

From Paradise to the Promised Land

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PENTATEUCH

Third Edition



T. DESMOND ALEXANDER

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Preface

The idea of writing an introductory guide to the first five books of the Bible arose following a brief period of teaching Asian theological students in Singapore in 1990. My experience there confirmed what had been evident to me in Ireland: most students of theology and religious studies have at best a very limited understanding of the basic contents of the Pentateuch. While they are vaguely familiar with the better-known stories of Genesis and Exodus, few could claim to have a clear understanding of the Pentateuch as a whole. What was lacking was a good guide to the text, a book that was suited to the needs of such students. To this end, what now appears as part 2 of this edition was published in 1995 under the title *From Paradise to the Promised Land*.

Because this former volume focused deliberately on the contents of Genesis to Deuteronomy, it provided no detailed discussion of contemporary academic approaches to the Pentateuch. To address this shortcoming, part 1 was added when the second edition was published in 2002. This third edition adds new material, with chapters revised to varying degrees. The present volume seeks to (1) guide the reader through the maze of modern approaches to the Pentateuch, and (2) focus on the main themes of the Pentateuch, viewed as a unified literary work, by drawing on the best insights of recent research into Hebrew narrative techniques.

To these a further aim has been added, which strictly speaking is not required in an introduction to the Pentateuch. I have sought to briefly outline the many ways in which the pentateuchal material is taken up and used in the New Testament. Two considerations have encouraged me to do this. First, many students of theology and religious studies approach the Pentateuch from a Christian perspective and are naturally interested in how this material relates to the beliefs and practices of the New Testament church. Second, and perhaps more important from a purely academic perspective, the New Testament documents reveal how the pentateuchal texts were understood in

a period and culture much closer to that of the Pentateuch than our own. It is interesting, therefore, to compare the New Testament understanding of the Pentateuch with that of twenty-first-century readers. To what extent is there agreement on the meaning of the text?

Having stated the general aims of this study, some further comments may help clarify the overall approach adopted here. Although this volume seeks to explain the contents of the Pentateuch, it is not a verse-by-verse commentary on the text. An abundance of commentaries already exists, as noted in the recommended further reading section on pages 315–20. Yet while they are especially helpful in explaining shorter units of material—for example, individual verses or chapters—by their very nature commentaries tend to atomize the text into small units. Consequently, they sometimes fail to highlight themes that are spread across entire books, especially when such themes do not appear to be of particular importance in any single passage. Studying the biblical texts by means of commentaries can be compared to looking at the separate pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Though we may find something of interest in each piece, it is only when all the pieces are put together that we get the complete picture. It is with this larger picture that we wish to engage in this study of the Pentateuch.

Not only may commentaries fail to give a complete picture, but they may also unintentionally give a distorted picture. By atomizing the text and considering each unit independently, there is ever present the danger of misinterpreting these shorter passages. This may be illustrated by using the jigsaw puzzle again. Examined on its own, a single piece may appear to show one thing, yet when placed alongside its matching pieces it may reveal something quite different. Obviously, knowledge of the wider context is vital for understanding the individual components of something larger. Unfortunately, scholars have not always adequately appreciated the dangers that exist in interpreting a biblical book unit by unit without sufficiently taking into account the broader context.

Alongside these shortcomings must be placed a further and much more fundamental problem. For the past two centuries the academic study of the Pentateuch has been dominated by methods that seek primarily to elucidate how the present text came into being; these methods are surveyed in part 1. Encouraged by the hope of uncovering the literary and oral prehistory of the received text, scholars have expended an inordinate amount of time and energy on developing the methodologies of *source* and *form* criticism. We observe several consequences of this practice. First, these methods have resulted in the text being dissected in a variety of ways. No longer is the Pentateuch generally considered to be a literary unity—which, regardless of how it was composed, it now is. Rather, it is commonly viewed as a collection of literary documents and/or oral accounts linked by editorial (or redactional) additions. Most scholarly research on the Pentateuch has sought

to (1) discover the existence of these hypothetical sources, (2) explain the process by which they were combined to form the present text, and (3) relate the existence of these earlier sources to the history and religious development of the Israelites before the final composition of the Pentateuch in the exilic or postexilic period. While scholarly endeavors to address these issues have not been wanting, the past two decades have witnessed a substantial rejection of results that seemed assured for several immediately preceding generations of scholars. At the present time much uncertainty exists regarding how and when the Pentateuch was composed. Given our present knowledge, we could even ask if it is possible to determine with any confidence the process by which it came into being.

A second consequence of biblical scholarship's focusing its resources on the prehistory of the text has been a failure to clearly elucidate the meaning of the Pentateuch in its received form. Relatively little has been said about the final form of the Pentateuch. Most studies have focused on the sources underlying the present text. Three factors have possibly contributed to this lack of interest in the Pentateuch as received.

