

Debunking the Documentary Hypothesis

A Review of
The Inspiration of the Pentateuch
M.W.J. Phelan
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Readers of *TJ* are intimately familiar with the defense of creationism against biological evolution. However, another type of ‘evolution’—one to some extent inspired by the thesis of biological evolution—offers an ever-present challenge for defenders of biblical integrity as well. It is fashionable in the field of biblical scholarship today to hypothesize naturalistic, evolutionary ‘development’ in the religion of the Bible. Where the New Testament is concerned, the phantom document ‘Q’, and the prioritization of the Gospel of Mark, is sometimes regarded as proving that ‘original’ Christianity did not recognize Jesus as divine or as the Saviour, and that this view of Jesus developed over time.¹ On the other hand, thoroughly evangelical scholars do not necessarily reject these literary theories, recognizing that accepting Q and Marcan priority on *literary* grounds does not mean accepting the theories of *social* development that are often insinuated into the literary hypotheses.

Where the Old Testament is concerned, however, the most popular literary theory is inextricably intertwined with social theory. Despite numerous permutations, the basic thrust of what is called the *Documentary Hypothesis* remains the same: the Pentateuch is divisible into at least four basic sources, each of which can be roughly dated to represent different stages in Israel’s (thoroughly

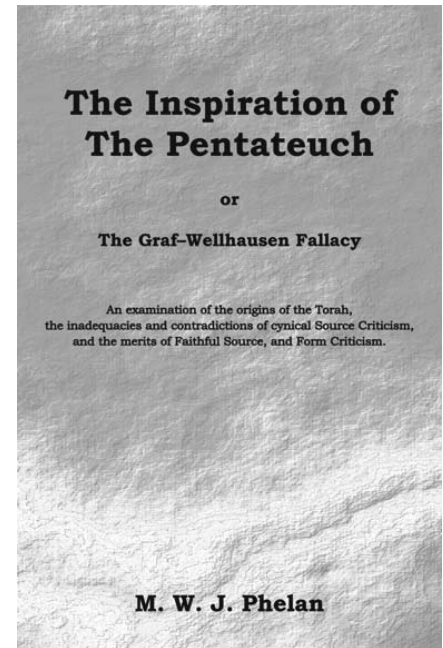
naturalistic) religious history. At some late date, perhaps in the time of Ezra, these four sources were collected by an unknown editor who painstakingly combined them as though in a blender, and what we now call the Pentateuch, with its illusion of unity, was the result.²

M.W.J. Phelan’s, *The Inspiration of the Pentateuch*, takes on this parsing madness with an informed ingenuity that leaves the Documentary Hypothesis gasping for air. A critical flaw of this hypothesis will be familiar, in mode, to creationists: when significant contrary evidence is found, rather than abandon the theory, proponents simply prop up the theory with ‘just so’ stories time and time again, until it resembles in form the proverbial mechanical device held together with ‘spit and baling wire’. The original Documentary Hypothesis suggested a mere four sources behind the Pentateuch:

1. J, or Jahwist, for an early priest (c. 900 BC) who preferred Jahweh as the divine name, and viewed God in somewhat anthropomorphic terms;
2. E, or Elohist, a slightly later priest who preferred Elohim as the divine name, and viewed God as more transcendent;
3. D, or Deuteronomist, the author of Deuteronomy who fabricated that work at the time of Josiah and presented it as an authentic work of Moses (and of course, it was accepted at once as authoritative by the conveniently, ‘enormously naïve’ Josiah [p. 45]); and
4. P, or Priestly, a rather sour-minded religionist of very late date who combined J, E and D and added his own touches.

Changes in the making

As knowledge of the Ancient Near East and its literary practices grew, however, it became necessary for JEDP



theorists to make adjustments again and again. Some, as Phelan notes, created a veritable alphabet soup of sources (p. 49), and the social aspect of the theory grew accordingly—having only the hypothesized divisions of these documents as evidence (not archaeology, or any other external vector) using a technique some scholars call ‘mirror-reading’—that is, assuming that because an author says ‘X’, there must have been other people in his time, perhaps even a vast majority of his contemporaries, who held non-X to be true; and of course, this is supplemented with the argument (still read today in popular works like *The Da Vinci Code*) that ‘history was written by the winners’ and that there were various ‘silenced’ voices whose equitable points of view were destroyed, and which we will never get to hear. Others turned P or another later editor of the Pentateuch into an ‘omnipotent’ being capable of making whatever changes were needed to accommodate the theory. As Phelan puts it, while it is not problematic to suggest that an editor may have affected a work, a hypothesis should be ‘minimalist and tenable’ and the use of editors and phantom positions to prop up JEDP has become ‘so easy, frequent, and above all convenient, as to make

us wonder how scientific the method employed really is!’ (p. 30).

