The Formation of the Pentateuch

Bridging the Academic Cultures of Europe, Israel, and North America

Edited by
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Why Is the Pentateuch Unreadable?

Or, Why Are We Doing This Anyway?

Joel S. Baden

I invite the reader to imagine for a moment a Pentateuch very different from the one we have now. Imagine a text that read as fluently as a Jane Austen novel – a text that told the sweeping epic of Israel’s history from creation through the patriarchs through the exodus and the wilderness up to the death of Moses. Imagine a text in which the broader themes and the smallest details of plot were all in perfect agreement, in which the language was consistent but not redundant, in which the theology was definable and yet also realistically complex.¹

What could biblical scholars do with such a text? Almost everything, really: scholars could inquire as to the historicity of the events it describes; could explore its use of rhetoric; could try to use it as a datum for understanding the history of Israelite religion; could approach it from every possible postmodernist angle, be it feminist, queer, postcolonial, black, liberationist . . .; could investigate the constituent elements of the narrative with an eye toward identifying what possible earlier materials, be they oral or written, the author may have used in composing this text.

One approach that would not be justified would be the attempt at any literary-historical analysis. Why, with such a text, would anyone ever think to divide it into sources, or layers, or redactions, or glosses? Source criticism – and here I use the word in its broadest sense, to include the sort of literary-historical textual surgery that most every pentateuchal scholar performs to a greater or lesser degree – is fundamentally unlike other biblical methods, such as form, rhetorical, feminist, or postcolonial criticism. Most critical methods are applicable to any text, not only biblical texts. One could apply any of these methods to, say, Jane

¹ Although there are, of course, scholars who maintain that the Pentateuch can be read as a unified text, they do so often from intellectual positions that require such a claim: either theological, as in the classic anticrotical works of W.H. Green, The Higher Criticism of the Pentateuch (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1902) or U. Cassuto, The Documentary Hypothesis (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1959), from the Christian and Jewish perspectives, respectively; or literary-critical, taking the initial position that the form of the text to be interpreted is fundamentally unlike other biblical methods, such as form, rhetorical, feminist, or postcolonial criticism. Most critical methods are applicable to any text, not only biblical texts. One could apply any of these methods to, say, Jane
Austen (and one can be sure that enterprising English PhDs across the world have done so). Source criticism, however, cannot – or at the very least should not – be used on any and every text.²

In large part this is because, despite its common name, source criticism is not, in fact, a critical method at all. There is no broad theoretical basis that can be shared by other disciplines, even though other disciplines may do something similar. One could not write an abstracted description of source criticism without reference to the text as one could with, say, form criticism.³ That is, there is no source-critical approach that is common to all literature, or even to all ancient literature, or even to all ancient Israelite literature. The literary-historical investigations of Homer, or of the Pali canon of Buddhism, or of the hadith literature of Islam, are all distinct in nature from one another and from the literary-historical investigation of the Pentateuch.⁴ They may all be source-critical, but one could not derive a handbook of source criticism from their commonalities. Source criticism is not a method or an approach. It is, more accurately, the name we give to a set of results – in the case of the Pentateuch, to the common scholarly conclusion that it is the product of multiple hands. These results, this conclusion, emerge from a particular question, one that it is not feasible to ask of just any text, namely, why is this book, this Pentateuch, so difficult to read?

There are obviously many different types of difficulty when it comes to reading a literary work. This is true even when there are no questions of authorship: children’s books are easier to read than books written for adults; books written for a popular audience are easier to read than those written for the academy. This means, in part, that we have to know what cultural expectations we can place on any given piece of writing before we start wondering whether maybe, just maybe, it is so difficult as to require a literary-historical explanation. Fortunately, we are blessed to have a relative abundance of comparative material against which to judge ancient Israelite writing. We know what fluid, coherent biblical prose looks like because we have examples of it elsewhere in the Bible: entire books, like Ruth; large swaths of corpora, like the so-called Succession Narrative; even

² This is not to say that it cannot or should not be used on any text other than the Pentateuch, of course. Myriad texts, from Homer to Hamlet, have been rightly subjected to something akin to a source-critical process.

