JOEL S. BADEN

The Literary History
of the Pentateuch

Forschungen zum Alten Testament

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of the Pentateuch

Collected Essays

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Preface

This volume presents my articles and essays on the literary history of the Pentateuch from the first fifteen years of my career (that is, through 2022). The pieces gathered here are analytical and methodological, textual and thematic, but together they form a fair representation of my exploration of the Pentateuch, and the scholarship thereon, through the lens of what is now widely known as the neo-documentary hypothesis.

I have chosen to arrange this volume in roughly canonical order, though with a couple of broader methodological essays at both the beginning and end. The advantage of this arrangement is that it allows for ease of reference; the disadvantage is that any progress in my thought over the past decade and a half is somewhat obscured. So be it – I trust that the reader looking to catch me changing my mind will have an easy go of it.

To that end, I have written two new essays specifically for this volume – they are the two at the end, "Sources without Authors" and "Secondary Additions: Form and Function." These essays are methodological and conceptual reflections, mostly on my own work and the ways that I have come to reconsider some of the standard ways that I (and others, to be sure) have been accustomed to thinking, speaking, and writing about the pentateuchal literature. In many ways, these essays are a commentary on my book *The Composition of the Pentateuch*, but they are also certainly applicable to almost everything in this collected volume as well.

Biblical scholarship hardly moves swiftly – we are, after all, still hashing out many of the same arguments from the nineteenth century, especially in pentateuchal studies – yet these first fifteen years of my career have seen rather significant movement in the study of the Pentateuch's literary history. At least, the nature of the discussion has changed, if its terms have remained relatively constant.

When I began, with my dissertation, the Documentary Hypothesis was in a state of clear decline. It was still taught as a theory in most North American contexts, but it was difficult to find more than a small handful of North American scholars who were actively working in and with it as an approach. It was a thing learned about, not really practiced. I was lucky enough to take a course with one of its practitioners, Benjamin Sommer, during my masters degree, and so was given at least an introduction to the application of the theory, rather than simply an overview of its general conclusions (which is the best that most students get – and no wonder the theory is viewed with some skepticism).

In those years, the newer trends in pentateuchal theory that had been developing in Germany, most notably with Rolf Rendtorff in the 1970s and Erhard Blum in the 1980s, were also rarely discussed in any depth, at least in the circles I moved in. Most American scholars knew of them second-hand, through works like Ernest Nicholson's *The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century* and David Carr's *The Fractures of Genesis*. This was undoubtedly in part due to the language barrier; it was also, however, due to a general lack of interest in the finer details of the Pentateuch's literary history. One of the advantages of the old Documentary Hypothesis was its simplicity, at least in its broad strokes. (This was, it turns out, also one of its weaknesses.) The theories that were coming out of Germany seemed to present serious challenges to the Documentary Hypothesis, brought by serious scholars, but they were of a higher order of complexity. For most scholars and students in the United States, who were not working directly in this area, the details inevitably remained fuzzy. There was a broad sense that some alternative to the Documentary Hypothesis existed out there, but few could reproduce it, either discursively or practically.

All that to say, when I entered the field as a newly-minted PhD, it was like entering a swimming pool with one very shallow end (the general biblical studies understanding of the Pentateuch's literary history) and one very deep end (the active work being done almost exclusively in Europe), and nothing in between. The prevailing sentiment among the European scholars toward those of us still working with a Documentary Hypothesis model was, at best, tolerance. Nevertheless, we were invited to the table, perhaps more as a gesture of goodwill than anything else. My first such exposure was at a conference in Vienna in the summer of 2007, just after I had graduated, and just before I started teaching. The story I regularly tell from that conference may illustrate the situation. I gave a talk about the methods for distinguishing P from H (included in this volume as "Identifying the Original Literary Stratum of P: Theoretical and Practical Considerations"), and during the question and answer portion following the talk, I said something about H – who remembers what now – that made three senior German scholars simultaneously yell "No!" at me. I turned to Erhard Blum, who was chairing the session and standing beside me, and asked, "Why did all the Germans just yell at me?" And he laid a hand on my shoulder and gently responded: "Because: there is no H."

