premise; the theory produces the sources.
- The problem of inadequate criteria–Do such criteria as divine name/titles, stylistic variations, and doublets substantiate a composite text? What if repetition, for example, occurs within one of the hypothetical source documents (which it does)?
- The problem of evolutionary presuppositions concerning Israel’s religious growth–Did Israel develop from polytheism to monotheism by influence of the prophets, or does a different picture better account for the historical and theological data–the picture preserved in the Bible’s own narrative of Israel’s religious development?
- The problem of textual atomization–How does fragmenting the present text into hypothetical sources explain the meaningful features of the resultant, remarkably coherent, final narrative?

4.3.3. Some problems with Form and Tradition Criticism:

- The problem of basic assumptions and excessive speculations–Are all written documents necessarily preceded by an oral stage of development? Does a necessary connection exist between oral and literary communication? Do common formal features indicate analogous social settings or direct borrowing? Do ethics and spiritual awareness actually evolve from simple and primitive to complex and sophisticated as the theory maintains in its analysis of oral cultures?
- The problem of confusing form and content–Does the form control the content, so that the Pentateuch’s use of a literary form that resembles a document in the library of one of Israel’s ancient neighbors means that the content is therefore analogous? Should the
formal tail wag the theological dog, or the conventional cart drive the hermeneutical horse?
• The problem of accounting for partial and altered forms—How shall we explain the adaptations (not wholesale borrowing) of conventional forms and the special purposes to which they are put in the biblical account?
• The problem of textual atomization—How does a miscellany of isolated genres and disconnected subunits within those genres, each with its own reconstructed *Sitz im Leben*, explain the meaningful features of the resultant, remarkably coherent narrative in its present, final shape?


5. THE PRESENT STATE OF THE PENTATEUCHAL DEBATE

5.1. Regarding the Shift in Focus

5.1.1. Although here and there discussions linger on one point or another from the old critical agendas (e.g., J. Blenkinsopp, H. Bloom, R. Friedman, A. Rofé, T. Thompson, J. Van Seters), it is completely fair and safe to say that the final decades of the 20th century witnessed a considerable straining and cracking in the walls of the earlier critical consensus—if not in the essential premises themselves, then certainly in the fact that few actually care much about those discussions any longer. Attention has shifted toward other interests. It is also fair and safe to say that this ground shift has almost nothing to do with a return to the traditional and conservative insistence on Mosaic authorship, since this view hardly accounts for the real complexities and other data of which we spoke earlier (and on which see further below).

5.1.2. What most characterizes the current climate of Pentateuchal (and most biblical) research is a renewed focus on the present text (as opposed to the details of its origin) and its defining function as confessed Scripture for the community of faith past and present (as opposed, say, to harvesting whatever historical light it might be able to shed, together with other ancient sources, on reconstructing Israel’s religious development). This shift in focus to the meaning and function of the biblical text a we have it is variously captured in a number of related but non-synonymous expressions: text-centered (as opposed to author-centered), synchronic (“at the same time” as opposed to diachronic, “through time”), literary (as opposed to historical), the world *within* and *in front of* the text (as opposed to the world *behind* the text), confessional/theological interpretation (as opposed to merely descriptive interpretation), canonical (as opposed to historical-critical), exegetical (as opposed to apologetic).

5.1.3. The list of contributors to one aspect or another of these movements as they affect especially Pentateuchal studies includes, among many others, T. Alexander, W. Brueggemann, A. Berlin, B. Childs, D. Clines, T. Fretheim, T. Mann, D. Olson, R. Polzin, R. Rendtorff, J. Sailhamer, C. Seitz, M. Sternberg, R. Whybray.

5.2. Regarding the Scope of the Material: Is it a Pentateuch, a Hexateuch, a Tetrateuch, or an Enneateuch?

5.2.2. ‘Tetrateuch’ (four-volume book; Genesis-Numbers)–especially associated with M. Noth (1943) and his proposal of a “deuteronomic/deuteronomistic history” (Joshua-Kings), with Deuteronomy as the introduction to this larger literary work.

5.2.3. ‘Enneateuch’ (nine-volume book; Genesis-Kings)–never really threatened ‘Pentateuch’ as an alternate title for the corpus; associated with H.-C Schmitt, D. Freedman.