Artificial ingredients

The unraveling of JEDP is found primarily in the discovery of *artificial literary structures*³ in the text of the Pentateuch which demonstrate that the text is overwhelmingly the work of a single author. The purpose of such structures, in the context of the biblical world, was to make the stories easier to remember: typically, ninety to ninety-five percent of people in the ancient world were illiterate, so information had to be transmitted orally, and for the average person, it was necessary to make a story easy to remember by telling it in familiar and memorable patterns—often requiring the elimination, streamlining, or summarization of details that members of a literate, writing-based society would typically include.⁴ The JEDP theory was composed under the premise of a *graphocentric* (a prejudice in favour of writing) view, and thus the artifacts of oral transmission were either completely unknown or were misread as signals of ‘inefficient and careless’ literary practice (p. 40).

Phelan notes several examples of artificial literary structures in the Pentateuch called *chiasmus*. A chiasmus is defined by the *Concise*

Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms as, ‘a figure of speech by which the order of the terms in the first of two parallel clauses is reversed in the second’. A short, non-biblical example of a chiasmus would be the saying of Winston Churchill, ‘Some men change their party for the sake of their principles; others their principles for the sake of their party.’ Another chiasmus in a different form would be, ‘[Norman Vincent] Peale would find Paul appealing; but Paul would find Peale appalling.’ Chiasms like these are found throughout the biblical text, even in the New Testament. A short and very good biblical example comes from Genesis 9:6, which laid out in a chiasmic pattern looks like this:

- A Whoever **sheds**
- B the **blood**
- C of **man**
- C’ by **man** shall
- B’ his **blood**
- A’ be **shed**

One of the largest chiasms in Scripture, Phelan notes (p. 114) occurs between Genesis 6:1–9:19, the account of the Flood (See Figure 1).

While Documentary Hypothesis chop and dice this story into portions as small as alternating half-verses, dividing it between the J and P authors, the chiasmatic structure points to a single author.

Treating a treaty

Further on, Phelan devotes an entire chapter to the book of Deuteronomy (pp. 163ff). Although Deuteronomy as a whole has been exempt from the ‘parsing madness’ of the Documentary Hypothesis, it has been attacked on other grounds, alleged to be a very late and spurious document composed in the time of King Josiah, and conveniently ‘found’ in the Temple just when it was needed most to validate Josiah’s reforms.

The problems with this thesis are too numerous to list here,⁵ but among those highlighted by Phelan is the necessity of dating Deuteronomy very early into the traditional time of Moses (c. 1400 BC) because of its format as a suzerain-vassal treaty document (p. 173). There are many examples of treaty documents known from the Ancient Near East, and in format, Deuteronomy most closely matches those found in the era of Moses, and is quite dissimilar to those found from the time of Josiah.

This leads to the conclusion that Deuteronomy was composed in the earlier provenance (though in an effort to ‘save the theory’, liberal critics have argued that the earlier treaty format was conveniently preserved until Josiah’s time, but we simply don’t have any other examples of such treaties in the

