

Why was the Pentateuch compiled?

by Brian McKinlay

§1 *Introduction*

Writing on the Pentateuch contains much on sources, form, textual variants, exegesis, and so on. There is also consideration of why particular parts of the text may have been written. But there seems to have been little work on reasons for the compilation of the Pentateuch as a whole, for there is little direct evidence. The text does not give reasons for its own compilation (though a purpose is given for some passages).¹ To approach the 'why?' of the Pentateuch's compilation, therefore, this essay explores related questions - 'how?' and 'when?' and 'by whom?' It looks at the compilation of Deuteronomy as an example, before attempting some ideas on the compilation of the Pentateuch as a whole. Some generalised conclusions are possible from a generic consideration of the work of textual editorship and the concept of 'implied readership'. Possible prophetic motivations for the compilation and propagation of the Pentateuch are mentioned.

§2 *The 'why?' via the 'how?', 'when?' and 'by whom?'*

An understanding of why the Pentateuch was compiled depends on what can be learned from the text itself, as well as other Biblical texts. The Pentateuch does not explicitly state a reason for its own compilation. The dominant approach has been to explain the Pentateuch's origin not as a single operation but as a progressive process of compilation over time. Debate continues on the nature of the process. According to the classical "documentary" hypothesis, formulated by Julius Wellhausen and others in the nineteenth century, the oldest written source of the Pentateuch was a document from the ninth century BCE, which has been named J (for its supposed author the "Jahwist" who used YHVH to name God). Other sources were believed to

¹ As, for example Deuteronomy 6:6-7, "Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise."

be an "Elohists" source (E), a "priestly" document (P) and Deuteronomy as a separate document (D).²

This documentary hypothesis has been strongly challenged, as have other source-critical theories. Generally however, as Fretheim notes, "it can be said that one basic result of source-critical study remains in place: the Pentateuch is a composite work that grew over the course of a half millennium or more. In addition, the identification of the priestly material (and to a lesser extent the Deuteronomic) remains agreed."³

If it is accepted that the Pentateuch has several streams of authorship, we must examine these streams separately if we seek to understand the intentions of the writers. Attempts to do this have developed in recent decades. The various literary forms, as well as the subject matter of portions of the Pentateuch, also give clues as to their respective purposes. Some see the Yahwist's message, for example, as from the time of Solomon, urging Israel to prove itself to be a blessing to the nations in accordance with the command to Abraham.⁴ The Elohist work may have been an appeal to ninth century Israel to maintain its relationship with God in the face of persuasive foreign cults. The Deuteronomic work may be a program for national reform, emphasising the unity of Israel despite the political reality of the divided kingdom. (Other possibilities are discussed below.) The Priestly work is addressed to the Babylonian exiles, reinforcing Israel's religious and cultic traditions and renewing the divine promise of blessing and abundance.

§3 *The compilation of Deuteronomy*

There has been much discussion of the origins and purpose of Deuteronomy in particular. Some describe its origins as prophetic. Others see similarities between the covenantal content of Deuteronomy and ancient treaties of vassalage. Von Rad argued that the nucleus of the laws in Deuteronomy can be traced back to an early

² The four-source theory and responses to it are discussed, for example, in *An introduction to Old Testament study* / John H. Hayes. - London: SCM, 1982, pp.157ff.

³ *The Pentateuch* / Terence E. Fretheim. - Nashville: Abingdon, 1996, p.26.

