3

OUT OF THE WILDERNESS?

Some suggestions for the future
of Pentateuchal research

Thomas M. Bolin

The Pentateuch is a massive work, which contains many disparate materials, and which is never explicit about its intentions. But there it is.

(David Clines 2013: 3)

I

Does anything remain to be said about the composition of the Pentateuch that has not already been said more than once, or that is not open to equally plausible counter arguments or alternative scenarios? If we use the work of Simon and Astruc as a starting point, we see the past three centuries of academic scrutiny of the Pentateuch has yielded precious little by way of what were once called “assured results”: 1. Deuteronomy, or part of it, is an appendix to a larger collection; 2. There are a number of texts, mainly ritual prescriptions, which appear to belong together, and have for a long time been designated as P. To quote another biblical author, “But beyond these, my child, beware!” (Eccl 12:12).

If I may be allowed to indulge in a once fashionable academic conceit, the present state of Pentateuchal studies is analogous to the Library of Babel in the well-known story of the same name by Jorge Luis Borges. The Library contains a copy of every possible combination of the alphabet, and thus a copy of every book that can ever be written. Naturally most of these combinations yield nothing but gibberish, and so the great quest in the Library of Babel is to find among the vast collection of nonsense those books that make sense and, most importantly, the book that is the catalog of the vast Library itself. This is nothing less than a quixotic task, and Borges speaks of hope followed by depression, of men who drive themselves mad looking for sense in an infinite universe of meaninglessness. But the
assumption that sense can be found amidst so much random arrangement becomes the orthodox position. Those who “assert that absurdities are the norm in the Library and that anything reasonable . . . is an almost miraculous exception” are labeled as “impious” (Borges 1962: 86). Biblical scholars may perhaps be in an even worse situation than Borges’s heretics. Jacques Berlinerblau (2005: 70–73) notes how Hebrew Bible scholars, occupying the no-man’s land between the academy and the church or synagogue, are Mischwesen, too religious for their fellow academics, and too academic for believers. Literary and historical studies of the Pentateuch are like the state of affairs in the Library of Babel. Exegetes search and search through a set of texts—albeit much smaller—looking for the catalogue, or key, that will reveal how the texts came to be written and collected. False leads are trumpeted as assured results, but hope is followed by disappointment, and those who question the rationality of the enterprise are branded as outsiders.

One does not need an Archimedean vantage point to see that many of the questions pursued in Pentateuchal study appear, quite frankly, to be played out. Among these is the view of biblical texts that assumes them to be the product of centuries of composition and editing of hypothetical documents or multiple imagined traditions. John Van Seters (2006) has described in great detail how the entire project of identifying editors and redactors in ancient Israel is founded upon an anachronism that hides at its core a fatal confusion in the understanding of what ancient scribes and modern editors do. And yet the field proceeds in this direction as can be seen from conclusions drawn by recent studies on the Pentateuch. One isolates multiple layers of D and argues that these were then combined with multiple layers of P (Otto 2000). Another posits a three-stage, postexilic redaction of the Pentateuch (Achenbach 2002). While some are ready to bid “farewell to the Yahwist” (Dozeman and Schmid 2006), others still argue for his existence (Levin 1993; 2007). We have choices in Pentateuchal studies, much like the unsuspecting customer wandering into an emporium or curio shop. Do you think J is the base narrative, with P being expansions? John Van Seters (1992; 1994) agrees with you. Would you prefer P as the Grundlage, with J as a redactor? Joseph Blenkinsopp (2000; cf. Otto 2000) has done that work. Joel Baden (2012) has even revived the full, four-source Documentary Hypothesis despite the fact that the very existence of the E document has been in question for almost a century (Volz and Rudolph 1933). And while Baden wisely avoids the mistakes of older Documentarians, and refrains from connecting any of the documents to specific periods of a biblically reconstructed Israelite history, the revived Documentary Hypothesis will not prevent conservative historians from doing so. We may even see the return of a Solomonic Yahwist. Little exists in way of consensus or assured results, and research is conducted with the chorus of those in disagreement as close as the notes at the bottom of the page.

