

When was Genesis Written and Why Does it Matter? *A Brief Historical Study*

BY PETER ENNS

Introduction

The question of when Genesis was written is not a new one. It has been a focus of modern biblical scholarship since the eighteenth century. Unfortunately, this scholarly development is often looked on as largely negative, as if it is simply unsettling the undisturbed consensus of thousands of years of Jewish and Christian opinion. Modern biblical scholarship is hardly above criticism, and some dramatic shifts have happened that were unprecedented in the pre-modern period. But it is wrong to suggest that a universal and undisturbed consensus was suddenly under attack by academics. Modern scholarship on the Pentateuch did not come out of nowhere; the authorship of the Pentateuch as a whole had posed challenges to readers centuries before the modern period.

Having some insight into *when* the Pentateuch was written has helped readers today understand something of *why* it was written. That *why* question is important when the discussion turns to the relationship between Genesis and modern science—be it cosmology, geology, or biology. The more we understand what Genesis was designed to do by its author, the better position we will be in to assess how Genesis is or is not compatible with modern science. Making false assumptions about what to expect from Genesis is perhaps the single biggest obstacle to a fruitful discussion between science, especially evolution, and Christianity.

This essay is limited in scope. It is mainly a **descriptive historical survey** of some issues surrounding the question of when the Pentateuch was written and how that question was answered. There will always be some differences of opinion on how that question is answered specifically, but there is a strong, general consensus today among biblical scholars that is important to grapple with in trying to understand Genesis: the Pentateuch as we know it is the end product of a complex literary process—written, oral, or both—that did not come to a close until the exile (586-539 BC) and postexilic period. The Pentateuch as we know it is a response to the crisis of exile, and much of the Old Testament as a whole seems to be explained in a similar way. Understanding something of why we have a Bible at all will help Christian readers today think more theologically about how best to engage Genesis as God’s Word when the topic turns to the compatibility of Genesis and evolution.

The Pentateuch Raises its Own Questions

For a very long time, alert readers have noticed that the Pentateuch needs some explaining. It is a document that raises its own questions about consistency, logical flow, and especially how all this could have been written by one man, Moses, in the middle of the second millennium. Genesis alone has kept biblical interpreters quite busy since before the time of Christ. Questions come to mind during the course of reading Genesis, such as:

- *Why are there two such clearly different creation stories at the very beginning of the Bible? (Genesis 1-2:4a and 2:4b-25)*
- *Why is sacrifice mentioned so casually at the dawn of time, and why does it play such a big role with Cain and Abel? (Genesis 4)*

- *If Adam and Eve were the first humans, from where did Cain get his wife and how can he be afraid of other people retaliating for murdering his brother? (Genesis 4)*
- *Why is the flood story so choppy and repetitive? (Genesis 6-9)*
- *Why are there two stories of the dispersing of the nations? (Genesis 10 and 11:1-9)*
- *Who is Melchizedek and how can he be a priest of Israel's God as far back as Abraham's day? (Genesis 14:18)*
- *Why are there two covenant making stories with Abraham? (Genesis 15 and 17)*
- *How is it that Abraham is described as a law keeper long before the law was given? (Genesis 26:5)*
- *How is it that the concept of Israelite kingship can be mentioned long before Israel existed as a nation? (Genesis 36:31)*

These and other questions arise from attentive reading, not skepticism, and faithful Bible readers have been musing about some of them since before the time of Jesus. The long history of Jewish and Christian biblical interpretation has been anything but bashful about engaging these problems. Any decent theological library has rows and rows of commentaries and other books dealing with how Genesis was interpreted over the last 2000 or so years, apparently showing that there has always been a *need* to apply a lot of energy and creativity in addressing a myriad of interpretive challenges.¹ Answering those questions eventually led to the modern study of Genesis and then the Old Testament as a whole. With respect to Genesis, modern scholars took the matter much further than others before them had, and those efforts can be judged on their own merits. But modern scholars did not create the problem—the Pentateuch did.

Two Early Examples

Let me illustrate concretely the questions the Pentateuch raises with two issues that were on the table in the pre-modern period, one concerning Deuteronomy and the other Genesis.

Deuteronomy is largely a series of speeches by Moses given on the brink of the Promised Land (he was not allowed to enter Canaan). The traditional view is that Moses wrote this book, but Deuteronomy nowhere claims that. In fact, the content of the book argues against it. For one thing, the entire book is set up as a third person account *about* what Moses said and did. In 1:5 we read, “Moses began to expound this law, saying...” Someone other than Moses is writing this (see also, for example, 4:41, 44 and 5:1). To insist that Moses wrote about himself in the third person bypasses the implications of what the texts says. Also, the very beginning and end of Deuteronomy won't allow Moses to be the author, and at least one early interpreter from about A.D. 400, whom we will meet in a moment, picked up on this. But first, we should be clear on the problem itself.