In the impressive array of European pentateuchal scholarship, all working with a non-documentary model, there were very few of us who were still advocating for the old ways (or an approximation thereof). I attended that Vienna conference with (and indeed shared a hotel room with) two dear friends and colleagues, Jeffrey Stackert and Sarah Shectman. We had met in a class offered at Harvard some years earlier by Baruch Schwartz, visiting from Hebrew University. Schwartz had for many years been almost the only documentary holdout in the world of pentateuchal scholarship. But after that course at Harvard – which

was the launching pad for my dissertation and career – there were at least a few more of us.

As we completed our dissertations, and published them as monographs, the winds started to shift slightly (although not without some, ahem, pushback – המבין יבין). No longer was it a nearly unified school of pentateuchal thought, with maybe one or two old-timers still hanging on to the Documentary Hypothesis. Even with just a few of us, there was now at least something resembling a school of thought that had to be acknowledged. Conferences were organized with the intention of bringing together these disparate approaches to the Pentateuch. One such conference, in 2010, resulted in a volume titled *The Pentateuch: International Perspectives on Current Research*, meaningfully recognizing that there were, indeed, multiple perspectives out there.

In 2012, I published *The Composition of the Pentateuch: Renewing the Documentary Hypothesis*. This book was meant to both articulate the newer version of the old documentary theory that had been developed by Schwartz (and Menahem Haran before him), and also to demonstrate what it looked like to put the theory into practice. It was my hope that it would go some way toward addressing the odd situation described above: the continued teaching of a documentary model, but without any actual practical application, in the North American context. It may still be too early to say whether those efforts fully succeeded. I think it is safe to say that the book at least cemented the idea that there was a viable alternative to the approaches and arguments coming out of Europe.

It was in this period that the term "neo-documentarian" was coined, according to legend at least by David Wright, for our little group and its ideas. I don't mind it as a title; certainly we are talking about documents, and in terms that are, I hope, an advance over the original theory of Wellhausen and his ilk. Perhaps what is most useful about the term is that it does solidify the notion that there is a real, fully worked-out theory underlying what we are doing. It is the naming, more than the name itself, that has some value in the wider world of biblical studies.

With the rise of the neo-documentarian school, the field of pentateuchal criticism entered a period of optimistic discourse. There was the 2010 conference mentioned above; there was also an Institute for Advanced Study held in Jerusalem during the 2012–13 academic year, with large related conferences in 2013 and 2014, arranged with the explicit desire to bridge the gap among the various scholars and theories. (The resulting volume was called *The Formation of the Pentateuch: Bridging the Academic Cultures of Europe, Israel, and North America*.) These were years of exploration: we not only thought seriously about each others' ideas, but also, and far more importantly, had extensive opportunities to spend time together as people. Even as we disagreed, we learned to like each other. It is far easier to savage a faceless book or article than it is a human you've

come to know. Relationally, at least, this was something of a golden period – and it produced a good amount of useful scholarship in big, field-setting volumes.

Alas, it was also relatively short-lived. Ironically, perhaps, even as we all came to know and like each other better over the course of these years, we also, especially in the wake of the IAS year, came to realize that the divide was, in fact, unbridgeable. It wasn't just that neither side was willing to be convinced by the other. It was that it became increasingly clear that although we were all looking at the same words on the page, we simply weren't talking about the same thing. Our understandings, at a fundamental level, of what the Pentateuch actually is were so distant as to make any significant agreement almost impossible.

In retrospect, the IAS conferences in 2013 and 2014 were the last moment of a real shared intellectual project among the various schools of pentateuchal thought. (Perhaps the last published project representative of that era was *The Oxford Handbook of the Pentateuch*, which came out in 2021 but originated from conversations all the way back in 2012.) Quietly, but rather swiftly, those sorts of gatherings, with representatives from each camp, dwindled away. European conferences were almost entirely for Europeans, and resulted in published volumes populated almost entirely by Europeans, using non-documentary models. This was (and remains) somewhat unfortunate, since it gives the impression that those models are representative of the field as a whole. In part as a response to that situation, Jeffrey Stackert and I started, in 2017, the Chicago-Yale Pentateuch Colloquium, an annual gathering of faculty and doctoral students working with or adjacent to the (neo-)documentary model.