What I offer in the remainder of this essay are three alternative avenues of exploration that may provide scholars different directions worthy of pursuit in Pentateuchal study. My observations are based both on some fruitful recent research in biblical studies and on long neglected questions and issues. The
alternatives are not cumulative, but reflect three distinct and in some ways mutually exclusive ways of analyzing the text. But they offer a way out of the constant recourse to standard source or redaction critical methods which often amount to little more than a rearrangement of the furniture in Pentateuchal study.

II

As prelude to the first of the alternative approaches, I would point to an important, but overlooked essay by Thomas L. Thompson (1998) in which he notes that in the Qumran texts, “we have an entry into the actual world of text-making, composition and transmission” (1998: 262). Noting that text preservation at Qumran is also closely bound up with text production, Thompson looks at 4QTestimonia/4Q175 and sees there evidence of text composition that involves the combination of smaller textual units, some of which are found in the Pentateuch, and whose particular arrangements can be used to create different texts entirely. That is to say Thompson shows that textual production in ancient Israel happens on the level of phrases, motifs, and multiple tradition variants. This isn’t the form-criticism of Gunkel or the tradition history of Noth, both of which deal in hypothesizing pre-textual material that otherwise doesn’t exist. It is more akin to the work of Lord (1960) and Parry (in A. Parry 1987) on oral bards and Homer, except that Thompson is not arguing for an exclusively oral phenomenon. Instead, he turns to the witness of the Qumran texts and their similarity with those in the Bible. This leads him to claim, with justification, that

> [a]ll biblical genres are what might be described as segmented genres; that is, they are complex units of tradition that are composed of multiple smaller segments of material. In a quite substantial way, larger tradition units are created through the joining or selecting of smaller units. (1998: 268)

This insight can be seen in Thompson’s reading of biblical texts in two other publications (1995, 2009). The first, published before the essay on 4QTestimonia, but clearly an example of Thompson’s approach, looks at the doublet of Yahweh’s self-revelation of his name to Moses in Exodus 3 and 6, and sees there evidence of ancient Israelite reflection on the nature of the absolute vis-à-vis multiple stories of finite deities. The texts engage in this theological reflection by means of the “common language of our variant episodes and scenes,” and “the intelligent patterning of themes, motifs and plotlines” which together “seriously undermines the documentary hypothesis and helps us focus on the coherence of the whole” (1995: 71). The second looks also to Exodus 3, and describes the multiple uses of the motif of Yahweh both being “with” his people, and of those people being created in Yahweh’s image, two themes that come together not only throughout the Pentateuch but also in Job and Deutero-Isaiah, among other texts. More recently and along the same lines, Bernard Levinson (2013) has used 11QTemple to help illuminate puzzling compositional features in Deuteronomy’s law on vows.
Worth further exploration in Pentateuchal studies is the close relationship between oral and literate modes of composition in ancient Mediterranean antiquity (Niditch 1996). For example, Raymond Person draws upon Parry and Lord’s work with Yugoslav bards and demonstrates how

When they copied their texts, the ancient Israelite scribes did not slavishly write the texts word by word, but preserved the texts’ meaning for the ongoing life of their communities in much the same way that performers of oral epic represent the stable, yet dynamic, tradition to their communities. In this sense, the ancient Israelite scribes were not mere copyists but were also performers. (Person 1998: 602)

Thus textual phenomena long classified by critics as “expansions” (e.g. between LXX and MT Jeremiah) are rather evidence of the cluster of associations that certain names or phrases have in a scribe’s mind and which are sometimes included in the text (Person 1998: 605–7). This approach has been most extensively explored in David’s Carr ambitious and important The Formation of the Hebrew Bible (2011). Carr demonstrates how some textual similarities in the Bible are the result of what he calls “memory variants”, i.e., variants in written texts which are the result of an author who is recalling other written texts from memory. Such a phenomenon grows out of the oral-literate environment in which ancient Near Eastern scribes were educated, and has long been noted in the Egyptian sebayit (Carr 2011: 23, following Burkard 1977). He then demonstrates that repeated texts in Proverbs and 11QT’s use of Deuteronomy and Leviticus are not evidence of variant traditions, but differences in the scribe’s remembrance of the text (2011: 25–34, 48–56). In this way, the interplay between fluid and static among oral performers long noted by Parry and Lord is also seen to be at work among the biblical scribes, whom Carr understands as transmitters of texts.