³ One may note the relative abundance of introductions to form criticism, which tend to roam freely and widely over the biblical corpus and which almost universally begin with discussions of universal concepts such as genre. See, e.g., M. Buss, Biblical Form Criticism in Its Context (JSOTSup 274; Sheffield; Sheffield Academic, 1999); J.H. Hayes, Old Testament Form Criticism (TUMSR 11; San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1974); K. Koch, The Growth of the Biblical Tradition: The Form-Critical Method (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1969); G. Tucker, Form Criticism of the Old Testament (GBS; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971). There are, to my knowledge, no similar overviews of “source criticism” divorced from its pentateuchal (or otherwise text-specific) content.

⁴ My thanks to Bernie Levinson for these examples.
Why Is the Pentateuch Unreadable?

individual chapters, such as Gen 24 or 38. We also know what the literature of Israel’s neighbors looked like. So we know that we do not require Israelite writing to be children’s literature, but we also know that it would be anachronistic and culturally ridiculous to expect it to look like Joyce or Faulkner.⁵

So let us return to our imaginary pristine Pentateuch. It is my contention that in the absence of any difficulty reading such a text, we would be unjustified in attempting to find a literary-historical solution to it. After all, what problem would we be solving? If the text presents no literary difficulties, we have no reason to pick it apart. It would be like doing source criticism on a Jane Austen novel. Could one try it? One can try anything. But without any grounds for doing it, the results are going to be ugly: a perfectly fluent text broken up into less fluent pieces, on completely subjective grounds, without any real connection to the text itself.

Of course, that is not the Pentateuch we have, not by a long shot. But the recognition that there are texts that we are happy to leave in unified peace leads to the fundamental question of interest in this essay: where the line is between a perfect text that resists literary-historical analysis and a text like the Pentateuch that, virtually all scholars agree, demands it.

What if we adjusted the perfect text so that it was a little more uneven in its use of language? This is obviously a bit of a silly example. Most scholars would agree that among the most easily discarded elements of early pentateuchal scholarship is the propensity for lengthy word lists, attributing words and phrases to individual sources.⁶ The notion that a given word belongs to a particular author and to no other is wrongheaded in theory and in practice. The ancient Israelite authors all wrote perfect Biblical Hebrew; we are in no position to say that one knew a word that another did not. We also cannot say, at least in the abstract, that one author uses a particular word and another does not. All we can say is that, as far as we can tell, one author used a particular word and another did not. It is the fallacy of statistics: just because something appears to be the case in every example we have seen so far does not mean that it will be the case in the next example. So to identify a word as belonging to one author in ninety-nine of its appearances does not mean that it will belong to that author also in its one hundredth. In his writings, my former teacher and now colleague Harold Bloom uses the word “uncanny” with what is, to my mind, alarming frequency. I have

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⁵ Contra, in a way, the extensive comparison of P precisely with children’s literature by S. McEVENUE, The Narrative Style of the Priestly Writer (AB 50; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1971).
maybe used it once in everything I have published. This statistical observation does not mean that my sentence should be attributed to Harold Bloom.

The idea that language variation can be a determining factor for dividing a text into separate authors breaks down completely whenever we encounter analyses that try to proceed on such grounds. These were common in early pentateuchal scholarship, where a verse, or often even a single clause, was stripped out of its context and assigned to another author merely because it used a word that had been determined, on the basis of a statistical word list, to belong to someone else. See, for example, Carpenter and Harford-Battersby’s vivisection of Gen 39, according to which the story is almost entirely a unity, with the exception of the words “he made him his personal attendant” and “Joseph was well-built and handsome; after these things” in verses 4, 6, and 7. Because the word “attendant,” משרת, the expression “well-built,” יפה תאר, and the phrase “after these things,” ויהי אחר הדברים האלה, were all believed to belong exclusively to E, they were ripped from the narrative, which was otherwise attributed to J. Of course, when this was done we were left not with one beautiful text, as we started with, but with two impossible texts, including the one that reads, simply, “He made him his personal attendant. Joseph was well-built and handsome. After these things.”

