



**Bible-study: 2020/10/25 (St. Matthew's Episcopal Church,
McMinnville) – Deuteronomy 34:1-12**

[Ask for a volunteer to read the passage.]

This year in the Old Testament – that is, Year “A” – we’ve been engaged, on Sundays, in a swift journey through the foundational stories of the Bible, called “the Pentateuch” – that’s the first five “books” of Scripture: so, back in early January, we were in *Genesis*, witnessing the universe’s creation out of a void of darkness. Today, we reach a pivotal moment in the history of Israel – a nation chosen from all the others to be God’s elite, which is the death of their first and greatest leader: *Moses*. He is supposed to have been the author of these “foundational stories” from which we’ve been hearing, but much modern scholarship casts grave doubt on the idea – and we reflected on this many months ago – I quote:

‘*Sceptics...“seize” on the lack of evidence contemporaneous with the great man, attesting to his existence, as indicative of him being a fiction; legendary. A myth like Theseus and the flying-horse, Pegasus. Or King Arthur of Camelot. The[ir] argument is that he’ – Moses – ‘was fabricated by the author of Deuteronomy – known in the [scholarly] literature as, “the Deuteronomist,” who lived ‘during the Babylonian Exile’ – so, the fifth or sixth century B. C., to explain, in neat and tidy fashion, the origin of ‘the basics of Judaism’, in order...[to] reinvigorate the ‘cultural identity’ of the captives, who were becoming deeply disillusioned with their ancestral tradition in the face of that appalling national disaster.*¹

In other words, the Deuteronomist’s purpose, so it goes, was to convince his countrymen to *remain Jewish – to inspire them with uplifting tales of forgotten glory, and so help them to resist enculturation [by their oppressors]... Alternatively, he wrote at King Josiah’s direction [prior to the Exile] to provide a propagandistic rationale for that ruler’s godly reforms, at a time of rampant – normative – idolatry.*²

To be clear, the prevailing suggestion *isn’t* that he’ – the Deuteronomist – ‘just “plucked” *Deuteronomy* “from thin air.” No, rather, along with ‘Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings’,³ it was ‘cobbled together’⁴ by ‘an editor/writer with antiquarian intent, who compiled and selectively rewrote a vast collection of source material into a historical work characterized by a singular deuteronomic

¹ Baxter, James W. (2013), *The Book of Deuteronomy and Post-modern Christianity*, Eugene, O. R.: Resource Publications (Wipf and Stock Publishers), 11-12.

² See, for example: Miller, Patrick D. (1990), *Deuteronomy (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Volume V)*, Louisville, K. Y.: John Knox Press, 3.

³ Harris, R. Laird (1967), ‘Factors Promoting the Formation of the Old Testament Canon’, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Volume 10, No. 1, pp. 21-27, 22.

⁴ Baxter, (2013), 11.

theology'.⁵ This posited “source material” doesn’t exist now, but, it is conjectured, consisted of ‘fragments’ (of parchment – of papyrus and vellum), ‘considered to be occasionally contradictory texts that circulated for the most part independently of one another [up to that point].’⁶

... [But about the] underlying – “plagiarized” – “scraps”...where are those? Have we really just not found them? This seems one of the most obvious flaws in the sceptic’s position: she or he’s had to suppose a primitive “strata” of writings about Israel’s earliest history that have *completely* disappeared – and one liberal embraces this, readily conceding: ‘the materials in *Deuteronomy* are lost in the mists of time. Most likely, they come from all around the Mediterranean region over several centuries.’⁷ Additionally, a minority, of course, retreat to the more extreme claim that the Deuteronomist [was inscribing] an oral tradition, *entirely* uncommitted to “hardcopy” up to his own day... Th[us says] Norman Gottwald: ‘...we can have more confidence about the experience and religious belief and practice of a proto-Israelite “Moses group” than we can have about [a] *specific* person[, “[Moses.]”]’ Most likely, he concludes, Moses was a mere ‘sacred cipher’.⁸

That is to say, a *symbol*. ... The traditional teaching of the Church, of course, disputes this. For the longest time across every denomination, Moses was assumed to be a *genuine* hero of our distant past, *and* the most obvious person responsible for *Deuteronomy*. After all, it consists, essentially, of three sermons that he gave, placed back-to-back, and these are described as ‘the words that Moses spoke to all of Israel beyond the Jordan in the wilderness, on the plain opposite Suph...’: [Deut. 1:1]; where, after forty years of wandering and whining, the Hebrews camped – in what is today the Arab Hashemite Kingdom, preparing to make war against the Canaanites. In this trio of sermons, Moses is portrayed as challenging the twelve tribes ‘to a total unshared allegiance to Yahweh who had wrought mighty acts of deliverance on [their] behalf.’⁹ By ‘a re-presentation of [T]he [L]aw’,¹⁰ that he then ‘gave...to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the Ark’: [31:9]. The snag, however, has always been the events of chapter thirty-four[– today’s “events”]...: Moses’ death; described from a dispassionate, third-party perspective. How could Moses have written this about himself and *after-the-fact*? *That* at least must have been appended by an unnamed sympathizer, making the preceding material [of *Deuteronomy*] ... – as Gerhard von Rad suggests: a farewell speech...¹¹¹²

⁵ Richter, Sandra L. (2002), *The Deuteronomistic History and the Name Theology*, Berlin; New York, N. Y.: Walter De Gruyter, 1-2.