The very first verse of Deuteronomy says, “These are the words Moses spoke *on the other side of the Jordan*” (see also 1:5). Again, this is a comment *about* Moses and in the *past* tense. But notice, too, that this is spoken by someone who apparently made it into *Canaan* whereas Moses did not (see Num 20:12 and Deut 32:48-52), which would seem to indicate quite clearly that Moses was not responsible for at least the final form of Deuteronomy. Some have tried to salvage Mosaic authorship by saying that the Hebrew phrase translated “on the other side of the Jordan” (*be-`eber hay-yarden*) is a fixed geographic term—like “The East River” or “South Central Los Angeles” today (these locations are “east” or “south central” regardless of where the speaker is). So, perhaps “other side of the Jordan” simply means “East Jordan,”

which opens the door to the possibility that Moses could have written Deut 1:1-5. But this is highly unlikely. First we still have the questionable scenario of Moses writing about himself in the third person and in the past tense. Second, the same Hebrew phrase is found in Deut 3:25 and 11:30 spoken by *Moses* and referring to the *Promised Land*, i.e., west of the Jordan. In other words, “on the other side of the Jordan” means just what it says: the side you are not on. It is a *relative* geographic term, not a *fixed* one.

The author of Deuteronomy certainly lived after Moses died. Judging from the account of Moses’ death in Deuteronomy 34 (which Moses certainly did not write), it seems that the author lived at a time far removed from Moses. Verses 6 and 10 are especially important. After we read of Moses’ death and burial, v. 6 says: “*to this day* no one knows where his grave is.” Verse 10 adds: “*Since then* no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses.” The fact that his gravesite is unknown suggests that a lengthy time has transpired.² Otherwise we would need to argue that Moses wrote about his future death in the third person and past tense, and also anticipated that his gravesite would become unknown—which strains credulity. It also makes it extremely improbable to think that someone of Moses’ generation (e.g., Joshua) wrote this, lest we conclude that within one generation the Israelites forgot where they put Moses’ body. The same holds for v. 10: “*Since then*, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses.” This statement makes no sense if only a generation or two, or three, or four, has transpired. The whole gravity of v. 10 is lost unless we presume that a considerable length of time has transpired—even after *all this time* no one like Moses has come along.

It is clear that some writer is telling us about what Moses said and did a long time ago. So, who wrote Deuteronomy? The Church Father Jerome (A.D. 347-420), without a lot of fanfare or elaboration, suggested a sober explanation for the account of Moses’ death—and this explanation can be seen in one form or another in later interpreters. He suggested that “*to this day*” of Deut 34:6 refers to the time of Ezra—the mid-fifth century B.C. returnee from Babylonian exile.³ Jerome does not say that Ezra was responsible for the whole of the book, or even more than this one verse. Also, he does not tell us why he chose a postexilic character as the likely candidate rather than Joshua, David, Solomon, or someone closer in time. At any rate, Jerome saw a problem that clearly needed an explanation and offered one. Jerome was neither adamant about the point nor did he seem all that concerned to defend his view. He certainly wasn’t attacking the Bible by suggesting that Moses did not write this. He was exercising common sense.

A second early interpreter of Deuteronomy was the twelfth century rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra. Ibn Ezra was brilliant and respected and also reluctant to break with tradition too quickly—including the tradition that Moses wrote the Pentateuch. Still, there seems to have been an independent streak in him. He noted several passages in the Pentateuch that he felt were incompatible with Mosaic authorship:

- Moses did not cross the Jordan (the problem of Deut 1:1-5);
- Ibn Ezra refers cryptically to a “mystery of the twelve” concerning Mosaic authorship. The seventeenth century philosopher Spinoza (see below) understood this to refer to Deut 27 and Josh 8:37, where the entire book of Moses was inscribed on an altar that consisted of twelve stones. Apparently, the “book of Moses” was small enough to fit on such a small space, and so could not have included the entire Pentateuch;
- Ibn Ezra felt that the third person account of Moses’ life was a problem for Mosaic authorship, citing Deut 31:9 (“Moses wrote the law”);
- According to Gen 22:14, the mountain of God is called Mount Moriah. Moriah is only mentioned

elsewhere in 2 Chron 3:1 as the site of the temple. By citing this, Ibn Ezra may have thought that a reference to Moriah in Genesis is anachronistic. The writer of Genesis lived much later and placed a reference to Mt. Moriah in Abraham's day to legitimate the temple site;

- According to Deut 3:11, the nine cubit long bed of iron of Og, king of Bashan, was "still in Rabbah." This sounded to Ibn Ezra like an explanation for an ancient relic. He attributed this comment to the time of David who conquered the city in 2 Sam 12:30;
- At Gen 12:6, during Abraham's sojourn through the Promised Land, the narrator comments "At that time the Canaanites were still in the land." Ibn Ezra concluded that this was written when the Canaanites were *no longer* in the land—after the final conquest of Canaan under David, 1000 years later. He writes: "...there is a secret meaning to the text. Let the one who understands it remain silent."⁴