5.2.4. The discernible preference in recent scholarship is ‘Pentateuch,’ on the basis of various compositional, linguistic, and thematic considerations, but with thoughtful appreciation for the manner in which Genesis-Kings forms a continuous narrative, a seamless account from creation to the exile, with Deuteronomy as the hinge between the Pentateuch and the Former Prophets (or the so-called “Historical” Books).

5.3. An Additional Note on Deuteronomy

5.3.1. Among the special issues raised by Deuteronomy, the critical discussion has focused most intensely on its association with the Josianic reform of 2 Kings 22-23. The identification of the “Book of the Law” found by Hilkiah the high priest (22:8-20) has roots as early as the Church Fathers, who regarded the torah book as Deuteronomy, compiled by Moses but now simply rediscovered after its long neglect in Israel.

5.3.2. But de Wette (1805) proposed otherwise. He claimed that Deuteronomy, which differs from the rest of the Pentateuch in various ways, was previously unknown, that it was produced by a later author shortly before its discovery in 622/621 B.C. as recorded in 2 Kings. Not without its opponents, this view gained wide currency in the heyday of Pentateuchal criticism, later to be challenged by 20th-century scholars (e.g., von Rad, Kline).

5.3.3. There continues to be widespread agreement that the torah book which underlay Josiah’s reform is preserved in our Deuteronomy, but many doubts have been raised about the book’s coming into existence at that time. “[T]he fact that a book can be shown to be relevant to a certain age does not require that it was composed then” (J. McConville, Grace in the End, 98; cf. C. Wright, Deuteronomy, 6-8).

6. THE PENTATEUCH AS CANONICAL COMPOSITION

6.1. In response to the textual data actually presented us in the Pentateuch and the perceived shortcomings of both the traditional and the critical views in accounting for those data, it is both possible and prudent to propose a “post-critical alternative” and a “very different approach” (Childs) to the study of the Pentateuch, one that proceeds from a different point of orientation, with different interests in mind, toward a different goal from the dominant critical programs. If anything should be clear from the foregoing survey it is that the primary focus and concern of the standard critical agendas has never been the explanation of the Pentateuch as it is, in its present shape, as we have it.

6.2. What I am here calling a Canonical-Compositional approach focuses on the present (final, canonical) shape of the Pentateuch as a composition, not in order to explain its prehistory (i.e., how it
came into being, the world behind the text), but to observe its intended meaning/message as Scripture by fixing undistracted attention on the wording and structure given it by its author(s) (composition) and finally received (as canon) by the believing community of Israel, Jesus, the apostles, and the Church (the world within and in front of the text). To summarize:

6.2.1. Whatever its precise oral and literary history, much of which we are not told, the Pentateuch comes to us as a fivefold composition or a book in five parts—a coherent literary work which reflects a purposeful, theological, comprehensive shaping with ideological integrity and interpretive direction. (See my fuller discussion and development in “Literary Structure of the Pentateuch,” in Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch [InterVarsity, 2003], 544-56.)

6.2.2. The most appropriate and methodologically sound approach to studying the Pentateuch is to study it in its present shape, as a final (canonical) text—irrespective of the long history by which it might have reached its present shape—in which form we discover the intended meaning/message of the inspired composition.

6.2.3. The primary hermeneutical focus concerns the present text and the disposition of the invited and listening reader who sits humbly before it. The biblical text is itself the real object of interpretive reflection, with a theological function that far exceeds its role as a window through which to look at ancient events, persons, and places in the interest of defending Scripture’s reliability or reconstructing the history of Israel’s religious growth. This is not to deny a legitimate role for the apologetic and historical-reconstructive enterprises in their own right, but to stress that construing the meaning of Scripture as Scripture is a fundamentally different undertaking from either of those disciplines, with many methodological implications hanging on that difference.

6.2.4. Since these writings were regarded as canonical Scripture by the community of faith who produced and received them and who defined themselves accordingly, they are best interpreted and understood in the light of that historical (!) and theological function, as one standing within and overtaken by the community of faith.


6.2.6. Postscript: When the above considerations are factored, the titles to arguably the two most influential works on the Old Testament in the 19th and 20th centuries present a study in contrast for deep and sustained reflection:

J. Wellhausen, Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels (Prolegomena to the History of Israel) (1878/1885)
B. S. Childs, Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture (1979)

To perceive the difference here is to be well on the way to understanding where Old Testament study, and biblical study generally, has been over the past two or three centuries.