⁶ Ausloos, Hans (2015), *The Deuteronomist's History*, Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 5.

⁷ Baxter, (2013), 11.

⁸ *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B.C.E.* (1980), London: SCM Press Ltd., 35-37.

⁹ Thompson, J. A. (2008), *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Volume 5)*, Downers Grove, I. L.: InterVarsity Press, 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹¹ *Studies In Deuteronomy* (1961), translated by David Stalker, London: SCM Press Ltd., 22-23.

¹² See: Randall, Benjamin T. (16th of February, 2020), “Back to Sunday School” – Bible-Study 2020/02/16 (St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church, McMinnville) – Deuteronomy 30:15-20, available at <http://www.saintmatthewschurch.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Bible-Study-20200216->

There can be no doubt, then, that an editor – who’ll never been known to us – has done *something* to *Deuteronomy*. We hear his ‘voice...[m]ost obviously...whenever [Moses] is identified by name or with the third person pronoun’.¹³ But that doesn’t mean we should regard its contents as suspicious – as anything less than sacred Scripture. And when we considered these things before, I offered evidences of its ancient, inspired origin:

‘At the “heart” of [*Deuteronomy*]...is the idea of “covenant.” Of, “if you do that, in return I promise this.” And the language [it uses] has ‘striking parallels’ in documents of Hittite imperial discourse ‘of the fourteenth-thirteenth centuries B. C’.¹⁴ (The Hittites were an Anatolian mountain-people, that “branched” out from a capital, “Hattusa,” in what is central Turkey [[show on map](#)], to become ‘for a time the dominant power within [the Near East].’¹⁵ ... J. A. Thompson agrees: ‘It is precisely the literary form of the suzerain-vassal treaty particularly that of the Hittites of the second millennium B.C., that is used...[in] *Deuteronomy* as a whole or in some of its parts’.¹⁶ The author has just ‘adapted’ it for his own purpose.¹⁷ Kitchen concludes: ‘This, if true, would suggest that [it] really did originate ...in the general period of Moses.’¹⁸ Furthermore, Gordon Wenham brings another line of argument to bear in favour of the evangelical presumption: the prophets, who almost exclusively precede the period claimed as that in which *Deuteronomy* was composed –

‘[T]here is some long-neglected evidence which suggests that...some form of the book of *Deuteronomy* itself was known in the eighth century. ...*Hosea* and *Amos*, show many traces of deuteronomistic style and apparent allusions to *Deuteronomy*. [[Draw timeline.](#)] Modern commentators generally ascribe these deuteronomisms to the ubiquitous deuteronomist, an editor who rewrote everything in deuteronomistic style. Commentators [have attempted to] peel away the most obvious deuteronomisms and argue that what is left is the authentic voice of [“]Amos[”] and [“]Hosea[”]. However, these commentators do not do a thorough enough job. If every trace of *Deuteronomy* were eliminated from these early prophets, there would be hardly anything left. ...

Recently, too,’ Wenham continues, ‘the doyen of Hebrew philology, C. Rabin, has also pressed the case for *Deuteronomy* being composed before *Hosea* and *Amos*. On the grounds of discourse analysis Rabin argues that *Deuteronomy* has the form of a prophetic sermon, yet prophetic sermons from *Amos* onwards adopt a clearly poetic style. *Deuteronomy*’s style is like that of earlier prophets such as *Samuel* and *Elijah*. Thus a late date for the book must be excluded. Rabin’s article, though written with great authority, is tantalizingly brief and leaves many questions unanswered. It does though suggest new methods of approaching an old problem.

[St.-Matthews-Episcopal-Church-McMinnville-Deuteronomy-30v15-20_BTR.pdf](#), (accessed October 20, 2020).

¹³ Block, Daniel I. (September, 2001), ‘Recovering The Voice Of Moses: The Genesis Of *Deuteronomy*’, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Volume 44, No. 3, pp. 385-408, 392.

¹⁴ Kitchen, K. A. (1966), *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, London: Inter-Varsity Press, 91.