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Much can and will be said about Carr’s book, in particular that his own historical reconstructions grow more speculative the further back beyond the Hellenistic period he goes. But we are all working with the same evidence, and such is true for everyone who tries to reconstruct Israelite history from texts that were only standardized in the Hasmonenean era. What I want to emphasize here is that I think Thompson’s Lego hypothesis is confirmed by Carr’s work on memory variants. In other words, the oral-literate nexus in which ancient Israelite writers worked
explains how biblical texts may be composed of “multiple smaller segments of material.” Susan Niditch has touched upon this when she writes of the Bible’s “oral register” (1996: 8–38).

The work of these scholars opens up new ways of looking at so-called redactional layers or glosses in the Pentateuch. For example, instead of seeing “priestly” language throughout the text as evidence of a later scribe going through and supplementing the text, these “glosses” may be better understood as evidence of authors’ own efforts to cross-reference parts of the sprawling text in a cluster of thematic or verbal associations. While this scenario allows for the possibility that “earlier” or “later” texts or traditions may have been incorporated into the Pentateuch, it does not require such a process, which has devolved into an understanding of the biblical text as a literary tell with several distinct historical layers of occupation. This view has yielded a dizzying array of reconstructions and theories with precious few concrete results and lacks substantive evidence from other ancient literatures.

III

As a second possibility, I would strongly urge that the large-genre question of the Pentateuch be taken up by more scholars than heretofore and more systematically. While questions of the origins and historical contexts of our texts are important, we have been too myopic in our attention to those issues, and ceded the study of the final form of the text to literary scholars dependent upon New Critical or post-structuralist readings of various stripes. Erisman (2014) has noted this, and urged historical-critical scholars of the Pentateuch to become competent critics in New Historicism, which combines the ideological sensitivity of post-structuralist approaches with the view of the text with a history of its own, rather than as a conveyor of history. Exegetes would then realize that “composition history is reception history” and that “[w]e encounter the residue of [the Pentateuch’s] historical development in places where it fails to cohere” (2014: 75, 78). With his characteristic élan, David Clines (2013) has questioned whether such a thing as the Pentateuch even exists, given the almost exclusive scholarly attention on questions of its genesis. As John Barton has clearly argued, the essence of biblical scholarship lies in the desire to make sense of the biblical texts, to determine how they “hang together” (2007: 19). Scholarly attention to the textual difficulties (e.g. doublets, contradictions) is the result of trying to make sense of the text, but failing to do so. For Barton, what distinguishes critical from non-critical attempts to do this is sensitivity to a text’s genre (2007: 23). The problem with the Documentary Hypothesis is that, while it rightfully begins its analysis from the problems with the text, it resorts to the modern creation of pre-existing documents to resolve those problems. The Pentateuch has not only defied easy genre designations, but is difficult to read as a coherent linear narrative. But “difficult” is not the same as “impossible”. People have been reading the text for centuries before the rise of modern criticism and it is possible for us to determine how these
readers from the past made sense of the Pentateuch. Thankfully, the rise of studies which explore the history of reception and interpretation, and investigates how pre-modern readers dealt with a particular interpretive crux (e.g., the translation of an obscure term, or the meaning of an ambiguous phrase or the theological meaning of a text), have illuminated centuries of readings for us. But how was the Pentateuch as a complete and single composition read in the centuries before the onset of modern biblical criticism? The answer may be that most people in the past didn’t read it this way. I know of no pre-modern Christian work that treats the entire Pentateuch, although Christian commentaries on various parts of the Pentateuch, mainly Genesis, do exist. What we find in Jewish tradition is that, while the Pentateuch is understood as a single work, it is hardly ever read as a text with a narrative arc and thrust from beginning to end. While midrash exploits the gaps or fissures in the text, the midrashic narratives do not always resolve any or all of the tensions in the biblical text. In commentaries such as those of Ibn Ezra or Rashi, the Pentateuch is read as a collection of precepts, and the characters in the narrative are seen as exemplars of the values and norms of the text. Even as thoroughly Hellenized a figure as Philo fits into this category. The most notable exception to this is Josephus, who is consciously adapting the biblical text to the norms of Greek historiography. In other words, the Pentateuch is most often read as a collection of smaller text segments (cf. Thompson 1998) that can be juxtaposed asynchronously on the principle that parts of scripture can be used to interpret other, unrelated portions. Indeed, this is the underlying principle of most of the middoth of Hillel and those reading strategies dependent upon them.