Ibn Ezra seems to have thought that authorship of the Pentateuch during the time of David explains some of what the Pentateuch says. Biblical critics would later adopt a similar position, since the time of David and Solomon was one of relative peace for this fledgling nation -- a good time to compose their national story. Later scholars, however, would argue that the time of the early monarchy was only the beginning of a writing process that did not come to an end until after the exile, a point Ibn Ezra was in no position in his historical moment to adopt. Another point raised by Ibn Ezra is that his difficulties with the Pentateuch are numerous, not just a verse in Deuteronomy as with Jerome. Although he hardly scratches the surface, Ibn Ezra's list would raise an important question for later scholars: is the Pentateuch an essentially Mosaic document that was merely *updated* here and there, or do these examples indicate when Genesis and the Pentateuch as a whole were *written* (no earlier than the time of David)?

Ibn Ezra could not be expected to explore this question fully in his historical moment. Five hundred years later, however, the influential Jewish philosopher Benedict Spinoza (1632-77) drew explicitly on Ibn Ezra's work and made broader—and more controversial—claims. In his 1670 *Theologico-Political Treatise* Spinoza lays out his views of the Bible as a whole and spends his share of time on the Pentateuch.⁵ Spinoza reviewed Ibn Ezra's difficulties with Mosaic authorship and added some of his own. He concluded: "From all this it is clearer than the noonday sun that the Pentateuch was not written by Moses but by someone else who lived many generations after Moses."⁶ Spinoza argued that only the postexilic priest Ezra could be responsible—the same figure suggested by Jerome nearly 1300 years earlier. But Spinoza explicitly made Ezra responsible for the entire Pentateuch (not to mention Joshua through 2 Kings).

In this sense, Spinoza's idea is more sweeping than anyone before him, and the importance of the postexilic period for large portions of the Pentateuch would continue to echo throughout the subsequent history of biblical scholarship through to today. Nevertheless, Spinoza's position is still not a comprehensive theory of *how the Pentateuch came to be what it is*. Such a theory was still several generations away, and it would bring with it the true appearance of "modern biblical scholarship."

The Beginning of Modern Old Testament Scholarship: God's Two Names

Modern Old Testament scholarship has its true beginning about a century after Spinoza, and questions about Genesis were the driving force, one in particular: why does God have two names in Genesis? It is no exaggeration to say that the answers given to that question gave rise to the modern study of the Pentateuch. The one typically credited for this revolution in biblical scholarship was a French

professor of medicine and physician to Louis XV, Jean Astruc (1684-1766). He was apparently quite industrious. In addition to teaching and tending to the French monarch, Astruc also read a lot of Hebrew and came up with a theory about Genesis that formed the basis for the work of every scholar after him.

Astruc wasn't out to make a name for himself in the history of biblical scholarship; he was simply curious why there were two primary names for God in Genesis. Chapter 1 uses Elohim (the Hebrew word translated "God") and chapters 2-3 use Yahweh Elohim (Yahweh is translated LORD—in lower caps—in most English Bibles) and Yahweh alone beginning in chapter 4. He thought this was interesting because the *difference in name* coincided with the *different perspective on creation* in those chapters. He wondered if he could detect a larger pattern, and so he undertook a systematic analysis of all of Genesis. He concluded that the presence of two names for God is best accounted for by posting two originally independent documents, which he named, rather unimaginatively, A (Elohim) and B (Yahweh). Astruc thought these documents were ancient memoirs that Moses took and arranged next to each other. In other words, Moses was the *editor* of Genesis. Wherever those memoirs overlapped in subject matter, he laid them side-by-side (as in Genesis 1 and 2) or wove them together (as in the flood story).

Astruc wasn't particularly interested in the post-Mosaic elements of Genesis that occupied Spinoza and Ibn Ezra. He focused on the *pre-Mosaic* elements of Genesis. Since Moses lived hundreds of years after the last recorded events in Genesis (and over two millennia after the events covered in the Genesis 1-11, according to a literal reading of the Genesis chronology), he was clearly not an eyewitness to these events. Astruc wondered how Moses could have known about them. By divine revelation, perhaps? Not likely, thought Astruc. No information is said to be revealed to anyone, as in the giving of the law or the inspiration of the prophets. For Astruc, Genesis is a record of events as one finds elsewhere in the Pentateuch or the Historical Books, and Moses wrote as a "simple historian" who had in his possession these two memoirs.