⁴ Clines, David J.A. "Pentateuch" in *Oxford companion to the Bible*. -New York: Oxford UP, 1993, pp.579-582, at p.580.

covenant ceremony at Sechem (Deuteronomy 27)⁵. More recently, Moshe Weinfield⁶ proposed that Deuteronomy was the work of scribes in Judean royal service, whose duty presumably was to propagate laws and ways of wisdom to the benefit of the Kingdom. Deuteronomy shares with the wisdom books of the Old Testament the character of a teaching book. It employs vocabulary and phraseology corresponding to the book of Proverbs.⁷

In response to the question "Who wrote Deuteronomy?" Blenkinsopp concludes that, "It will be obvious ... that there can be no simple answer to this question, if only because of the successive editions through which the book has passed."⁸ However, he notes that since the early nineteenth century, a connection with the religious reforms of Josiah (640-609 BCE) has been "more or less taken for granted".⁹ The historicity of the description in 2 Kings 22-23 of the finding of the "book of the law" during the repair of the temple is debated. But there are textual features in Deuteronomy that associate it with the time of Josiah. Blenkinsopp discusses others' work showing that Deuteronomy has been deeply influenced by prophetic preaching, with links to Hosea, Micah and their concerns.¹⁰ He argues¹¹ that there was growing tension between prophet and law scribe from the time of Josiah onwards. (For example, Jeremiah makes disparaging references to "handlers of the law" (2:8) and to scribes who have falsified the law with lying pens (8:8-9)). This reinforces the suggestion, Blenkinsopp suggests, that Deuteronomy intends to resolve conflicting authority in a particular society, conflict "characteristic of any stratum of learned men who are ritually oriented to a law book as against prophetic charismatics."¹² Such a line of argument would be further confirmed if the first collection of prophetic writings was put

⁵ Whybray, *op.cit.*, p. 88, citing Gerard von Rad "The form critical problem of the Hexateuch" in *The problem of the Hexateuch and other essays*. - Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1966, p.26ff.

⁶ *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic school*, cited in Whybray, *op.cit.*, p.89.

⁷ Whybray, *op.cit.*, p.90.

⁸ *The Pentateuch: an introduction to the first five books of the Bible* / Joseph Blenkinsopp. - London: SCM, 1992, p.214.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.215.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.216.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.234.

¹² *Ibid.*, quoting *Ancient Judaism* / Max Weber. - New York, 1952 [1917-19], p.395

together during the exilic period, a thesis, Blenkinsopp says, that has much to recommend it.¹³

Of the likely next step in the compilation of the Pentateuch, Blenkinsopp comments that, "It is easier to speak of the combination of D and P as literary works than it is to identify the circumstances which precipitated the combination."¹⁴

Cyrus II of Persia captured Babylon in 539BCE. The policy of the Achaemenid dynasty was to respect the diverse social and political systems within its large empire, allowing considerable autonomy. But imperial policy required a codified corpus of traditional law for each subordinate regime. Ezra implemented such a body of law in the post-Exilic restoration. References in Ezra and Nehemiah point to laws and practices drawn from Deuteronomy, supplemented by priestly ordinance.¹⁵

§4 *Compilation of the Pentateuch as a whole*

Though there is much debate and little certainty, scholarship has achieved some understanding of the influences behind the composition and compilation of the source documents of the Pentateuch. But the topic to be addressed here is the compilation of the Pentateuch as a whole.

Whatever the essential ideas of the text are, the purpose of its compilation presumably was to convey those ideas. Martin Noth, while accepting the documentary hypothesis, detected five major themes or organising ideas around which the Pentateuchal material was gathered: the promise to the ancestors, the Exodus, guidance in the wilderness, the giving of the law, and guidance into the land.¹⁶ This is but one, influential (though contested), attempt to discern and describe the organising principles and essential elements of the Pentateuch.

Some have suggested that certain broad summaries within the Pentateuchal narrative indicate the fundamental story line of the compilation as whole. These "little creeds" as von Rad described them¹⁷ (e.g. Deuteronomy 6.20-24 and 26:5-9), speak of the origins of the patriarchs, their election by God, the descent into and deliverance

¹³ Blenkinsopp, *op.cit.*, p.234.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.238.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.240.

¹⁶ Clines, *op.cit.*, p.581.