The current state of affairs, then, is one of a distant stasis. While this is perhaps an accurate reflection of the field, it has also undone some of the relational work of past years. It is my impression, at least, that the cordiality of the 2010s has reverted back to the sort of disdain that characterized my first forays into the field. And this is obviously a shame.

The essays in this volume, therefore, come from a period that saw a series of significant shifts in the field of pentateuchal studies – even as the ideas remained relatively (if not entirely) consistent throughout, on all sides, the meta-discourse, the sense of the intellectual project, feels very different now than it did ten years ago, and different still from ten years before that. I trust that they will feel different in ten years from now, too.

In preparing this collection, I found myself occasionally cringing at my earlier writing, both in terms of style and content. Alas, what is done is done. I have made no substantial changes to any of the pieces here. The only adjustments have been very minor, such as the updating of the occasional "forthcoming" reference to note a published version, the changing of all transliterated Hebrew to Hebrew script, and the leveling of the entire collection to conform to the most current SBL style guide – thus citations may look slightly different, titles of biblical books may be somewhat shorter, and so on.

I would like to express my gratitude to Hatty Lee and Kieran Cressy for their help in preparing this volume, to the editors of FAT for agreeing to publish it, and to all the many friends, teachers, colleagues, and students who have served as conversation partners over these past fifteen years, who have helped shape my thinking and writing and who have contributed, in ways both acknowledged and implicit, to the essays found here.

New Haven, April 2025   Joel S. Baden

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Why Is the Pentateuch Unreadable; or,
Why Are We Doing This Anyway?

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

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

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

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[1] Although there are, of course, scholars who maintain that the Pentateuch can be read as a unified text, they do so often from intellectual positions that require such a claim: either theological, as in the classic anticritical works of William Henry Green, *The Higher Criticism of the Pentateuch* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902) or Umberto Cassuto, *The Documentary Hypothesis* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1959), from the Christian and Jewish perspectives, respectively; or literary-critical, taking the initial position that the form of the text is to be interpreted is the final form, as in the case of T. Mann, *The Book of the Torah: The Narrative Integrity of the Pentateuch* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988). Even these scholars, however, do not maintain that the Pentateuch is easy to read or untroubled by contradictions and doublets; they simply have different sorts of explanations for these phenomena.

have done so). Source criticism, however, cannot – or at the very least should not – be used on any and every text.[2]

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

There are obviously many different types of difficulty when it comes to reading a literary work. This is true even when there are no questions of authorship: children's books are easier to read than books written for adults; books written for a popular audience are easier to read than those written for the academy. This means, in part, that we have to know what cultural expectations we can place on any given piece of writing before we start wondering whether maybe, just maybe, it is so difficult as to require a literary-historical explanation. Fortunately, we are blessed to have a relative abundance of comparative material against which to judge ancient Israelite writing. We know what fluid, coherent biblical prose looks like because we have examples of it elsewhere in the Bible: entire books, like Ruth; large swaths of corpora, like the so-called Succession Narrative; even individual chapters, such as Gen 24 or 38. We also know what the literature of Israel's neighbors looked like. So we know that we do not require Israelite writing

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

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

[4] My thanks to Bernie Levinson for these examples.

to be children's literature, but we also know that it would be anachronistic and culturally ridiculous to expect it to look like Joyce or Faulkner.[5]

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

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

What if we adjusted the perfect text so that it was a little more uneven in its use of language? This is obviously a bit of a silly example. Most scholars would agree that among the most easily discarded elements of early pentateuchal scholarship is the propensity for lengthy word lists, attributing words and phrases to individual sources.[6] The notion that a given word belongs to a particular author and to no other is wrongheaded in theory and in practice. The ancient Israelite authors all wrote perfect Biblical Hebrew; we are in no position to say that one *knew* a word that another did not. We also cannot say, at least in the abstract, that one author *uses* a particular word and another does not. All we can say is that, as far as we can tell, one author *used* a particular word and another did not. It is the fallacy of statistics: just because something appears to be the case in every example we have seen so far does not mean that it will be the case in the next example. So to identify a word as belonging to one author in ninety-nine of its appearances does not mean that it will belong to that author also in its one hundredth. In his writings, my former teacher and now colleague Harold Bloom uses the word "uncanny" with what is, to my mind, alarming frequency. I have maybe used it once in everything I have published.[7] This statistical observation does not mean that my sentence should be attributed to Harold Bloom.