Since he was not a trained biblical scholar, Astruc was not confident about his conclusions. He was also concerned that his views would be misused to undermine the Bible, the very opposite of his intention. He was encouraged by a friend, however, and decided to publish his views anonymously in order to subject his theory to professional criticism and to abandon it if need be.⁷ Instead of criticism, however, his argument received wide acclaim, thanks in part to the work of Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1753-1827), an actual biblical scholar, whose own work corroborated that of Astruc's.⁸

As biblical scholars thought more of Genesis and Astruc's idea of memoirs, or "sources" as they would come to be called, they noticed something: the patterns Astruc saw in Genesis can also be seen elsewhere in the Pentateuch. That meant that Astruc's theory of sources for Genesis could also be applied to the Pentateuch. That was a game-changer, for it meant that (1) there was a *major* editorial process of combining originally separate documents to make the *entire Pentateuch*, and (2) that had to have happened well after Moses, since the Pentateuch has such long-recognized postmosaic elements. We have now moved beyond Ibn Ezra and Spinoza simply *pointing out* problems in the Pentateuch and toward a *theory that explained* how those problems came to exist in the Pentateuch to begin with. Astruc's theory was the key: different documents written by different authors compiled together by a later editor—only now it was no longer Moses editing just Genesis, but someone much later editing the entire Pentateuch. For the next generation or two, Old Testament scholars would be working with this basic template to see how best to explain the properties of the Pentateuch. Theories were posed—some accepted, some rejected, some modified—all of which came to a head in the nineteenth century (see below).

There is another very important development in biblical scholarship that begins to take shape with

the fixation on sources that preceded the Pentateuch: biblical scholars began to focus on the *historical circumstances that gave rise to the sources*. The Pentateuch was seen to tell us not so much about the “history” of Noah, or Abraham, or Moses, but of the *historical circumstances of the individual writers of the sources*. The importance of this shift cannot be overstated for the history of modern biblical scholarship. The Pentateuch and the Bible as a whole do not accurately recount events in neutral fashion, but tell us *what the writers understood or believed* about those events. The historical value of the Bible must be mined *beneath the surface* of the text and corroborated by *outside sources*, textual and archaeological. This view of the historical value (or lack thereof) of the Old Testament is one of the main reasons why some view modern biblical scholarship with great suspicion.

Julius Wellhausen’s Postexilic Pentateuch

In 1878, the German Old Testament scholar Julius Wellhausen published his *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, routinely considered the most influential book on Old Testament scholarship published in the modern era—not because Wellhausen was correct on all counts, but because his work became the starting point for subsequent scholarly work. Wellhausen claimed to have solved the problem of how the Pentateuch came to exist. His theory is very detailed, but the general idea can be outlined quickly. A careful reading of the Pentateuch reveals various patterns—for example, theological points of view and the use of vocabulary, (the name of God that Astruc wrote about being one example). Working off of what Astruc, Eichhorn, and several other important precursors had proposed, Wellhausen grouped together sections of the Pentateuch that he felt exhibited similar characteristics. Some of these sections were chapters long, others parts of verses. Wellhausen agreed with previous scholars that these groupings of texts were *originally distinct documents* that were the *source material* for what eventually became the Pentateuch at a much later time. (This is why his method is referred to “Source Criticism” and his theory as the “Documentary Hypothesis.”)

So far this was not earth-shattering in that academic climate. But Wellhausen did not just find some sources and leave it at that. What he said was far more controversial. Wellhausen argued that the editor compiled these sources *after the return from exile* and made no effort to respect the integrity of the originals or their chronological order. In fact, he cut and pasted the sources together driven by a striking—for some even disturbing—theological agenda (which we will get to in a moment). This brings us to what stands out in Wellhausen’s explanation of the Pentateuch: the Pentateuch *obscures* Israel’s *real* history. Wellhausen claimed to have rediscovered Israel’s *true* history by, (1) untangling the original documents from the editor’s work, and (2) putting them back in their proper chronological order. In other words, Wellhausen *reconstructed Israel’s history*, and that is what made his work so controversial. Even conservative scholars acknowledged that there were some sources behind the Pentateuch (although they assigned the editing job to Moses, as did Astruc). But for Wellhausen, the sources were pervasive and his source analysis was just the first step of a larger program, as the title of his magnum opus tell us: it is *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*.

Wellhausen identified four sources: J, E, D, and P, and *in that order*.⁹ J stands for “Yahwist” (spelled with a J in German), the anonymous author of a tenth century B.C. document that reflects (among other things) his preference for using Yahweh to refer to God. J was Astruc’s B. The E (Elohlist) source (Astruc’s A) is a ninth century B.C. work that reflects that author’s preference to refer to God as Elohim. A lot of Genesis is made up of J and E. Next is D (Deuteronomist), which refers mainly to Deuteronomy and other parts of the Pentateuch that express similar theological concerns. The D source dates to the late seventh to sixth

century B.C., near the time when the southern kingdom, Judah, was taken into exile in Babylon. The final source, considered early postexilic by Wellhausen (around 500 B.C.), is P (priestly). This author was responsible for the kinds of things that Wellhausen thought priests would produce: the tabernacle section in Exodus, the rituals in Leviticus, and laws in general—pretty much anything that sounded like ritual and legalism. All of this was brought together by an editor (redactor, R) in the middle of the fifth century B.C.