In order to address the large-genre question of the Pentateuch, I argued (Bolin 1999) that the Pentateuch was never intended to be read as historiography as that genre was understood in antiquity, although this thesis has been maintained by others (e.g., Halpern 1988; Mandell and Freedman 1993; Van Seters 1992; 1994; Brettler 1995). Instead, I maintained that Genesis-Deuteronomy, along with other parts of the Old Testament, was assembled with the antiquarian aims of preserving multiple variants of past traditions. Consequently, instead of assuming that the biblical text was meant to be read in the way that we read it, and then try to make sense of its incongruities, we should instead ask whether it was ever meant to be read as a coherent whole at all (Bolin 1999: 137–38). In hindsight I would acknowledge that the line between historiography and antiquarian writing in antiquity was more fluid than I had at first maintained. I do still think that the Pentateuch is not historiography; a position also held by others (Ska 2007: 147–50).

What might it be, then? Because genre designations are essentially conventions shared by authors and readers, the way forward in trying to answer the large genre question for the Pentateuch is to look at how it was read. Determining reading strategies of a text can (although not always) help us to know what kind of text we are reading. At this point it might do well to remind ourselves that the Pentateuch, in the form that we have it, is sacred or authoritative literature referred to as the torah or the torat Mosheh. In modern biblical scholarship, the default translation
of the term, *torah*, has been “law”. But this is too often tainted by the Pauline Law-Gospel dichotomy of mainly Christian exegetes, and has done nothing but make reading and analyzing the *torah* more difficult than otherwise. A better translation of *torah*, one also valid for the term’s Greek equivalent, *nomos*, would be “instruction”, or even, “custom”, as Reinhard Kratz (2007: 102) and others have argued. As such it encompasses not simply casuistic and apodictic commands, nor even is limited exclusively to a legal setting. *Torah* encompasses not simply laws to be followed with their consequences, but a way of doing things, what the early Jesuits referred to when discussing their order as *nuestro modo de proceder* (“our way of doing things,” O’Malley 1995: 8). It is likely that the Pentateuch was read as *torah* no earlier than the second century BCE (Kratz 2007). We ought to ask next exactly what kind of authority the *torah* was seen to have by its readers. James W. Watts has argued that textual authority in the ancient Near East was not granted to legal codes, but rather almost exclusively limited to texts associated with rituals.

In antiquity, claims for the authority of old texts were more frequently made for ritual texts than for any others. Rather than law or diplomacy or bureaucracy or divination, the use of texts for and in ritual explains more plausibly the origins and development of book religion. (Watts 2005: 404)

Similarly Russell Hobson (2012), in a detailed study of manuscript variants in the library of Ashurbanipal and at Qumran, has shown that the most stable cuneiform texts were those connected with rituals, while the most stable Hebrew texts at Qumran are from the Pentateuch. While the Pentateuch comprises a number of genres that do not so easily coincide with the categories of cuneiform material, and the stability of individual books of the Pentateuch varies, Hobson—a cautious interpreter of the data throughout his study—nevertheless feels warranted in describing the Pentateuch as “a ritualized collection” (2012: 155). This dovetails with the fact that the one of the few points of agreement in Pentateuchal studies is the centrality of the Priestly source for the overall final structure of the *Torah*. Whatever else the Pentateuch may be, it is indisputably a collection of ritual literature.

We should look for other large collections of authoritative texts that are comprised of both narrative and ritual instruction. Unfortunately, apart from the ritual or liturgical etiologies that occur in texts such as *Atrahasis* or *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, there is nothing in the ancient Near Eastern or Mediterranean cultural contexts that can quite compare to a text the size of the Pentateuch comprising elements as diverse as the patriarchal narratives in Genesis and the detailed descriptions of the tabernacle in Exodus. And it will not do to categorize the Pentateuch as a type of literature of which it is the only example. Genuinely new literary works nevertheless establish their novelty in dialogue with existing texts. For example, James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, widely acknowledged...
as the most innovative work of fiction in 20th century English literature, uses Homer’s *Odyssey*, one of the oldest texts in the Western tradition, as its foil (*pace* Sanders forthcoming).