¹⁷ See Fretheim, *op.cit.*, p.27.

from Egypt, and the entry of the people into the promised land. Such an outline does correspond roughly with the content of the Pentateuch, though notably omitting the events at Sinai. The theme of the divine-human relationship is strong throughout the Pentateuch. The promises of God made at the beginning are brought toward fulfillment, though none is fully realised within the Pentateuch itself.

Consistent with this, the Pentateuch may also be seen as a preface or prologue to the Deuteronomic history as a whole. The idea of this history, consisting of the books of Deuteronomy through 2 Kings, was proposed by Martin Noth and subsequently refined by Frank Moore Cross. A.D.J. Mayles suggested¹⁸ that the Deuteronomic history was formed first, and that the Pentateuch was composed somewhat later as an introduction to it. Noth dated the whole history to the exilic period because it concludes (2 Kings 25:27-30) with the release of Jehoiachim from prison in Babylon. According to Noth its purpose was to show the exiles that their situation was the result of infidelity to the covenant contained in the Deuteronomic laws. Subsequent scholars have elaborated Noth's thesis.¹⁹

§5 *Compilation as a work of editing and the concept of 'implied readership'.*

The earliest hints of a collected, canonical, "book of the law" occur as late as the second century BCE, in Ben Sirach's writings.²⁰ (Earlier references to the book of the law, especially in Nehemiah 8, probably refer to part of what is now the Torah.) The text of the Pentateuch remains,²¹ but separate documents from which it may have been compiled do not. This may imply that the compilers and recipients of the Pentateuch found it to be of greater value than whatever they had had before. To attempt to achieve this would in itself be a motivation for the work.

Any editorial process of this kind has at least three motives. First, editors (redactors) select texts (or oral traditions) which they find to be valuable. In making this selection, they might choose between variant renderings of the same tradition.

¹⁸ I am relying on the discussion in *Introduction to the Pentateuch* / R. Norman Whybray. - Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995, p.137.

¹⁹ Fuller, Russell. "Deuteronomic history" in *Oxford companion to the Bible*. -New York: Oxford UP, 1993, pp.163-4.

²⁰ John H. Hayes, *op.cit.*, p.22.

²¹ Though there are some significant textual variants, as in the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Greek-language Septuagint.

Equally they would choose which traditions to include. The compilers' choices tell us something of their motivations. Secondly, editors, in making their choices, seek the preservation and possible propagation of the selected words. Thirdly, editors discard some material - possibly by simply ignoring it, or by actually destroying documents.

Such work would be stimulated, first, by the value the compilers perceived in the sources, written or oral. We may speculate that they thought it their sacred duty to preserve that which was God-given or spoke truly of God. Secondly, the compilers' work would be motivated by the needs of their readers. Thus, scholars have sought to understand the text's implied readership or audience. The approach here is both theological and historical. (Whybray argues that to be preoccupied with the question whether the Pentateuch is historical, however, is to miss the point of reading it. He believes that, in common with some other Old Testament books, the Pentateuch was written principally to teach religious lessons.²²) The implication is that the text was compiled so that its audience might receive a certain (theological) message. Fretheim suggests three possible effects on the readers: (1) the reception of new information or a new perspective; (2) motivation to think, speak or act differently; (3) a religious response, "wherein one is converted or comforted or challenged to a new appreciation of God or the divine-human relationship and its implications for life."²³

Fretheim continues:

It can be shown that the implied readers of the Pentateuch bear a family resemblance to the exiles in Babylon (587-538BCE), but it seems just as clear that these exiles do not "exhaust" the identity of the implied readers; that is, the text stops short of such an explicit identification, though given many opportunities to do so. This lack of specificity leaves more room for other readers to hear themselves addressed. This analysis raises issues regarding these other readers of this text through the centuries and their relationship to the original implied readers. Generally, to the degree that the postbiblical readers of the text find themselves addressed by it, the text may function in comparable ways.²⁴

A scholarly approach seeks to understand why the Pentateuch was written in its own historical context. Nevertheless, Fretheim's comments remind one of Peter's exhortation that the scripture that we have today came not by human will, but as people moved by the Spirit spoke from God (2 Peter 1:20-21 *cf.* 2 Timothy 3.16). In considering the historical reasons for the compilation of the Pentateuch, we note that

²² Whybray, *op.cit.*, p.142-3.