Two features of Wellhausen's theory should catch our eye. First, the *earliest* document (J) was written about half a millennium after Moses, the traditional author of the Pentateuch. So, even the earliest written portions of the Pentateuch are far removed from Moses' day. Second, the legal and ritualistic material (P), which was given to Moses on Mt. Sinai according to Exodus—the very thing most closely associated with Moses—was written *last*, about one millennium after Moses. These four sources were arranged in the Pentateuch by a postexilic *priestly* editor, who, according to Wellhausen, had an agenda: he wanted to *put the law at the very beginning of Israel's history*. The editing job was only partially successful, however, for all sorts of clues were left that people like Wellhausen claimed to have found—like anachronisms and theological contradictions. Others had picked up on these things, but Wellhausen provided a comprehensive and compelling theory to explain them.

Comprehensive and compelling as it was, Wellhausen's theory cast serious doubt on any sense of the Pentateuch's value as an accurate account of historical events. In fact, Wellhausen argued that the historical picture the Pentateuch gives is misleading. Only after you untangle the mess created by the redactor and put the sources in their proper order can you see the *progression* of Israel's religion from simple to complex, or better, from *free* to *legalistic*.¹⁰ J and E are the earliest sources, and their theology reflects a simple, free, unencumbered relationship with God, devoid of ritual, as when Abraham built altars at Shechem and Bethel (Gen 12:6-8). Ritual would be a later imposition, which began with D. This author begins to squelch spontaneous religious expression. Wellhausen saw here the beginning of Jewish dogma, carefully guarded by the developing ruling and priestly class. Worship is now to be controlled by a clergy and performed under their careful gaze in only one place, the place Yahweh will "choose" (Deuteronomy 12), i.e., Jerusalem. According to Wellhausen, D does not give us second millennium Mosaic legislation that set the *template* for Israel's legal history. Rather it gave us mid-first millennium propaganda, where words were put into Moses' mouth.¹¹

It is easy to see why not everyone was happy with Wellhausen. But there was more. What D began was carried through with greater force in P. Here Wellhausen saw priests run amuck, making all sorts of regulations for what should be sacrificed when, how many, and for what reason (see Leviticus). We are a far cry from Abraham building altars out of devotion to Yahweh who had appeared to him there. P is legalism pure and simple and, according to Wellhausen, would eventually give rise to *Judaism*, a religion completely contrary to the spirit of free religious expression of J and E. The priestly legislation and the Judaism that arose from it were a different religion altogether from what the Old Testament itself really described—*provided one knows how to decipher the clues left in the text*, which he claims to have done.¹² For Wellhausen, the law was not the starting point for the history of ancient Israel, but for the history of Judaism.

Wellhausen's theory was creative and compelling, but not problem-free, and I do not mean to suggest otherwise. In fact, elements of his theory have been challenged since not long after they were proposed. For example, Wellhausen's notion that priestly concerns were wholly the product of postexilic Jewish legalism is impossible to maintain. The importance of the postexilic period for the Pentateuch is still the strong scholarly consensus, but the kinds of things that occupy Wellhausen's P source (laws, priests,

religious rituals) have been a part of the ancient Near Eastern fabric since long before the exilic period—indeed, since long before Israel existed. This has come to light more clearly from archaeological discoveries after Wellhausen’s time, so perhaps he can be forgiven for jumping the gun. But no one today argues that the Jewish legalism of the Pentateuch arose only after the exile. Also, Wellhausen’s claim that the prophets did not know of P does not account well for Ezekiel’s theology, which sounds like P in places, thus suggesting that priestly concerns were not simply postexilic. It also seems to be the general consensus now that the writer of D was also aware of priestly issues. Some scholars have also questioned whether J and E are really two separate documents.

Simply put, the sources cannot be separated and dated as simply as Wellhausen thought. Other theories were posed, beginning not long after Wellhausen, that either forced some adjustments to his theory or went in another direction altogether.¹³ Today there is no one universally accepted theory of how the Pentateuch came to be. Some scholars even speak of the entire field as being in a state of chaos. That is both true and false. Source criticism is still a dominant theory taught in some form in colleges and seminaries everywhere, but not everyone agrees on the details, and source criticism often sits side-by-side with other methods. That being said, however, Wellhausen’s work has been central in cementing into place the foundation of the modern academic study of the Pentateuch: *The Pentateuch as we know it was not authored out of whole cloth by a second millennium Moses, but is the end product of a complex literary process—written, oral, or both—that did not come to a close until sometimes after the return from exile*. On this point there is very little serious disagreement. In fact, the postexilic period is crucial for more than just the Pentateuch.

The Old Testament, the Exile, and Israel’s Self-Definition

When was the Old Testament written and why? Looking at the Old Testament as a whole, even briefly, will put into sharper relief what we have seen about the date of Genesis. As with the Pentateuch, the exile and postexilic period play an important role in forming the Old Testament as a whole.