**IV**

This leads to a third and final possibility for future study. At this point I want to recall Jonathan Z. Smith’s presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature (Smith 2009). Smith, with reference to the monumental scholarship of Max Müller, reminds biblical exegetes that one of the most important tasks of the academic study of religion from its beginning has been the comparative project, and he rightly chides biblical scholars for having neglected this task.

The study of religion has been conceived from the outset as one that entails comparison, and biblical scholars ought not avoid that requirement . . . For Müller, the biblical scholar is a practitioner of what he termed the science of religion to the degree she sees her work as comparative. I would argue the same.

(Smith 2009: 19)

Smith goes on to urge biblical scholars to look at how different collections of sacred literatures the world over are formed and read over time. Indeed, he argues persuasively that this is an essential part of the academic study of the Bible as a sacred text.

[A]s biblical scholars we are called not only to comparisons between canons, comparative processes of canon formation and supplementation, but also to undertake comparative investigations of strategies for the interpretation of canonical collections as well as comparative inquiries into their several ritual settings and employments.

(Smith 2009: 22)

I think that Smith is correct in his admonition and recommendation to biblical scholars. The texts found in the collections of other sacred literatures remain untapped sources for fruitful comparison with something as large and focused on ritual as the Pentateuch. The first such collection that comes to mind is that of the Vedas. Previous work on the relationship between Hindu and Jewish texts has primarily been done by scholars of Hinduism (Goodman 1994; Holdrege 1995). I would propose that biblical scholars engage in comparative work between the Pentateuch and the Vedas. While below I can sketch out only the most preliminary observations, I am convinced that further work will yield positive results.

A few features of the Vedic literature strike me as potentially significant in regard to the question of how the Pentateuch was read and, perhaps, how it came together. The oldest of these Sanskrit texts, the *Rig Veda*, is a large collection of
poems comprised exclusively of ritual texts.\textsuperscript{10} As such, they describe rituals—often in the contexts or myths and tales of these rituals’ origins—and provide specific “words of power”, (mantras) to be said during those rites (Doniger 2009: 107). As mentioned above, some biblical scholars have argued that the text of the Pentateuch was ritualized, i.e., first used in rituals until it then became part of the ritual itself. The cultic material in the Pentateuch, rather than seen as a “late” addition by an increasingly “legalistic” Jerusalem priesthood,\textsuperscript{11} really can be seen as the entire collection’s raison d’être. It is perhaps telling in this regard that the oldest extra-biblical occurrences of Pentateuchal texts are the blessings related to passages in Numbers and Deuteronomy inscribed on the two Ketef Hinnom amulets. Written on silver, clearly worn as talismans and found in a large tomb complex, these lamellae clearly demonstrate a ritualistic or mantra-like understanding of the blessings etched on them. Their excavator asserts that they are “amulets whose inscriptions served an apotropaic function” (Barkay \textit{et al.} 2004: 41).

The ritual texts in the \textit{Rig Veda} spawned an entire body of theological and philosophical literature in the Brahmanas and Upanishads that read the Vedic texts symbolically or extend their legal prescriptions to other aspects of life. As Doniger describes,

\begin{quote}
In 700 BCE, the only texts that were memorized and preserved were the Brahmanas, and the sacrifice was the focal point for all forms of creative expression. Thus these texts purporting to gloss the sacrifice attracted to themselves, like magnets, everything else that could be dragged in to express the meaning of life in ancient India. Or rather, since the sacrifice was believed to symbolize everything that was meaningful in human life, any compelling insight into that life would eventually gravitate to the traditional literature that was constantly coalescing around the sacrifice (Doniger 2009: 159–60)
\end{quote}

