

Composition of the Pentateuch

Wellhausen's History of the 4 Sources

4 major sources were identified by Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918), a German scholar who established the documentary hypothesis as the accepted model for the growth of the Pentateuch. He drew up a history of how each source came to be. This meant biblical students could discover not only four different authors & their literary styles within the Pentateuch, but they could picture clearly the time & place each source came from. The early & mostly oral traditions of Israel were gradually written down, preserved in four written documents, & then combined to make one Pentateuch.

When David & Solomon united Israel as a kingdom, a new era of trained scribes & writers began. Sometime during Solomon's reign, or soon after, in Jerusalem, an unknown author put together the Yahwist account from the viewpoint of the southern tribe of Judah, & to glorify the monarchy created by David & Solomon.

When Solomon died & the nation split into a northern kingdom (Israel) & a southern kingdom (Judah), the northerners needed a revised version of the traditions that would not glorify Jerusalem & the kings of Judah so much. They produced a second, revised account of the old traditions which used Elohim for God & place names that were more familiar to their part of the country. They also stressed the role of the covenant of Moses over the role of the king, & avoided much of the Yahwist's intimate language about God walking & talking with humans. They favoured a more "spiritualised" & awesome sense of God's dealings with Israel. These two accounts existed side by side as long as the two kingdoms lasted. When the north fell to the Assyrian army in 722 BCE, the northerners who fled south carried their written Elohist source with them. The J & E documents were then combined as one during the following century for the people who lived now only in Judah.

At the same time, there arose a group of priests, levites & prophets who tried to reform many bad practices of the faith in Judah. Out of their efforts came the Book of Deuteronomy (D source). This arose partly in reaction to "primitive" ideas in J's & E's theology of promise & blessing for the promised land. The deuteronomist reformers collected covenant legal traditions & added to them sermons stressing obedience & faithfulness to the covenant if the people were to receive blessings in the promised land. Although put together from the best of

both northern & southern traditions during a long period from Hezekiah (715-688) to Josiah (640 BCE), it was only “discovered” hidden in the temple when Josiah began his reforms of 622. The king & people recognised its authority & genuine Mosaic flavour, & D was joined with J & E as part of the nation’s sacred traditions.

Finally when the whole country went into exile under the Babylonians (597-586), a school of priests seems to have gathered many of the cultic & legal traditions together. This included the lists of ancestors preserved in the temple, the isolated stories & traditions not found in the earlier works, & most of the great law collections in Leviticus & Numbers. This Priestly work (called P) formed a fourth source which made the earlier historical accounts more complete & also set out a whole way of life under the law that would allow Israel’s covenant with God to be lived & to last even when there was no land or temple or king. According to Wellhausen, these four sources were finally edited by the Priestly school into the Pentateuch after the exile ended in 539 BCE. This is the classical four source theory followed by the majority of scholars in the 20th cent.

The underlying view behind this picture really belongs to the 19th cent. with its romantic view of how cultures develop from primitive levels to more advanced ones. Thus the Yahwist represents a primitive anthropomorphic view of God, filled with magical appearances & mythical details. The Elohist shows a deeper awareness of God’s distance, while the Deuteronomist reflects the later & more sensitive concern of the prophets to the ethical demands & oneness of God over the whole world. Finally, the Priestly source brings together the complex institutional, cultic & legal aspects of Israelite faith that would support a life of fidelity to the covenant through exile & times of loss.

Major Characteristics of the 4 Sources

The oldest source, the ***Yahwist source (J)***, uses the name the LORD or Yahweh for God. Since Yahweh is spelled Jahweh in German it is usually called the J source. The J source consists of brilliantly told stories running through Genesis, the first half of Exodus & small sections of Numbers.

The next oldest source, the ***Elohist source (E)***, refers to God as Elohim or God. It too consists of vivid stories running in parallel with the J source for the most part: e.g. the Jacob & Joseph stories from Gen 25-50 are split between J & E.

But unlike J, E has no account of the creation or the flood, because the narrative of the Elohist source does not start until Gen 15.

The third source, the *Deuteronomist source (D)*, is more or less the book of Deuteronomy. Its genre & style set it apart from the great narrative sources J & E. Deuteronomy is a series of sermons about the law. It is full of exhortation to observe the law, urgent appeals to love the LORD with all one's heart, warnings about the dangers of disobedience etc. Its characteristic designation for God is "the LORD our/your God", which also sets it apart from the J & E sources, where God is referred to by the names Yahweh & Elohim respectively.

The fourth source is the *Priestly Source (P)* – parts of Genesis, together with all those parts of Exodus, Leviticus & Numbers about worship & associated matters which priests would have been interested in. In Genesis the genealogies are ascribed to this source, as well as chs 1, 17 & 23 because of their teaching on religious topics such as the Sabbath & circumcision.

Source	Name of God	Character	Content
J Yahwist	The LORD = Yahweh	Narrative	50% of Gen to Ex 24; fragments of Numbers
E Elohist	God = Elohim	Narrative	33% of Gen to Ex 24; fragments of Numbers
D Deuteronomist	The LORD your/our God	Sermons	Deuteronomy
P Priestly	God = Elohim	Lists, laws on worship etc.	17% of Genesis; Exodus 25 to Numbers 36

In the English-speaking world the great advocate of the documentary hypothesis was S.R. Driver (1846-1914), professor of Hebrew at Oxford. Below is a simplified version of his analysis of Gen 11:27 - 25:11.

Source	Name of God	Character	Content
J Yahwist	The LORD = Yahweh	Vivid narrative	11:28-30; 12:1-13:18; 16:1b-14; 18:1-19:38; 21:1a, 2a, 33; 22:15-18, 20-24;

			24:1-25:6, 11b.
E Elohist	God = Elohim	Vivid narrative	15:1-21; 20:1-18; 21:6-32,34; 22:1-14,19
P Priestly	God = Elohim	Lists, dates, religious issues	11:31-32; 12:4b-5; 13:6, 11b-12a; 16:1a,3,15-16; 17:1-27; 19:29; 21:1b, 2b-5; 23:1-20; 25:7-11a

According to the documentary hypothesis these sources were originally independent. But they were not all amalgamated at one time by a single editor, but at different times by a succession of editors. The oldest source J was first combined with the next oldest source E to form the combined JE work. Some time later, JE was combined with D, Deuteronomy, to form JED. Finally, JED was combined with the long priestly source P to form JEDP i.e. the present Pentateuch. The dates commonly associated with the documents are:

Approximate Dating of Sources

Document	Date BCE
(Moses)	(1300)
J	950
E	850
JE	750
D	622
JED	600
P	500
JEDP	450

Reference:

Gordon Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament*. Vol.1 The Pentateuch, SPCK, London, 2003 (pp.165-171)