²³ Frethiem, *op.cit.*, p. 40.

God moves in history. Therefore, should we not allow that the Spirit of God in some sense motivated the writing and compilation of texts that we now receive as Holy Scripture - including the Pentateuch?

§6 *Prophetic motivations*

The Pentateuch contains the Torah. But *torah* is more than simply law as we understand it today. It contains commands, but it is also instruction, wisdom and guidance. It is to be kept as well as obeyed. Thus, Dennis Bratcher suggests, "the OT concept of *torah* is a lifestyle of nurtured and nurturing relationships with God and others..."²⁵ This is found, for example, in Ps 19.7-9.²⁶

Torah was one way the Israelites expressed God and human beings as interactive in history, God revealing Himself and at the same time calling them to respond in concrete ways to that revelation in a mutual relationship. As such, *torah* describes the balanced tension between stability and changing community, a balance that the biblical traditions hold in stasis in order to avoid the drift to religious tyranny (liberalism) or the excesses of religious anarchy (antinomianism).²⁷

This is a prophetic lifestyle, proclaiming the relationship between God and the people of God's.

Reading from the Pentateuch, Walter Brueggemann²⁸ uses the ministry of Moses as a paradigm for the ministry of prophecy. Moses' ministry in leadership of the Israelites was a radical break with the social reality of Egypt. It was a break from triumphalist religion and from the politics of oppression and exploitation. The alternative consciousness wrought through Moses, Brueggemann argues, is characterised by criticism and energising. "The alternative consciousness of Moses was exceedingly radical in its implications both for the religion and for the social and political order."²⁹

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Bratcher, Dennis R. - *Torah as holiness: Old Testament 'law' as response to divine grace.* - Paper presented to the 30th Annual Meeting of the Wesleyan Theological Society, Dayton, Ohio, 5 November 1994. (URL: <http://www.cresourcei.org/torahholiness.html>).

²⁶ "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;
the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;
the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever;
the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

²⁷ Bratcher, *op.cit.*

²⁸ *The prophetic imagination* / Walter Brueggemann. - Fortress Pr., 1978, pp.15-27.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.28-9.

If Brueggemann's portrayal is reasonable, and if we also accept the widely held view that the Pentateuch was compiled around the time of the Babylonian exile, the Pentateuch can be seen to present a social paradigm greatly at odds with that of the defeated former kingdoms of Judah and Israel. For the kingdoms had taken on much of the triumphal and imperial character of the Egypt from which God had delivered his people. Here then is a *prophetic* motive for the compilation and propagation of the Pentateuch, complementing the other prophetic voices of the time. Ernst W.

Nicholson has also suggested a prophetic background for Deuteronomy in particular, similarly pointing out resemblances between its teaching and that of prophets such as Hosea.³⁰ We may speculate that the compilers sought to supply the ancient sources and traditions with fresh prophetic strength, applicable to the needs of their day.

§7 *Summation*

We have looked at some ideas towards answering the question "Why was the Pentateuch compiled?" There are ideas gleaned from the text itself, together with other Biblical texts. We can also suggest from our understanding of the editorial process that certain things are likely to have been the case. We can attempt to infer ideas from the identity of the readership and its needs. And we have noted a possible prophetic motive for the compilation of the Pentateuch. All this is to some degree speculative. We have no complete answer to the question, "Why was the Pentateuch compiled?" What we do have is the text itself, to enjoy, and from which to learn.

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³⁰ Whybray, *op.cit.*, p.88.

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