The most famous example along these lines, of course, is Jean Astruc’s division of Genesis purely according to the distinction between Yahweh and Elohim. His results were fine in some parts, but they were disastrous overall. Today there is no one, I think, who would argue that the divine names are a reasonable sole basis for literary division. It should be remembered, however, that the divine names were not really the rationale for Astruc’s literary division either, though they may have been the means. Astruc did not come to Genesis thinking that he had a perfect text with the exception of the alternative divine names. He came to Genesis knowing the already quite extensive scholarship that had recognized all of the famous literary problems, particularly in the creation and flood accounts. He knew his Simon well, and Astruc was merely recognizing that the doublets and contradictions that scholars had seen for a century hap-

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7 Now, perhaps, twice.
8 CARPENTER and HARFORD-BATTERSBY, Hexateuch (see n. 6), 2:61–62.
9 J. ASTRUC, Conjectures sur les mémoires originaux dont il paroit que Moyse s’est servi pour composer le Livre de la Genèse (ed. P. Gibert; Paris: Éditions Noësis, 1999).
10 See, e.g., his unified view of Gen 37 (ASTRUC, Conjectures, 300–305 [see n. 9]), or, on the other side, his division of the story of the binding of Isaac in Gen 22 between vv. 1–10 and vv. 11–19 (Conjectures, 225–227).
pened to line up, in crucial moments, with the alternation of divine names. It is mistaken to claim that Astruc divided Genesis into parallel narratives in order to solve the issue of the divine names. He divided Genesis using the divine names in order to solve the narrative problems.

Variations in terminology and style are no reason to divide up an otherwise perfectly good text. So let us take a step further. What if this text also contained multiple genres? Not only narrative but also some poetry, some law, some genealogies—would this be a reason to start asking whether it might not have had multiple authors? Again, I think not, and it really requires little argumentation. Genres do not belong to individual authors; they belong to individual settings in a given culture. Everyone in that culture is able to utilize any number of genres, in any combination. We all do it constantly. The notion that the ancient Israelite author was capable of expressing himself in only one genre, or form, or Gattung, is among the most famous and most famously erroneous aspects of Gunkel’s otherwise largely brilliant contribution to our field. We know better than to treat the ancient Israelite mind as somehow more primitive. What this means, then, is that, in the absence of any other pressing evidence, there is no reason to think, simply because a text moves from narrative to law to poetry to genealogy and back again, that it could not be the work of a single hand. In fact, such fluency with contemporary genres and forms is common today, and probably would have been then, and certainly should be, from the scholarly perspective, evidence of a certain sort of genius. We see this in the prophetic corpus to be sure, and often also in psalms that bring together divergent generic elements into new artistic units—so too with our imagined Pentateuch.

Of course, genres are often linked with style, as is frequently noted. It is often the case that fluctuations in style occur precisely where the text transitions from one genre to another. If the text were perfect in every sense, except that a different set of terms and a different literary style were used when it shifted from narrative to ritual law, we would not be in any position to think that we were dealing with multiple authors.

So let us take yet another step: what if this text also took up a variety of themes over its length? What if, in the course of telling its story, it shifted its thematic emphasis from passage to passage—here concentrating on the theme of sibling rivalry, there on, say, corporate punishment for sin? Unless we were to state from the outset that an ancient Israelite author can treat only a single theme

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12 See the open acknowledgement of Simon, le Clerc, and others in Astruc, Conjectures (see n. 9), 135–137.
14 This was, in fact, one of the standard objections to the entire source-critical enterprise among its early critics. See the comment of Cassuto, Documentary Hypothesis (see n. 1), 54: “Change of style depends on change of subject-matter, not on difference of sources.”
in any given work, there is no obvious reason why this would be unacceptable. (We would also have to declare impossible such multithemed literature as the book of Ruth.) And if the two themes were somewhat closer in nature – in one passage emphasizing the authority of prophetic figures, for example, while concerned with accentuating priestly power in another – would this sort of thematic variance, on its own, demand a literary-historical solution? The instinct might be to say yes – we would have there evidence of one pro-prophetic author and one pro-priestly author. But would we say that if the text were otherwise totally coherent? Or, more pertinently, would these two emphases render the text somehow incoherent? There is nothing impossible about a single author justifying both prophetic and priestly power. There is not even anything unlikely about it, unless we assume from the outset – as, admittedly, many do – that there was some constant battle between the two sides and that every ancient Israelite author had to align himself with one of the two camps.

It seems reasonable to accept that limiting ancient authors to a single theme is unfair and, moreover, would result in rather boring literature. In even the most restrictive analyses of the Priestly writings, one would be hard-pressed to say that there is only a single theme present. Of course there are themes that are more central than others, and perhaps there are even overarching thematic concepts, but virtually every biblical text encompasses multiple concepts and focuses. Again, if it were perfectly coherent in every way, yet also contained multiple themes, our imaginary Pentateuch would still be impervious to literary-historical analysis. It would simply be a manifestation of good, complex ancient Israelite literature, like the other examples mentioned already.