Unfortunately, it is common for Christians to think of the “biblical period” as extending from Genesis to the fall of Jerusalem and Israel’s deportation to Babylon in 2 Kings 25 (about 586 B.C.). This is the bulk of the story, and Ezra, Nehemiah, and a couple of the Minor Prophets form a postexilic postscript to bring the whole sad story to a stuttering, anticlimactic ending. In this characterization, the exilic and postexilic periods become something of a postbiblical dark age: all that is worth knowing has happened. Israel has failed, and it is time to move on.

The truth, however, is that this alleged “postbiblical” period is actually the *biblical* period, meaning the time in which the Hebrew Old Testament as we know it took shape as a *final* and *sacred* collection of texts. There is little question that Israel documented, recorded, told, and retold parts of its own story—in writing and orally—probably for hundreds of years before the exile. Few would dispute this. It is unlikely, however, that early records of ancient deeds, court politics, and poems were thought of as “sacred Scripture” at the time. That is a later development, and the motivation for it was Israel’s national crisis.

The exile was arguably the most traumatic and therefore most influential historical event in Israel’s ancient history. The Israelites understood themselves to be God’s chosen people: they were promised the perpetual possession of the land, the glorious temple as a house of worship, and a descendent of David sitting perpetually on the throne (2 Sam 7:4-16). With the exile, all of this came to a sudden and devastating end. Exile in Babylon was not an inconvenience. It meant to the Israelites that their relationship

with God had been disrupted. God could no longer be worshiped as he himself required—in the Jerusalem temple. Israel’s connection with God was severed: no land, no temple, no sacrifices, no king. Rather than prompting the other nations to acknowledge the true God, which was Israel’s national calling, Israel was humiliated by these nations. Rather than the nations streaming to them, they were slaves in a foreign land. Israel was estranged from God.

The impact of this series of events cannot be overstated. Since these heretofore ties to Yahweh were no longer available to them, the Israelites turned to the next best thing: *bringing the glorious past into their miserable present by means of an official collection of writings*. Some of these writings were collected or edited during the exile or afterward, while others were composed during those times. But the trauma of the exile was *the* driving factor in the creation of what has come to be known as “the Bible.” Walter Brueggemann summarizes well the scholarly consensus:

It is now increasingly agreed that *the Old Testament in its final form is a product of and response to the Babylonian Exile*. This premise needs to be stated more precisely. The Torah (Pentateuch) was likely completed in response to the exile, and the subsequent formation of the prophetic corpus and the “writings” [i.e., poetic and wisdom texts] as bodies of religious literature (canon) is to be understood as a product of Second Temple Judaism [=postexilic period]. This suggests that by their intention, these materials are...an intentional and coherent response to a particular circumstance of crisis...Whatever older materials may have been utilized (and the use of old materials can hardly be doubted), the exilic and/or postexilic location of the final form of the text suggests that the Old Testament materials, understood normatively, are to be taken precisely in an acute crisis of displacement, when old certitudes—sociopolitical as well as theological—had failed.¹⁴

The central question the exilic and postexilic Jews asked themselves was, “Are we still the people of God? After all that has happened, are we still connected to the Israelites of old, with whom God spoke and showed his faithfulness?” Their answer to these questions was to tell their story from the beginning and from their postexilic point of view—which meant editing older works and creating some new ones. The creation of the Hebrew Bible, in other words, is *Israel’s self-definition as a nation and the people of God in response to the Babylonian exile*. Following is a brief description of the extent to which the Old Testament as a whole is a product of the exilic and postexilic periods.

The **Deuteronomistic History**¹⁵ (Joshua through 2 Kings) recounts Israel’s history from just after Moses’ death to the Babylonian Exile and the release of King Jehoiachin (about 561 B.C.), which means these books reached their final form no earlier than the exilic period and perhaps later. Although no doubt dependent on earlier documents and traditions (e.g., The Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah [1 Kings 15:23] and of Israel [1 Kings 15:31]), the reality of exile shaped how Israel’s story was told.

1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah are postexilic historical books. 1 and 2 Chronicles gives a post-exilic perspective on Israel’s history. Ezra and Nehemiah recount Israel’s return to the land after the Babylonian captivity. Other details indicate that these books were written no earlier than the latter half of the fifth century B.C. Likewise, **Esther** was written no earlier than the middle of that century, since it is set during the reign of the Persian king Xerxes. In view of its well known and numerous historical difficulties, the book is typically dated between the fourth and third centuries B.C.

Of the poetic books, few dispute the linguistic evidence for a postexilic date for **Ecclesiastes**. Some even suggest the Hellenistic period, i.e., after the conquest of Alexander the Great in 332 B.C. Even granting

a Solomonic core (which scholars still debate), **Proverbs** has multiple authors and an editorial history that extends to the time of Hezekiah at least (d. 686 B.C.; see Prov 25:1). The book as a whole did not reach its final shape until sometime after Hezekiah, i.e., no earlier than the late pre-exilic period. Many scholars see good reason to pose a postexilic date (although the setting of the book of Proverbs is a thorny issue). There is no clear consensus on the date of **Job**, other than dates that range from 700 to about 200 B.C. with perhaps an older oral tradition behind it. The final form of the **Psalter** is a big topic of discussion. It clearly has an intentional shape, namely, there are “five books” to the Psalter, which mimics the Pentateuch. This arrangement clearly happened after the exile, since there are psalms that presume the exile (e.g., Psalm 137). **Song of Songs** is notoriously difficult to date, in part due to the lack of any historical referent. Some argue that linguistic evidence points to a postexilic date, while others see the parallels between Song of Songs and Egyptian love poetry as pointing to a date as early as the tenth century B.C. At present, it is best to remain open to different possibilities.