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[5] Contra, in a way, the extensive comparison of P precisely with children's literature by Sean McEvenue, *The Narrative Style of the Priestly Writer*, AB 50 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1971).

[6] See in particular J. E. Carpenter and G. Harford-Battersby, *The Hexateuch According to the Revised Version* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1900), I:185–221, as well as H. Holzinger, *Einleitung in den Hexateuch* (Freiburg i.B.: Mohr [Siebeck], 1893), 93–110, 181–90, 283–91, 338–49.

[7] Now, perhaps, twice.

The idea that language variation can be a determining factor for dividing a text into separate authors breaks down completely whenever we encounter analyses that try to proceed on such grounds. These were common in early pentateuchal scholarship, where a verse, or often even a single clause, was stripped out of its context and assigned to another author merely because it used a word that had been determined, on the basis of a statistical word list, to belong to someone else. See, for example, Carpenter and Harford-Battersby's vivisection of Gen 39, according to which the story is almost entirely a unity, with the exception of the words "he made him his personal attendant" and "Joseph was well-built and handsome; after these things" in verses 4, 6, and 7. Because the word "attendant," משרת, and the expression "well-built," יפת תאר, and the phrase "after these things," ויהי אחר הדברים האלה, were all believed to belong exclusively to E, they were ripped from the narrative, which was otherwise attributed to J. Of course, when this was done we were left not with one beautiful text, as we started with, but with two impossible texts, including the one that reads, simply, "He made him his personal attendant. Joseph was well-built and handsome. After these things."[8]

The most famous example along these lines, of course, is Jean Astruc's division of Genesis purely according to the distinction between Yahweh and Elohim.[9] His results were fine in some parts, but they were disastrous overall.[10] Today there is no one, I think, who would argue that the divine names are a reasonable sole basis for literary division.[11] It should be remembered, however, that the divine names were not really the rationale for Astruc's literary division either, though they may have been the means. Astruc did not come to Genesis thinking that he had a perfect text with the exception of the alternative divine names. He came to Genesis knowing the already quite extensive scholarship that had recognized all of the famous literary problems, particularly in the creation and flood accounts. He knew his Simon well, and Astruc was merely recognizing that the doublets and contradictions that scholars had seen for a century happened to line up, in crucial moments, with the alternation of divine names.[12] It is mistaken to claim that Astruc divided Genesis into parallel narratives order to solve the issue of the divine names. He divided Genesis using the divine names in order to solve the narrative problems.

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[8] Carpenter and Harford-Battersby, *Hexateuch*, 2:61–62.

[9] Jean Astruc, *Conjectures sur les memoires originaux: don't il paroit que Moyse s'est servi pour composer le Livre de la Genese*, ed. P. Gibert (Paris: Éditions Noêsis, 1999).

[10] See, e.g., his unified view of Gen 37 (Astruc, *Conjectures*, 300–305 [see n. 9]), or, on the other side, his division of the story of the binding of Isaac in Gen 22 between vv. 1–10 and vv. 11–19 (*Conjectures*, 225–27).

[11] See Erhard Blum, *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte,* WMANT 57 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1984), 471–75; John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 156.

[12] See the open acknowledgement of Simon, le Clerc, and others in Astruc, *Conjectures* (see n. 9), 135–37.

Variations in terminology and style are no reason to divide up an otherwise perfectly good text. So let us take a step further. What if this text also contained multiple genres? Not only narrative but also some poetry, some law, some genealogies – would this be a reason to start asking whether it might not have had multiple authors? Again, I think not, and it really requires little argumentation. Genres do not belong to individual authors; they belong to individual settings in a given culture. Everyone in that culture is able to utilize any number of genres, in any combination. We all do it constantly. The notion that the ancient Israelite author was capable of expressing himself in only one genre, or form, or *Gattung*, is among the most famous and most famously erroneous aspects of Gunkel's otherwise largely brilliant contribution to our field.[13] We know better than to treat the ancient Israelite mind as somehow more primitive. What this means, then, is that, in the absence of any other pressing evidence, there is no reason to think, simply because a text moves from narrative to law to poetry to genealogy and back again, that it could not be the work of a single hand. In fact, such fluency with contemporary genres and forms is common today, and probably would have been then, and certainly should be, from the scholarly perspective, evidence of a certain sort of genius. We see this in the prophetic corpus to be sure, and often also in psalms that bring together divergent generic elements into new artistic units – so too with our imagined Pentateuch.