If we further tweaked this imaginary Pentateuch so that it contained a variety of theological views, would we finally have arrived at the breaking point? Can we imagine a text in which different theological questions and positions are presented without feeling the burning need to tear it to pieces? Obviously there are different levels of theological difference. In one passage God is imagined as speaking to people in dreams (e.g., Gen 20:3), whereas in another God speaks face to face (e.g., Exod 33:11), and in yet another God speaks from heaven (e.g., Gen 21:17). I think most readers could live with such a text – at least no one would think to identify the “God-speaks-in-dreams” source or the “God-speaks-from-heaven” layer. More difficult, perhaps, would be a text in which in one passage God’s control of history from behind the scenes is emphasized (e.g., Gen 45:5), whereas in another it is clear that God takes direct action on behalf of Israel (e.g., Exod 3:8). Still, even in this case one author could well put forward both ideas. They are not contradictory; they are complementary. God sometimes acts this way and sometimes that way. It might not be neat and clean, but it has the advantage of being more true to human experience.

Even if in one place the text said that God punishes to the third and fourth generation (Exod 34:7) and in another it said that God does not visit the sins of the fathers on the sons (Deut 24:16) – if everything else about the text were
unproblematic, I think that we could live even with this.\textsuperscript{15} We would understand it as we do so much wisdom literature, as expressing ostensibly contradictory ideas in the service of representing more accurately the range of humanity’s interaction with God. Theologies are, I suggest, almost always capable of standing beside one another in a singly-authored text.\textsuperscript{16} The only sorts of exceptions I can think of would be claims that Israel must worship only one god, but in one text that god is identified as Yahweh while in another it is Baal. That would be pretty well irreconcilable – but we do not find that in the Pentateuch, either the real one or the imaginary one being constructed in this essay.

Diversity of language and style, of genre, theme, and theology – none of these reach the tipping point, the moment when it is necessary to search for a literary-historical solution to the problems of the text. None of these render the text unreadable, either in our imaginary Pentateuch or in the real one. Moreover, I would argue that not until the twentieth century did anyone ever claim that they did. Astruc, Eichhorn, Vater, Hupfeld, Graf, Kuenen, Wellhausen – none of them divided the text into its constituent parts because it contained a variety of styles, or themes, or genres. Before them, Simon and Spinoza were not compelled to challenge the unity of the text on the basis of disparate terminology or theology. These may have been some of the means by which analysis proceeded, but they were not the rationale for the analysis in the first place. From the very beginning the impetus for source-critical analysis, the reason that the text was considered so unreadable as to require a literary-historical solution, was always and ever the fact that the narrative, on the level of plot – who, what, when, where, why, and how – is self-contradictory, repeatedly and incontrovertibly.\textsuperscript{17}

It is not the names for God that render the flood story unreadable, nor was that ever thought to be the case. It is the blatant contradictions in narrative claim at virtually every stage of the story. It is not the differing theological views related to God’s position vis-à-vis the world that render Gen 1 and 2 impossible to read as being from a single hand. It is the narratively untenable sequence of events. It is not the differing emphases on priestly and prophetic authority that eliminate the possibility of reading Num 16 as a unified text. It is the utter confusion on the basic level of the plot, of who is doing what where and when.

\textsuperscript{15} Though see the extensive commentary on this ostensible contradiction and its dispersion throughout biblical literature in B. M. Levinson, \textit{Legal Revision and Religious Renewal in Ancient Israel} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 57–88.