¹⁵ Bryce, Trevor (2004), *The Kingdom of the Hittites*, Oxford, U. K.: Oxford University Press, xix.

¹⁶ Thompson, J. A. (October 1963), ‘The Significance of the Ancient Near Eastern Treaty Pattern’, *The Tyndale Bulletin*, Volume 13, pp. 1-6, 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁸ Kitchen (1966), 91-92

The same too could be said of [G. A.] Rendsburg’s article in which he argues that the Hebrew of the Pentateuch is distinctively archaic in certain respects, [for example, in] its failure to distinguish the masculine and feminine in some words. ‘The Pentateuch as a whole would by necessity be dated earlier than the composition of *Joshua, Judges, etc.*’¹⁹

Lastly, Josef Schubert adds what I [hoped might be] the coup de grâce – you might call it a “slam dunk” – to the sceptics’ cynical view about a late *Deuteronomy* written by one unnamed in the Bible: it is ‘virtually identical’, he reports, to its equivalent in the *Samaritan Pentateuch*, (which is like our Old Testament but considerably shorter).²⁰ The Samaritans, remember, were descended from those few Jews from the northern tribes who survived the Assyrian destruction of the Kingdom of Israel *after* its split from the Jerusalem monarchy. They built their own temple (to God) on Mount Gerizim in competition with the one built by those Judeans who returned from the Babylonian Exile, which they themselves avoided having become a separate and distinct polity; and ‘[i]t is not credible that the Samari[t]ans would copy the [ir – the Judeans’] Pentateuch or collaborate with the Judeans in its final redaction’.²¹ (Consider the deep animosity that existed during Jesus’ ministry.) Rather, they must be [– the two Pentateuchs], theorizes Schubert, ‘different editions of the same document’ – a document that existed ‘as a unit [at least] *before* the separation between the kingdoms’.²²

[And, to finish, I offered the following quotation from the biblical commentator] Peter Craigie...: ‘...the religious significance of that form make it not unreasonable to assume that the book comes from the time of Moses or shortly thereafter...’²³²⁴ But there is, in fact, even more to be said – I want us, for example, to return to the idea of an anonymous editor doing “something” to *Deuteronomy*, which may make some of you uncomfortable: his existence is as undeniable as Moses’ own: look again at that statement in verse ten – ‘Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses ...he was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform’. ← ‘This statement not only reflects an awareness of the existence of an office of prophecy, but also is able, within that chronological frame, to draw the conclusion that such an

¹⁹ Wenham (1985).

²⁰ Schubert, Josef (2018), *Dating Deuteronomy: The Wellhausen Fallacy*, Eugene, O. R.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 68. To be precise, it is just the first five books. And it ‘features approximately six thousand textual variants of the Masoretic Text (MT).’ (Eshel, Esther and Eshel, Hanan (2003), ‘Dating the Samaritan Pentateuch’s Compilation in Light of the Qumran Biblical Scrolls’, in Paul, Shalom M.; Kraft, Robert A.; Schiffman, Lawrence H. & Fields, Weston W. (Eds.), *Emanuel: Studies in the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, and the Dead Sea Scrolls in Honor of Emanuel Tov*, Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, pp. 215-, 215.) (‘The Masoretic Text’, by the way, ‘was used as the basis for translations of the Old Testament in Protestant Bibles such as the King James Version’, (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masoretic_Text.) Furthermore, the Eshels argue that the “SP “had “roots” in a Jewish version of the Pentateuch adopted by the Samaritans in the second century B. C. E.’, to which were ‘added’ [s]ectarian changes establishing Mt. Gerizim as the primary sacred site’, 240. A similar proposal is made too by Robert T. Anderson and Terry Giles in *The Samaritan Pentateuch: An Introduction* (2012), Atlanta, G. A.: Society of Biblical Literature, 15.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

²² 85. (My emphasis.)

²³ *The Book of Deuteronomy (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: Volume V)* (1976), Grand Rapids, M. I.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 28.

²⁴ See: n.13

individual prophet ...had not yet arisen. Neither Joshua, nor Samuel, nor any of the pre-exilic prophets were in a position to make such a statement. In Joshua's day, the prophetic office had not been established, and in Samuel's day it had only just begun to function. Even during the exile, the office of prophet was still being actively exercised [by Jeremiah and Isaiah, for instance].²⁵ This assessment, then, can only have been offered by someone 'much later than the time of Moses'.²⁶ "There's no two ways about it."