Of course, genres are often linked with style, as is frequently noted. It is often the case that fluctuations in style occur precisely where the text transitions from one genre to another. If the text were perfect in every sense, except that a different set of terms and a different literary style were used when it shifted from narrative to ritual law, we would not be in any position to think that we were dealing with multiple authors.[14]

So let us take yet another step: what if this text also took up a variety of themes over its length? What if, in the course of telling its story, it shifted its thematic emphasis from passage to passage – here concentrating on the theme of sibling rivalry, there on, say, corporate punishment for sin? Unless we were to state from the outset that an ancient Israelite author can treat only a single theme in any given work, there is no obvious reason why this would be unacceptable. (We would also have to declare impossible such multithemed literature as the book of Ruth.) And if the two themes were somewhat closer in nature – in one passage emphasizing the authority of prophetic figures, for example, while concerned with accentuating priestly power in another – would this sort of

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[13] See his disparaging statements about the intellectual capacity of the ancient Israelite in Hermann Gunkel, "Israelite Literary History," in *Water for a Thirsty Land: Israelite Literature and Religion*, ed. K C. Hanson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 31–41, esp. 34.

[14] This was, in fact, one of the standard objections to the entire source-critical enterprise among its early critics. See the comment of Cassuto, *Documentary Hypothesis* (see n.1), 54: "Change of style depends on change of subject-matter, not on difference of sources."

thematic variance, on its own, demand a literary-historical solution? The instinct might be to say yes – we would have there evidence of one pro-prophetic author and one pro-priestly author. But would we say that if the text were otherwise totally coherent? Or, more pertinently, would these two emphases *render* the text somehow incoherent? There is nothing impossible about a single author justifying both prophetic and priestly power. There is not even anything unlikely about it, unless we assume from the outset – as, admittedly, many do – that there was some constant battle between the two sides and that every ancient Israelite author had to align himself with one of the two camps.

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

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

Even if in one place the text said that God punishes to the third and fourth generation (Exod 34:7) and in another it said that God does not visit the sins of the fathers on the sons (Deut 24:16) – if everything else about the text were unproblematic, I think that we could live even with this.[15] We would understand it

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[15] Though see the extensive commentary on this ostensible contradiction and its dispersion throughout biblical literature in Bernard M. Levinson, *Legal Revision and Religious Renewal in Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 57–88.

as we do so much wisdom literature, as expressing ostensibly contradictory ideas in the service of representing more accurately the range of humanity's interaction with God. Theologies are, I suggest, almost always capable of standing beside one another in a singly-authored text.[16] The only sorts of exceptions I can think of would be claims that Israel must worship only one god, but in one text that god is identified as Yahweh while in another it is Baal. That would be pretty well irreconcilable – but we do not find that in the Pentateuch, either the real one or the imaginary one being constructed in this essay.

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

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

No one is going to argue that there is not any terminological variation in the two flood stories, or that there is no difference in theology between Gen 1 and 2, or that there are not different thematic emphases in the two stories of Num 16. But if it were only that – if there were no problems on the level of plot – then

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[16] See the self-consciously canonical but certainly theologically diverse, interpretive treatment of Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

[17] I contend that this is true even for Graf and Kuenen, who concentrated their efforts primarily on the contradictions and duplications among the legal corpora of the Pentateuch. Those legal corpora are only contradictory because they are in a narrative setting, in which the existence of multiple legal positions, all given by the same deity to the same messenger at the same historical moment, is logically problematic.

