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HOW TO READ AND UNDERSTAND THE PENTATEUCH

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CENTRAL THESIS

A key to reading and understanding the Pentateuch is to see these five books from the Old Testament as one literary text that was authored by God. While the determination of human authorship is significant and can help in reading the Scriptures, it is more important to understand the purpose and the overall theme of the Pentateuch first.

This paper proposes that considering the overall literary theme of the Pentateuch should take priority over determining the composition as well as the authorship of the book. This approach is consistent with literary criticism that is an alternative way to view the Pentateuch that has become more prevalent in recent decades.

PENTATEUCHAL THEME

The Pentateuch has been seen as a single book from the earliest times. Old and New Testament writers called the whole of the Pentateuch one book as evidenced in 2 Chronicles 25:4 by the singular reference, “the Book of Moses.”

As Clines indicates, “The Pentateuch is a unity—not in origin, but in its final shape. Two centuries of Biblical criticism have trained us to look for unity, if at all, in the Pentateuch’s sources rather than in the final product. I have thought it worthwhile to suggest that it is time that we ignored the sources—hypothetical as they are—for a little, and asked what the Pentateuch as a whole is about; that is to say, what is its theme.”¹

These themes help to understand the Pentateuch by providing an overall message and purpose. Hill and Walton write that “The unifying theological theme of the Pentateuch is Yahweh’s covenant promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3. What humankind was unable to do in

¹ David J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series, Vol. 10* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001. eBook), 7.

all its pride and self-sufficiency (epitomized in the Tower of Babel), God initiated in his covenant promise.”²

Clines proposes that “The theme of the Pentateuch is the partial fulfilment—which implies also the partial non-fulfilment—of the promise to or blessing of the patriarchs. The promise or blessing is both the divine initiative in a world where human initiatives always lead to disaster, and are an affirmation of the primal divine intentions for humanity.”³ In addition, he argues that the Pentateuch has two primary divisions. The first section is Genesis 1-11 which explores how the relationship between God and man can be repaired or restored. The second division from Genesis 12 to Deuteronomy 34 provides a partial answer to this human dilemma through the covenant bonding between God and Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3.

These discussions around the theme of the Pentateuch provide a foundation by which to read and understand the individual passages. In the following section, authorship will be discussed as well as how the book was composed to provide help in understanding the Pentateuch.

PENTATEUCHAL AUTHORSHIP

The Pentateuch is an anonymous work as evidenced by the fact that nowhere in the whole of the Pentateuch is the name of the author identified. As a starting point to the discussion, this paper supports the divine origin of the Pentateuch since as part of the inspired Scriptures. All of Scripture has been written by God, or as 2 Timothy 3:16 says “is God-breathed.” 2 Peter 1: 21 also affirms that, “prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the

² Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton. *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 38.

³ Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, 30.

Holy Spirit.” Even though the Pentateuch originates with God, there was human authorship that included the individual skills and talents of the author or authors.

Traditional views have always supported that Moses wrote the Pentateuch under God’s direction. There is evidence from verses in the Old Testament, such as Nehemiah 13:1, as well as others in the New Testament, that the Pentateuch or books of the law were considered the “book of Moses.” In Mark 12:26, Jesus also referred to the Pentateuch as the “Book of Moses.”

The Jewish testimony from the Talmud, the Mishnah, and Josephus, amongst others, all confirmed Mosaic authorship. Bajic supported Moses as the author, writing, “Christian tradition follows the Jewish view of the Pentateuch’s authorship. The Church fathers (Clement of Rome, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus of Lyon, etc.) have expressed the same belief.”⁴

This position of Mosaic authorship contends that Moses wrote Genesis using a combination of oral stories and inscribed tablets and then used his own experience and what he received from God to write Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Moses would have written the Pentateuch between the events of Exodus and his death outside the Promised Land.

Until the Age of Reason, there was little question that Moses wrote the Pentateuch. This enlightened period brought an era of critical study that was rooted in a more humanistic and scientific worldview that questioned the Pentateuch’s origin and authorship. Alexander acknowledges that part of this challenge is legitimate. “As a literary work, the Pentateuch displays evidence of both unity and disunity. Unity of overall composition, involving a narrative plot that binds disparate materials together, has to be balanced against the fact that the

⁴ Monika, Bajic, “Authorship of the Pentateuch.” *Kairos: Evangelical Journal of Theology*, Vol. 10, Issue 2 (July 1, 2016: 215-223), 216.

pentateuchal writings lack homogeneity, with different styles and types of writing having been placed side by side.”⁵

Some examples of the differences are that the Pentateuch uses two primary names for God; Elohim and Yahweh, in separate passages. There were also two versions of the creation story and other duplicates or inconsistencies. A response to these difficulties and the combination of unity and disunity in the text was to introduce the idea that there were editors who modified the original Mosaic writings.

The most popular responses to these differences developed around looking at the Pentateuch using four main methods; source criticism, form criticism, traditio-historical criticism, and literary criticism. Source criticism tries to identify the literary sources that were used for various portions of the writings. Form criticism considers the oral discussions that are behind the source documents. Traditio-historical criticism explores how the oral forms produced the written sources. Literary criticism sees the whole of the Pentateuch as a consistent, unified writing. While these views can be complementary, literary criticism has challenged the other three methods, particularly in recent years.

The most popular method has been the Documentary Hypothesis, a source criticism approach. This method is a process by which some scholars believe Israelite literary documents were combined by various editors at different points in history to form the Pentateuch. They identify four primary sources, J, E, P, and D, that were combined to form the Pentateuch.

At one point, the Documentary Hypothesis was a "staple" of Biblical scholarship. However, in recent years, the original Documentary Hypothesis has been challenged with multiple modified alternatives (K, J1, J2, etc.) that bring the initial approach into question. Many

⁵ T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land An Introduction to the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 109.

scholars would now agree that the Documentary Hypothesis is based far more on supposition than specific, known sources. As Levin says, “Not a few of today’s scholars consider that this hypothesis is now superseded.”⁶

This sentiment regarding this hypothesis has brought source criticism, form criticism, and traditio-historical criticism into question and fueled the rise of literary criticism. Alexander says that “adherence to the Documentary Hypothesis has prevented scholars from observing the main compositional features of the Text.”⁷ Holding to the Documentary Hypothesis or other criticism approaches focuses on the sections or the fragments rather than the whole. The main themes and truths are then lost in the discussion of how the Pentateuch was composed.

CONCLUSION

The best place to start in reading and understanding the Pentateuch is to hold to divine authorship to help concentrate on the overall message instead of the compiling of the text. This paper would also support the view that the primary human author or compiler was Moses.

More scholars now advocate a literary approach to the Pentateuch, which is the view suggested here. The Documentary Hypothesis and other methods are too speculative and continually changing. The Pentateuch should be read as one literary work that was consciously composed or compiled to form one story. Identifying the overriding themes and then proceeding with that consideration in mind is the best way to read and understand the Pentateuch.

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