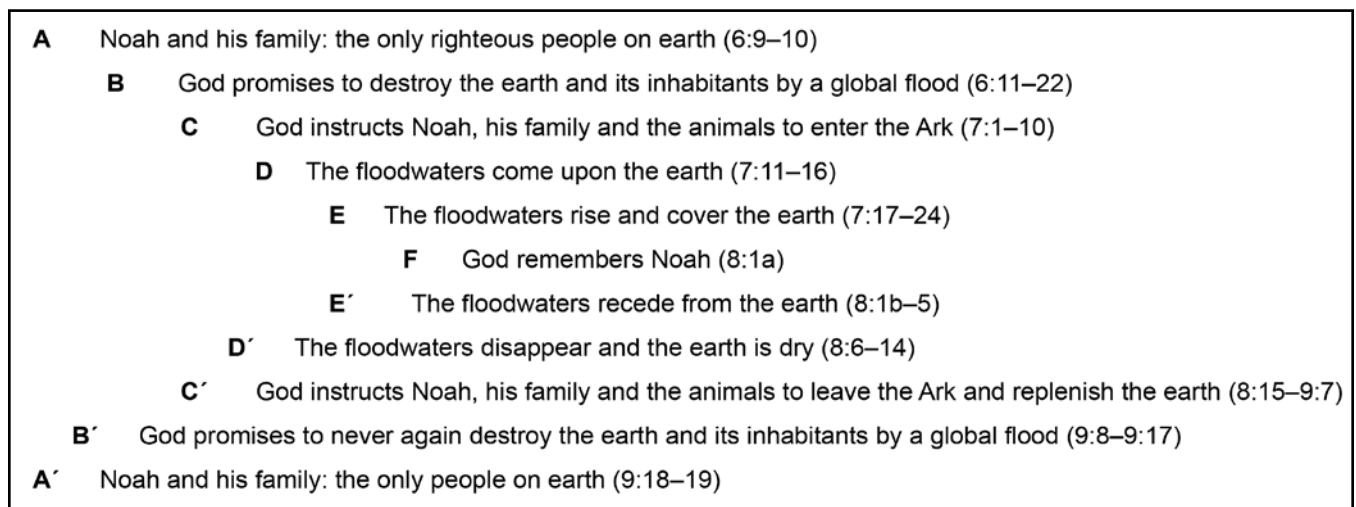


Figure 1. The Flood account of Genesis 6:9–19, one of the largest chiasms in Scripture.

intervening period!). Phelan also notes several ways in which Deuteronomy would have been ill-equipped to serve as a validation for Josiah's reforms, as JEDP theorists suggest; for example, Josiah was very interested in promoting centralized worship, yet Deuteronomy does not mention centralized worship, much less does it describe a Temple or mention that it ought to be in Jerusalem!

Above every name

A chapter following is devoted to Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. Here Phelan tackles one of the keystones of the JEDP theory, the variation of divine names in the text (Yahweh, Elohim) and particularly Exodus 6:3 ('I appeared until Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by the Name of God Almighty, but by My Name YHWH was I not known to them') which is claimed to prove that earlier uses of Yahweh by Abraham and his contemporaries must have been imposed upon them, so that this is proof of an invented 'Yahwist' text in Genesis. Phelan presents numerous solutions to this issue, all of them helpful; perhaps the most parsimonious is the answer taken from Garrett that the grammar of the verse means it should read, 'Did I not make myself known to them?'—a reading which by itself literally renders dozens of books by JEDP theorists completely obsolete.

A single chapter devoted to Genesis (pp. 216ff) discusses the book's literary structure and use of *toledoth* ('generations' or family history) accounts. Of the literary chapters, this one is the most speculative, and offers a hypothesis of composition of the *toledoths* by various individuals named in Genesis (Adam, Noah, Shem, Terah) which were then passed down through the generations. This theory was first proposed by Air Commodore P.J. Wiseman, and his son, Professor of Assyriology D.J. Wiseman, has updated and revised his father's work.^{6,7} These ideas do match well with normal processes of the passing on of family tradition in the Ancient Near East.

However his identification of such specifics as the exact author of each *toledoth* ought to be regarded with caution; otherwise, his suggestion of such documents as 'The Book of Adam' become somewhat as speculative as (even if more reasonable than) the very Documentary Hypothesis he is trying to rebut. Indeed, most Hebrew scholars regard the phrase אֱלֹהֵי תוֹלְדוֹת ('*ellēh tōl'dōt*) as a literary marker to designate the beginning rather than the end a new narrative section of the book. It takes the results of the preceding section and propels it forward in the narrative—i.e. it means '[these are the] historical developments arising out of ...'.⁸ This interpretation also preserves the unity of Genesis.