But what may help alleviate any anxiety you may be feeling is 'a clearer distinction between what we might call the *redaction* of the Pentateuch and its *composition*. This distinction is of much more importance than merely the correct use of terminology. It is, rather, a question of properly understanding the notion of the "authorship" of the Pentateuch. Redaction usually means the literary *reworking* of an existing text. Composition, on the other hand, focuses on the final shape of a written work. [In other words, t]he process of composition produces a text; that of redaction reworks an existing text.'²⁷ *And my argument is that what is fundamentally true about Deuteronomy is not impacted whatsoever by the reality of its redaction.* Proof of this "reality" stared us in the eye – had the Lectionary included it – already in chapter one of *Deuteronomy*; in the first sentence no less: "These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel beyond the Jordan": [v. 1]. *Great* → we are certainly hearing in this book 'the words of Moses' – *that's* important. But '*beyond the Jordan*'? 'Th[is] sentence seems to [constrain us to interpret that *some* of the text which follows must] have been written on...*the Israelite side* [of the Jordan, *across* from Moab] – a place that, again, Israel did not occupy until after Moses's death.'²⁸ And the remark must, then, have been contributed by one (comfortably) situated *in* the Promised Land (after the purge of the pagan tribes).

Now, that is a truth, I believe, of no real consequence for the Church. We mustn't, however, turn a blind eye to its importance to those who argue for multiple *authorship*. That is to say, the evidence of an editor can become *and has become* a "slippery slope" which leads to claims to multiple *compositions* underlying the Pentateuch. John Van Seters puts it this way: (having admitted the likelihood of a redactor), there are scholars for whom 'the redactor is portrayed as so completely in control of his material, reshaping it and adding so much of his own content and perspective, that he had become indistinguishable from the author and has largely supplanted him.'²⁹ This is a road we don't need to travel down. Yet those who do have, in the 20th century, found themselves mired in the so-called "Documentary Hypothesis": 'It presupposes four originally independent literary sources (the Yahwist, Elohist, Priestly, and Deuteronomic

²⁵ Sailhamer, John H. (2009), *The Meaning of the Pentateuch: Revelation, Composition and Interpretation*, Downers Grove, I. L.: InterVarsity Press, 18.

²⁶ *Supra*. (My emphasis.)

²⁷ Sailhamer, John H. (2000), 'A Wisdom Composition of the Pentateuch?', in Packer, J. I. (Ed.), *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke*, Grand Rapids, M. I.: Zondervan, pp. 15-35, 16. (The author's italics.)

²⁸ Baden, Joel S. (2012), *The Composition of the Pentateuch: Renewing the Documentary Hypothesis*, New Haven, C. T.; London: Yale University Press, 14.

²⁹ *The Edited Bible: The Curious History of the "editor" in Biblical Criticism* (2006), Winona Lake, I. N.: Eisenbrauns, 391.

sources, identified by the sigla J, E, P, and D), each with its own set of laws and narratives, which were joined together in stages'.³⁰ And we've talked about this monster before. Its proponents 'have populated [an] imaginary biblical world with myriads of text-corrupting editors, who virtually replaced the actual authors of the text.'³¹ What it has contributed shouldn't be overlooked – it has highlighted 'contradictions, doublets, and discontinuities' throughout the Pentateuch, including 'simple disagreements about the names of people and places. Is Moses's father-in-law named Reuel (Exod[.] 2:18) or Jethro (Exod[.] 3:1)?' For example.³² Some of these details can be explained away. I call Rebekah's father – my father-in-law – *both* "Kent" – his given name – and "Papaw" – the name he adopted for Poppy. Others, though, cannot, and this indicates a 'weaving together' of preexistent materials.³³ *And yet* Moses' involvement – as the principal source – *is necessary* to explain why those "materials" were preserved (in the first place) to undergo that "weaving." Hence, 'the frequent references to [it as] "the book of the Torah of Moses" (Josh[.] 8:31, 32; 23:6; 2 Kgs[.] 14:6; Neh[.] 8:1), [as] "the book of Moses" (Neh[.] 13:1; 2 Chr[.] 25:4; 35:12), "the Torah of Moses," [and] "the book of the Torah of Yahweh by the hand of Moses" (2 Chr[.] 34:14, 15), and "the words of Yahweh by the hand of Moses" (2 Chr[.] 35:6), in the OT [afterward]'.³⁴

³⁰ Gertz, Jan C.; Levinson, Bernard M.; Rom-Shiloni, Dalit and Schmid, Konrad (2016), 'Convergence and Divergence in Pentateuchal Theory – The Genesis and Goals of This Volume', in Gertz, Jan C.; Levinson, Bernard M.; Rom-Shiloni, Dalit & Schmid, Konrad (Eds.), *The Formation of the Pentateuch: Bridging the Academic Cultures of Europe, Israel, and North America*, Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 1-10, 1.

³¹ Van Seters (2006), 400.

³² Baden (2012), 16.

³³ Sailhamer (2009), 283.

³⁴ Block (2001), 385.