Among the prophetic books, **Jeremiah**, **Ezekiel**, and **Daniel** clearly assume the fall of Jerusalem (in 586 B.C.). Controversial to some is the book of **Isaiah**. Chapters 40-66 seem to assume that the exile is a past event as opposed to prophecy (e.g., 42:22-25; 47:6). This is one of several factors that has led most scholars to conclude that Isaiah was written over several centuries extending well past the exile, which means that the final form of that book as a whole stems from that period. Also, there has been much work in recent years on the twelve **Minor Prophets**. Scholars are seeing more clearly how those books are a collective literary product (hence referred to as “The Book of the Twelve”). At least Zechariah and Malachi (likely Haggai, too) are clearly written during the exilic and postexilic periods. The final collection as a whole is dated to the Persian period, if not later.

A strong conclusion of modern scholarly study of the Old Testament is that, as a collection of sacred writings, it is a postexilic phenomenon. Again, very few scholars would care to deny a prehistory—in some cases a lengthy and extensive prehistory, whether oral or written—to at least some portions of the Old Testament. Also, there are some parts of the Old Testament that can’t be dated with any certainty. Still, there is a strong scholarly consensus that the exile and postexilic period played a vital role in (1) the production of numerous books or parts of books, and (2) the final editing of older material. Israel formed its sacred collection of books not out of dispassionate academic interest on the part of some scribes, but as a statement of self-definition of a haggard people who still claimed—and yearned for—a special relationship with their God. The Bible was formed to tell the old story for contemporary reasons: Who are we? Who is our God? What do the two have to do with each other? The questions that led to the formation of the Old Testament are the same ones that have occupied the minds and hearts of people of faith ever since. The Bible models that process of bringing the past to bear on the present.

The Creation Story and the Church’s Self-Definition

Understanding how the Pentateuch came to be and the importance of the postexilic period for forming the Pentateuch and the Old Testament are not side issues. They reorient us to what questions we have a right to ask of the Bible as a whole and Genesis in particular, which is half of the evolution/Christianity dialogue. The exile prompted Israel to put down in writing once and for all an official declaration, “This is who we are and this is the God we worship.” The Old Testament is not a treatise on Israel’s history for the sake of history, and certainly not a book of scientific interest, but a document of self-definition and persuasion: “Do not forget where we’ve been. Do not forget who we are—the people of God.”

Genesis as a whole, and the creation stories in particular, are to be understood within this larger framework. The creation stories were not written to give *us* information that can be mined for *scientific* purposes, nor can they be expected to address modern scientific concerns. *Genesis and the creation stories are part of a larger theologically-driven collection of writings that answers ancient questions of self-definition, not contemporary ones of scientific interest.* Therefore, Christian readers today should not engage Genesis in the scientific arena. Rather, they are more faithful to the Bible when they follow the trajectory of the postexilic Israelites and ask their own questions of self-definition as the people of God: *in view of who and where we are, what do these ancient texts say to us about being the people of God today?* Israel's moment of national crisis drove their theologians to engage their past history creatively. The church's view of that same history has also been shaped by a defining moment—not one of crisis but of Good News, the appearance of the kingdom of heaven and Son of God. That defining moment shaped how the New Testament writers engaged Israel's story—better put, it forced a fresh engagement of that story. They believed Jesus to be the focal point of that drama. In fact, demonstrating how Jesus both confirms and reshapes that story is the heart and soul of the New Testament. Its authors echoed the pressing question of the postexilic Israelites: in view of what has just happened, what does it mean to be the people of God? In answering that question, the New Testament constantly references the Old Testament—about 365 citations and over 1000 allusions.¹⁶ With each citation and allusion we see the New Testament authors at work, rethinking and transforming Israel's story in view of this new thing that God has done in Christ.

The defining moment for the New Testament writers remains the defining moment for Christians today. The Old Testament—including *Genesis*—is the church's *theologically* self-defining document recast in the light of the appearance of the Son of God. Proper contemporary appropriation of Israel's self-defining documents, therefore, is theological, not scientific work. Reducing Genesis to a book of scientific interest is not just scientifically awkward—it fails to embrace the theological trajectory laid out in the Christian Bible.