Two chapters then discuss 'positive form criticism', that is, literary criticism of the Pentateuch that has verified, against the JEDP hypothesis, the literary unity of the Pentateuch and its divine inspiration. The first of the two chapters offers a survey of likenesses of genre between the Pentateuch and Ancient Near Eastern literature, based primarily on the work of the scholars Duane Garrett (*Rethinking Genesis*), and Issac Kikawada and Arthur Quinn (*Before Abraham Was*). The second is somewhat more devotional in outlook and draws parallels between the story of Abraham and the Christian life. As such it takes a presuppositional rather than an evidential approach, and would be more relevant to Christians than to biblioseptics. Phelan rounds off with a concluding summary chapter and a number of supplements and appendices on a wide variety of topics, ranging from the role of the Levites in the period of the Judges (and the critical claim that their lack of appearance in Judges is evidence for the Documentary Hypothesis), to evidence for creationism, to the age of Terah at the birth of Abraham.

Summary

Readers new to this subject will appreciate Phelan's historical survey of the growth of the JEDP hypothesis and his introduction to

its theorists (Wellhausen, De Wette, etc.) as well as its opponents. His work would also serve well as a springboard to more detailed texts, such as Garrett's, and Whybray's *The Making of the Pentateuch* (which, although of a liberal bent, offers an even more thorough demolishing of the Documentary Hypothesis). Phelan presents some new and interesting counters to the JEDP theory based on the transmissional antiquity of a manuscript of the Samaritan Pentateuch (Chapter 4), written in a style of paleo-Hebrew representative of that used in the time of Hezekiah.

Some aspects of this book, however, do leave minor reservations. Phelan offers some peculiar capitalizations and hyphenations ('Word-of-God'), though perhaps these are quirks of translation. He also endorses some ideas that could be regarded as questionable or too speculative, in particular, gematria (a system of equating letters with numbers to derive some new message; such as those who calculate the value of letters in various languages to reach '666' and decide, using gematriac calculations based on a person's name, that that person is 'the Antichrist') and the so-called Bible Codes.⁹ In addition, his supplement on creationism, while undoubtedly well-intentioned, shows a certain lack of discernment in selection of credible creationist sources. Phelan is of best use when he is writing about topics with which he is intimately familiar, and with respect to the JEDP hypothesis, both his sourcework and his presentation reflect soundness of approach.

References

1. One of the most prominent, and tendentious, examples of this type of theorizing is found in: Mack, B.L., *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins*, Harper, San Francisco, CA, 1994. I have offered a thorough overview of Q and Marcan priority, and its weaknesses, at <www.tektonics.org/qm/qmhub.html>.
2. The greatest popularizer of this thesis today is Richard Elliott Friedman, whose titles include *Who Wrote the Bible?* Harper, San Francisco, CA, 1997; see my review at <www.tektonics.org/books/friedmanwwbrw.html>.
3. Some may have the misperception that

the presence of artificial literary structures somehow compromises the doctrine of inerrancy. This idea is rejected by the Chicago Statement on Inerrancy, which says: 'We affirm that God in His work of inspiration *utilized the distinctive personalities and literary styles* of the writers whom He had chosen and prepared' (Article 8). And: 'We affirm that the text of Scripture is to be interpreted by grammatico-historical exegesis, *taking account of its literary forms and devices*, and that Scripture is to interpret Scripture' (Article 18).

4. It is worth noting that early proponents of the JEDP theory grounded their ideas in the assumption that writing was unknown at the time of Moses (p. 59)! This assertion, long since vastly disproven (as Phelan shows in his Chapter 3), has been quietly and disingenuously removed from discussion, despite its critical contribution to the foundation of the JEDP theory, and stands as a classic example of the 'just so' methods of the Documentary Hypothesizers.
 5. I examine a large number of these at <www.tektonics.org/jedp/deut.html>.
 6. Wiseman, P.J., *Ancient Records and the Structure of Genesis*, Thomas Nelson Inc., Nashville, TN, 1985.
 7. Sewell, C., The tablet theory of Genesis authorship, *Bible and Spade* 7(1), Winter 1994; updated <www.trueorigin.org/tablet.asp>, March 2002.
 8. Wolters, A.M., *Creation Regained: Biblical Basis for Reformational Worldview*, Paternoster Press, Carlisle, UK, p. 37, 1996.
 9. For more about the 'Bible Codes' see <www.answersingenesis.org/docs/205.asp>.
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