\textsuperscript{16} See the self-consciously canonical but certainly theologically diverse interpretive treatment of W. Brueggemann, \textit{Theology of the Old Testament} (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

\textsuperscript{17} I contend that this is true even for Graf and Kuenen, who concentrated their efforts primarily on the contradictions and duplications among the legal corpora of the Pentateuch. Those legal corpora are only contradictory because they are in a narrative setting, in which the existence of multiple different legal positions, all given by the same deity to the same messenger at the same historical moment, is logically problematic.
No one is going to argue that there is not any terminological variation in the two flood stories, or that there is no difference in theology between Gen 1 and 2, or that there are not different thematic emphases in the two stories of Num 16. But if it were only that – if there were no problems on the level of plot – then I think we would not come to the same conclusions. The issue that demands resolution – that demands a literary resolution in particular – is the issue of plot consistency. If that sounds too strong, consider: is an analysis of the flood narrative that left us with two (or more) texts that made absolutely no sense on the level of the plot even remotely imaginable? If it is not the problems of plot that drive the analysis, then why does every scholar try as hard as possible to end up with texts that are readable on that level? We may disagree on stylistic or thematic or theological points, but no one has yet to put forward a flood story in which the water lasts both forty and one hundred and fifty days or in which God twice promises Noah that he will not destroy the earth again. Even scholars who are inclined to isolate the smallest literary units in the Pentateuch inevitably find that those smallest units are narratively coherent – indeed, that coherence is one of the defining features of the smallest literary unit. The plot is fundamental; it is irreducible.

If the text is sick, it requires surgery. If the text were not sick, no surgery would be required. Cutting up a text even if it shows no signs of being sick is called elective surgery. It can be done, but one should not expect insurance to cover it. It is not necessary, not safe, and when it is over, the patient usually looks worse than before the procedure began. Our text is sick, and that illness is exclusively the literary contradictions on the level of plot. That is the level we are operating on. It is not sick because it uses different terminology and style in its various parts, or because it contains a variety of themes, or because it is theologically intricate – and it is not sick because it contains a variety of traditions, or because it covers a large temporal range, or because we can imagine some of its constituent parts existing in some independent form. These descriptions are true of most complex texts, ancient and modern alike, and we do not slice all of them up into sources or layers or redactions. Jane Austen is full of stylistic and thematic variety, and she, like every author, relies on an abundance of previous oral and written traditions to construct her narrative. But we refrain from dissecting Jane Austen because Jane Austen is perfectly coherent on the level of plot.

If it is the contradictions in plot that drive us to the literary-historical analysis of the text – and that is the claim being put forward here – then it is only logical

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18 This is true in nondocumentary work as divergent in theory and result as that of, e.g., BLUM, Vätergeschichte (see n. 11), and C. LEVIN, Der Jahwist (FRLANT 157; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993). Later literary developments render the earlier text difficult to read; the earliest levels are always narrative jewels (though sometimes not particularly multifaceted).
that our literary-historical solutions should also proceed on the basis of resolving those contradictions in plot. This is because, sensibly enough, if we try to divide the text on other grounds – terminological, stylistic, generic, thematic, theological – then we are not actually addressing the basic problem. This is why Astruc’s separation of Genesis failed – he was trying to solve the plot difficulties by means of terminology. So too with any such mismatched mechanism, examples of which have been all too common in scholarship of all stripes from the early twentieth century down to the present. Now if one thinks that the problem is not plot but is actually theology, then by all means one may attempt to separate the text according to its various theological viewpoints – but one cannot then expect the narrative problems to be resolved. If one thinks that what makes the Pentateuch unreadable is its conflicting themes, then it is certainly in line with those themes that the text should be divided – but the contradictions in the plot will remain.

Similarly, of course, if one divides the text according to the plot contradictions, then one cannot expect all of the terminology, theme, and theology to similarly break down into absolutely neat lines. But that is precisely the point: there is no need for terminology, theme, and theology to break down into absolutely neat lines. In the imaginary Pentateuch constructed above, variations in style, theme, and theology do not necessarily demand literary-historical solutions. They do not render the imaginary Pentateuch unreadable. And so too it is with the texts we identify as making up the real-life Pentateuch. Once the plot contradictions are resolved, if we are left with a narratively coherent text, that text can, like any text ancient or modern, accommodate stylistic and thematic and theological complexity. The reverse is not true: a stylistically or thematically or theologically uniform text cannot accommodate plot contradictions.

What makes the Pentateuch unreadable is its thorough-going internally contradictory plot. The analysis that explains that unreadability is, by necessity, grounded in the resolution of those plot contradictions. That is why source criticism exists – that is why anyone ever thought to enter into this sort of analysis hundreds of years ago. And if one does not think the Pentateuch is fundamentally unreadable, then one ought to stop performing elective surgery on it. It has been under the knife for long enough, and surely it could use a rest.