I think we would not come to the same conclusions. The issue that demands resolution – that demands a *literary* resolution in particular – is the issue of plot consistency. If that sounds too strong, consider: is an analysis of the flood narrative that left us with two (or more) texts that made absolutely no sense on the level of the plot even remotely imaginable? If it is not the problems of plot that drive the analysis, then why does every scholar try as hard as possible to end up with texts that are readable on that level? We may disagree on stylistic or thematic or theological points, but no one has yet to put forward a flood story in which the water lasts both forty and one hundred and fifty days or in which God twice promises Noah that he will not destroy the earth again. Even scholars who are inclined to isolate the smallest literary units in the Pentateuch inevitably find that those smallest units are narratively coherent – indeed, that coherence is one of the defining features of the smallest literary unit.[18] The plot is fundamental; it is irreducible.

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

If it is the contradictions in plot that drive us to the literary-historical analysis of the text – and that is the claim being put forward here – then it is only logical that our literary-historical solutions should also proceed on the basis of resolving those contradictions in plot. This is because, sensibly enough, if we try to divide the text on other grounds – terminological, stylistic, generic, thematic, theological – then we are not actually addressing the basic problem. This is why Astruc's separation of Genesis failed – he was trying to solve the plot difficulties by

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[18] This is true in non-documentary work as divergent in theory and result as that of, e.g., Blum, *Vätergeschichte* (see n. 11), and Christoph Levin, *Der Jahwist,* FRLANT 157 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993). Later literary developments render the earlier text difficult to read; the earliest levels are always narrative jewels (though sometimes not particularly multi-faceted).

means of terminology. So too with any such mismatched mechanism, examples of which have been all too common in scholarship of all stripes from the early twentieth century down to the present. Now if one thinks that the problem is not plot but is actually theology, then by all means one may attempt to separate the text according to its various theological viewpoints – but one cannot then expect the narrative problems to be resolved. If one thinks that what makes the Pentateuch unreadable is its conflicting themes, then it is certainly in line with those themes that the text should be divided – but the contradictions in the plot will remain.

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

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

Continuity between the Gaps:
The Pentateuch and the Kirta Epic

In discussions of certain older, and recently rehabilitated, theories of the Pentateuch's literary history, one often encounters the same criticisms, whether one reads older anticritical tracts or contemporary alternative presentations. Many of these criticisms fall into the category that might be called *perfectionist*. That is to say, it is frequently suggested that in order for a documentary theory to hold water it must be flawless; one hole, one gap, in any of the purported sources or in the explanation for their existence and compilation, any place where the present text is difficult to explain, and the entire theory will drain away.[1]

The logical impetus behind such criticisms is easy enough to see. As one graduate student in a European doctoral program said to me recently, "I'd just prefer a theory that can explain every single word over one that doesn't." This is, naturally, hard to argue with. Nevertheless, it might be cautiously suggested that a theory that can indeed explain every single word of the present text is probably a bit overly optimistic about our scholarly ability to reconstruct the complete process of composition. Which is not to say that we can rest content with the mere recognition of areas in the text that are difficult, if not in fact impossible, to explain; it is, rather, that a few of them, here and there, do not necessarily shake the foundations of any given hypothesis. They are reminders that we are dealing with what must have been a historically messy literary project and that perfection of explanation, like perfection of transmission, is probably too much to ask.

One of the places where that sort of perfectionism comes into play is in the assessment of the reconstructed sources. Unquestionably with regard to E, but also to a degree with regard to J – and, it must be admitted, in a few places with

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[1] From the older critics, see especially William Henry Green, *The Higher Criticism of the Pentateuch* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), 84: "The great body of the Elohim passages are given to the second Elohist [E], and nothing reserved for the first [P] but occasional disconnected scraps, which never could have formed a separate and independent record." See also his broader comments on 106–9. More recently, Rolf Rendtorff made the same arguments, that the discontinuous state of the Priestly narrative is grounds for declaring untenable the theory that it was an independent document, beginning with this a priori definition of how P must function in a sustainable documentary framework: "It is important that the document being discussed is a coherent P narrative with but few gaps" (Rolf Rendtorff, *The Problem of the Process of Transmission in the Pentateuch*, JSOTS 89 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1977], 137). His discussion continues, in great detail, exclusively along the lines of discontinuity within the P narrative, for the next twenty pages.