Notes

1. Readers interested in this topic could begin with James Kugel, *The Bible As It Was* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1999) and *Traditions of the Bible* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998). The latter is a bit more detailed and technical, although both are eminently readable. For a glimpse at the Church Fathers and Genesis, see Peter C. Bouteneff, *Beginnings: Ancient Christian Readings of the Biblical Creation Narratives* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).
2. There has been some debate about the meaning of the first couple of Hebrew words in v. 6. The Hebrew text literally reads, somewhat cryptically, "He buried him [Moses]...." Some claim that "he" refers to God, so it was God who personally buried Moses in "Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Peor" without anyone knowing where. However, God is not mentioned explicitly, as one might think he would be if such an unusual event were actually the topic. Also, the Hebrew can be translated in the passive voice in English, hence "He was buried." In any case, although there is some disagreement among various commentators of the Hebrew, this is clearly an editorial comment that suggests a significant period of time has elapsed.
3. The comment and its context can be found in *The Principle Works of Jerome* (Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Church, vol. 6; trans. W. H. Fremantle; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 337-38.
4. *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch: Genesis (Bereshit)*, (trans. H. Norman Strickman and Arthur M. Silver; New York, N.Y.: Menorah, 1988), 151. Ibn Ezra holds the same opinion about Gen 13:7.
5. Spinoza argued that biblical interpretation belongs to *everyone*, not just the ruling elite, and that one needs nothing more than the *natural light of reason* to do so. There is no room for any *external authority*, either the church or God. Spinoza had political motives for this. He wanted to challenge the ecclesiastical power structures of his native Holland, which were tied to the political structures (hence, *Theologico-Political Treatise*). Undermining the Bible meant undermining the government. Casting off the shackles of ecclesiastical authority was the theme of the Protestant Reformation 100 years earlier. Some

historians suggest that modern biblical scholarship, ironically, could not have developed apart from what the Reformation had set into motion.

6. This quote is from the version of *Theologico-Political Treatise* edited by Jonathan Israel for the *Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 122. The entire discussion begins at p. 118 and continues to p. 125. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) actually preceded Spinoza by several years in putting into print his view that Moses did not write the entire Pentateuch (*Leviathan*, 1651), although he did think that Moses wrote Deuteronomy 12-25. He is the first European to commit this view to writing, and like Spinoza, was not merely interested in a discussion of theology for its own sake, but of politics.
7. *Conjectures on the original documents that Moses appears to have used in composing the Book of Genesis. With remarks that support or throw light upon these conjectures*, 1753.
8. *Introduction to the Old Testament* (5 vols.), 1780-83. A German pastor, H. B. Witter, arrived at some similar conclusions earlier in the eighteenth century, but his work was likely unknown to Astruc.
9. Here, Wellhausen followed the work of fellow German Old Testament scholar Karl Heinrich Graf (1815-69; *The Historical Books of the Old Testament*, 1866), although with some differences of opinion.
10. Wellhausen was influenced here by another fellow German, Wilhelm Vatke (1806-82; *The Religion of the Old Testament according to the Canonical Books*, 1846). Some have also argued that such historical “progression” reflects the influence of evolutionary thinking, and perhaps even the philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831), who taught that history progressed to higher and higher syntheses. Wellhausen’s theory, however, of an “evolution” of the Pentateuch from simple to complex was probably not influenced by Darwin in any direct way.
11. Wellhausen’s understanding of D was largely dependent on the work of W. M. L. de Wette (1780-1849), who argued that the “finding” of the “book of the law” under Josiah in 2 Kings 22:8 was political propaganda. De Wette argued that the book of Deuteronomy was *written* during this time to foster political and religious unity under Josiah’s reign.
12. Wellhausen’s anti-Semitism, prevalent in his time, is hardly veiled, and it is no surprise that one Jewish scholar referred to Wellhausen’s brand of higher criticism as “higher anti-Semitism” (Solomon Schechter, “Higher Criticism—Higher Anti-Semitism,” in *Seminary Addresses and other Papers* [Cincinnati: Ark Publishing, 1915], 36-37). Ironically, Wellhausen felt he was actually reclaiming the Old Testament for Christianity by making the legalism an afterthought, not the heart of Israel’s faith. Wellhausen’s Lutheran theology may have influenced him here, with its tendency to draw distinctions between law and grace. The legalism of D and P obscured the grace of Israel’s first encounter with God in J and E. The grace of the Gospel is more in line with J and E.
13. For example, Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932) argued in his 1901 Genesis commentary that oral traditions, arising from specific social and historical settings and which pre-dated any written sources, were a valuable factor in understanding the formation of the Pentateuch.
14. W. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 74-75.
15. The term Deuteronomistic History is academic shorthand for Joshua through 2 Kings because these books reflect the theology of Deuteronomy, e.g. the importance of a central place of worship (Deuteronomy 12) and the consequences of worshipping foreign gods (Deuteronomy 13), especially by imitating Canaanite practices of “altars...sacred stones...Asherah poles” (Deut 7:5; 12:3; 16:21-22).
16. Barbara Aland, et al., eds., *The Greek New Testament*, 4th rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993), 887-900.