6.3. Pentateuchal Authorship and the Canonical-Compositional Approach

6.3.1. The issue of authorship: In what sense then is the present or final composition of the Pentateuch—the Pentateuch as we have it—actually Mosaic?
6.3.2. Strictly speaking, the Pentateuch is an anonymous literary work. While it does claim that Moses wrote down certain passages (e.g., Exod 17:14; 24:4, 7; 34:27; Num 33:2; Deut 31:9, 24-26), a claim corroborated by preexilic, exilic, postexilic, New Testament, and traditional references, the fact remains that nowhere does the author of the full and finished composition identify himself. According to Schniedewind:

... [T]he Book of Deuteronomy . . . is framed as a third-person report of a speech by Moses and not as something that Moses himself wrote, “These are the things Moses said to all Israel . . .” (Deut 1:1). In the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, Moses is a character, not an author. Genesis does not mention Moses in any capacity. In spite of this, Deuteronomy, along with the other four books of the Torah, has usually been ascribed to the pen of Moses rather than being understood as traditions passed down from Moses or more generally as traditions of the Israelite people (8).

Moreover, none of the references to Moses in the remainder of the Old Testament or in the New Testament requires that Moses was himself the author of record for the final production (e.g., Josh 1:7-8; 8:32; 1 Kgs 2:3; 2 Kgs 14:6; 23:21, 25; Ezra 3:2; 6:18; Neh 8:1; 13:1; 2 Chron 8:13; 25:4; 34:14; 35:12; Matt 8:4; 19:8; Mk 1:44; 7:10; Lk 2:22; 16:29, 31; 24:27, 44; Jn 5:46-47; 7:19-23; Acts 3:22; Rom 10:5, 19; 1 Cor 9:9; Heb 7:14). Clearly Moses is responsible for much of the material contained in the Pentateuch, but to every observant reader the style of presentation in the Pentateuch is more biographical (third person; e.g., “YHWH spoke to Moses”) than autobiographical (first person; e.g., “YHWH spoke to me”). Still, since there is no compelling literary, historical, or theological reason to rule out Moses’ role in the early composition and formation of the Pentateuch and many reasons to affirm the same, we may confidently regard the Pentateuch as essentially Mosaic in authorship.

6.3.3. Having said that, it is important to underscore that the Pentateuch, like most of the Old Testament books, “shows a distressing disinterest in who wrote it” (Schniedewind, 9; “Ironically, for the authors of the [Old Testament], authorship seems unimportant”, 11). The preoccupation with authorship, and certainly the attachment of authority to a knowable author—these concerns reflect later interests and developments in Hellenistic rather than Semitic civilization (Schniedewind, 7-9). And, of course, that the authorship of the Pentateuch (or the authorship of Isaiah to use another famous example)—where ‘authorship’ is understood in the modern sense of who wrote it—has been made in some circles a test of orthodoxy reflects the extent to which post-Enlightened modernity rather than the actual scriptural claims and concerns has come to define the battle lines, even piety itself.

6.3.4. The undeniable complexities of the text point to an apparently complex literary history, superintended, our confession would maintain, by the same Spirit who spoke through and guided Moses in the first place (“Version 1.0.”), until the Pentateuch reached its final form some centuries later (“Version 2.0.”), to which form the final divine imprimatur or stamp of inspiration attaches. In this way an authoritative and relevant word of the Lord through his prophet Moses mediated the person and will of the selfsame Lord to his people throughout their history, with abiding authority and intrinsic relevance. The tensions and upheavals and stylistic shifts and other difficulties noted by earlier generations of careful scholars—in the pointing out of which, we should add, critical study offers its most important service—should not be conveniently explained away by positing variant sources or divergent Sitze im Leben in pre-literary cultures, much less should they be buffed out or varnished over or lightly dismissed by obscurant impulses (obscurantists are those who pretend that such difficulties do not exist—the proverbial ostrich comes to mind, with its head in inauspicious places—and who blame those “liberal” scholars for
trying to make havoc of our faith in the Bible’s integrity and simplicity). In fact, textual complexities invite studied attention for the contribution they make to an overall presentation that means to say something more or other than pleasant uniformity, whether theological, ethical, political, or otherwise.