Similarly, another scholar of Hinduism, Timothy Lubin, makes important connections between the Brahmanas and rabbinic Jewish texts, noting the “marked similarities in the hermeneutical principles developed in the Rabbinic and Brahmanical interpretive traditions”, as evidence of a “parallel trajectory of exegesis devoted to explaining an elite priestly cult to the communities that define themselves by that cult” (2002: 456).\textsuperscript{12} This is clearly very similar to the ways that both Philo and the Talmud use the ritualistic directives of the Pentateuch as discussed in detail by Barbara Holdrege (1995). This phenomenon might also be at work in the growth of the Pentateuch itself as a collection. The \textit{Rig Veda} is a large collection of both ritual descriptions and narratives that describe these rituals or provide them with etiologies. As such, it offers a close corollary with the very long cultic and narrative assembly of the Pentateuch, and which is not found in other ancient Near Eastern writings. It is the view of Kratz, who argues that, “The whole process of making the Pentateuch can be understood as an ongoing theological reflection upon the meaning of the community’s own customs” (2007: 97). Jeffrey Stackert
has detailed how certain laws regarding the Levites found in Leviticus are subtly interpreting similar laws elsewhere in the Pentateuch so that these similar laws are either affirmed or marginalized (2009: 187–204; see also Gesundheit 2012). Finally, the second oldest collection of Vedic texts, the Sama Veda is comprised mostly of lines from the Rig Veda that have been rearranged for use in rituals, while the third oldest collection, the Yajur Veda, also combines verses from the Rig Veda with explanatory prose passages. What we see in the contents of these three oldest Vedic collections is the kind of mobility of small text segments as outlined by Thompson in his reading of biblical material. At first glance, my suggestions resemble nothing more than a revival of the fragment hypothesis, but the strength of the approach I have outlined here is in the control offered by the comparative material from the Vedic tradition and its particular rootedness in an elite, sacerdotal class. Such a control is what we have been lacking in Pentateuchal studies (pace Tigay 1985).

V

The title of this essay refers, albeit a bit playfully, to the forty-year itinerant sojourn of the Israelites in the desert, a theme that encompasses over half the Pentateuch. The playful part of my allusion is the fact that I naturally do not believe the last forty (or eighty or one hundred) years of Pentateuchal scholarship have been for naught. I certainly would not characterize them as divine punishment for faithlessness, although that is a position that those who are against historical-critical scholarship for religious reasons might espouse. But I would also say that, like the Israelites in the wilderness, Pentateuchal studies have been wandering for a long time with seemingly little progress to show for the journey. The options I have outlined in this essay are not guaranteed to bring us to the promised land of assured results, but I do think that they will yield us better results than we would get by plowing resolutely forward using essentially the same methods as Wellhausen and Noth. When lost in the wild, the first step required to finding your way again is to acknowledge that you have taken a wrong turn.

Notes

1 There are at least two digital replicas of the Library available online: http://dicelog.com/babel and http://libraryofbabel.info/index.html.
2 What Berlinerblau (2005: 43) refers to as “diachronic polyauthorism”.
3 Other recent surveys of literature on the Pentateuch are Knoppers and Levinson (2007); Dozeman et al. (2011); Erisman (2014). For an essential history of the Documentary Hypothesis see Nicholson (1998).
4 This kind of textual analysis forms the backbone of Thompson (2005) a point not often grasped by its reviewers.
5 “[F]or example, the name Jeconiah is automatically associated with his patronym, titles, and events surrounding his reign, so that the copyist may not even be conscious that he is writing down what from our perspective includes additional words” (1998: 606).
In her review of the book, Erisman (2012) rightly places the volume in the scholarly tradition of the Einleitung.

Pace Thompson, (1998: 267). This is also an alternative—and better—explanation for the divergences between the résumé of Israelite history in Nehemiah 9 and Genesis-2 Kings which I put forward (Bolin 1996: 3–15).

Again, Erisman’s Review of Carr (2012) is incisive: “[W]e can no longer speak of oral stages of transmission superseded by written stages. This approach to the problem of orality, which was taken for granted in early- and mid-twentieth-century scholarship, has been eroding for some time, but the phenomenon of writing-supported memory in texts from various periods throughout the ancient Near East should drive the final nail in its coffin for anyone still inclined to it”.

Among the few who have dealt with this issue are Whybray (1987); Freedman & Mandell (1993); Clines (1997); Sailhamer (2009).

The following remarks about the contents of the V edic literature are dependent upon Doniger 2009: 103–30.

It is high time we consign the biases of Wellhausen to history’s rubbish bin.

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Out of the Wilderness?