6.3.5. Whatever the literary complexity and compositional history of the Pentateuch in arriving at its present form, the authored production in that final (canonical) form is the absorbing concern of the interpreter, whose loyalty is to the Lord who engineered the whole literary creation. Moses and subsequent editors probably did use multiple sources, but dwelling on the identity of these editors or on the identification and dates of their sources is as misdirected as it is subjective. *We have a text—one that is worthy of Jesus’ full endorsement. To study the Pentateuch is to take our place under his lordship in the study of this text and its reception as witnessed in the remainder of the Bible and continued in faithful Judaism and the Church.*

6.3.6. To cite just one intriguing implication, what this means is that the interpretive question will not be captured in “What did Moses mean when he said or wrote such and such?” but “What does the Pentateuch mean to say by this statement or this passage as a constituent part of the whole?” For all we know the Pentateuch as a canonical composition might contain meanings that exceed or modify what Moses first conceived; it might even comment upon the man Moses as an object of discussion, from a perspective that long postdates him. Or here’s an intriguing possibility: The Pentateuch might cast a different light on the Law from that which Moses and his contemporaries experienced; and if perchance it does, then it is precisely *that Pentateuchal perspective* which we are called upon to hear in conversation with the New Testament and to proclaim as part of the Church’s gospel. Alas, it might turn out to be the case that both of the following statements are true: (a) Christians today are *not* under the law as ancient Israel was under the law; (b) Christians today *are* under the Pentateuch as the *Torah* of YHWH. (To show my honest hermeneutical hand here, I happen to believe that Moses already understood things this way, and that it is the function of Deuteronomy to tell us so.) Related, while Moses obviously was addressing his contemporaries in various speeches that now comprise the Pentateuch, it is equally obvious that the Pentateuch in its present shape addresses a different audience entirely, namely, biblical readers—Christian readers included. Those who listen will discern a message no less authoritative or relevant than anything the New Testament has to say. In this light it will not be surprising that those who bypass the Pentateuch and go straight to Paul (or Matthew or Peter or James or John or . . .) not only misinterpret most of what they have to say, they also sadly *miss* it. It turns out then that an age-old critical issue does have implications for how we read and hear the Pentateuch—whether we read and hear it on its own wavelength and in its own idiom, or in terms that are constrained by other presuppositions and agendas.


7.1. For an insightful survey of the relationship of Catholic biblical scholarship to the historical-critical approaches pioneered primarily, as we have seen, in liberal Protestant Germany in the 18th and 19th centuries, see Robert Royal, *A Deeper Vision*, ch. 6, “The Three Ages of Scripture Studies,” 279-323; and ch. 7, “Scripture Study after the [Second Vatican] Council,” 324-57. Royal goes so far as to suggest that “the historical-critical approach could be viewed as a kind of über-Protestantism” (292). See further the papal documents *Providentissimus Deus* (Pope Leo XIII, 1893), *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (Pope Pius XII, 1943), and *Verbum Domini* (Pope Benedict XVI, 2010); also the Vatican II document *Dei Verbum* (1965).
7.2. For the Church’s official response to the modern, critical discussion of the origins of the Pentateuch specifically, see the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s document “Reply concerning Mosaic Authorship of the Pentateuch” (1906), and Cardinal Ratzinger’s “Address to Pontifical Biblical Commission on the Centenary of Its Establishment (October 30, 2002).” It is clear that the Commission has taken a certain “open-ended” (Ratzinger’s term) approach, affirming Mosaic authorship on the basis of the evidence cited above (explicit statements, Jewish and Christian tradition, internal evidence), without insisting therefore that everything contained in the Pentateuch was necessarily written or dictated by Moses directly. Moreover, the Commission allows that over the centuries the Pentateuch experienced “a number of [editorial] modifications” as pointed out previously. “In other words, like Jerome before it, the Pontifical Biblical Commission did not see the clear evidence for post-Mosaic material in the final form of the Pentateuch as a problem for following the Jewish and Christian tradition that such later alterations and additions could be accepted while ‘safeguarding substantially the Mosaic authorship and integrity of the Pentateuch’” (Bergsma & Pitre, 90).

7.3. Unfortunately (in my view), “over the course of the twentieth century, the vast majority of biblical scholars, including Catholic scholars, did not come to the same conclusions as the Pontifical Biblical Commission. Instead, the Documentary Hypothesis came to be widely (if not universally) held as the more plausible explanation for the origins of the Pentateuch” (Bergsma & Pitre, 90). The negative effects are still felt by their impact on the seminary component of priestly formation, and on homilies and catechetical efforts as a result.


V. J. Steiner
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