1. In the past source-critical studies have generally portrayed the earliest stages in the composition of the Pentateuch as the most interesting and important. In marked contrast, the contribution of the final editor or editors was considered to be insignificant. Consequently, there was little incentive to examine his work in detail. Moreover, when scholars did consider it, they generally looked only at the material assigned specifically to him. It was believed to be inappropriate or unnecessary to consider the entire Pentateuch in order to establish an understanding of the final redactor(s).

2. Many scholars appear to have assumed that a detailed explanation of the prehistory of the Pentateuch reveals all that needs to be known about the text as received. However, as R. Polzin has rightly observed: "Traditional biblical scholarship has spent most of its efforts in disassembling the works of a complicated watch before our amazed eyes without apparently realizing that similar efforts by and large have not succeeded in putting the parts back together again in a significant or meaningful way."¹ We need to recognize that the Pentateuch, as we now have it, is much more than the sum of its component parts.

3. Scholars have tended to consider the study of the Pentateuch in its final form as less demanding and therefore of less academic value than the investigation of its hypothetical sources.² Such reasoning is fallacious, however. The value of the final form of the Pentateuch should not be judged on the

1. R. Polzin, "The Ancestress of Israel in Danger' in Danger," *Semeia* 3 (1975): 82–83.

2. A similar observation was voiced by Gerhard von Rad in 1938: "On almost all sides the final form of the Hexateuch has come to be regarded as a starting point barely worthy of discussion, from which the debate should move away as rapidly as possible in order to reach the real problems underlying it." See *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1966), 1.

basis of the ease or otherwise of studying it. Rather, such study should be undertaken because of the inherent importance of the text as a unified literary work.³ While some still fail to take seriously the study of the Pentateuch in its final form, it is encouraging to see that many more scholars now recognize the importance of doing so.

Even if one grants the importance of source and form criticism, various arguments strongly favor an approach that gives prominence to the final form of the Pentateuch.

First, this is the form in which the text has been received. Whatever the process by which it was composed, it is now a coherent literary work. Even if, as seems very likely, various sources were used in its composition, it must be recognized that the final editor, whoever he (or she?) may have been, appropriated all the source material as his own and used it to compose the present narrative, which begins in Genesis and continues through to the end of Deuteronomy. It therefore is essential to view the entire Pentateuch as reflecting the outlook of the final editor, not merely the portions that are normally assigned to the last editorial stage.

Second, a detailed and comprehensive study of the Pentateuch in its final form must have priority in sequence over the approaches of source and form criticism. It is methodologically unsound to explore the prehistory of the text without having established a clear understanding of how the present text is constructed as a literary work. To do otherwise is to set the cart before the horse. Similarly, on pedagogical grounds, it is surely improper to expect students to appreciate and apply critical methods before they have understood the content and literary structure of the received text. Unfortunately, students frequently are introduced to scholarly opinions regarding the process by which the text was composed, yet without knowing what the text itself is saying.

Third, new literary approaches to the study of Hebrew narrative provide fresh insights into the meaning of many pentateuchal passages. Frequently these insights offer new ways to approach problems that in the past were resolved by resorting to source- or form-critical solutions. Scholars in general are now more confident about taking seriously the present integrity of the text.

Fourth, a clear understanding of the final form of the Pentateuch is important if we are to appreciate how it influenced later writers. The writers (and earliest readers) of the New Testament were all precritical in their understanding of the Pentateuch; they did not think in terms of different literary and/or oral sources underlying the text, each reflecting a different theology. For them the Pentateuch was a single entity; this was how they understood and

3. By this I mean that the books of Genesis to Deuteronomy are linked in such a way that while they may be viewed as separate entities, it is clear that they have been made dependent on one another, with the later books presupposing a knowledge of the earlier ones and the earlier books being incomplete without the addition of the later ones. On this basis the Pentateuch itself is incomplete and is linked in a special way to the material in Joshua to 2 Kings.

interpreted it. All these reasons argue for an approach that treats with respect the received text of the Pentateuch.

From the preceding comments it is evident that the position adopted in part 2 of this book differs markedly from that often followed by others. The object of my study is the final form of the Pentateuch as it has been handed down to us in the Hebrew text. Little attention will be given to possible sources or the process of composition; much has been written on this elsewhere, as will be observed in part 1. Rather, it is my aim to map out the terrain of the Pentateuch as it now stands by drawing attention to its main features. To enable the reader to assimilate the contents of the Pentateuch more easily, the material is usually approached book by book. Sometimes attention is focused on major themes running through entire books. Elsewhere shorter blocks of material that deal with specific subjects are examined. The intention is to allow the text to determine the approach that seems most appropriate. For example, on the one hand, the themes of “seed,” blessing, and land run throughout the book of Genesis.⁴ On the other hand, the account of the building of the tabernacle dominates most of the final third of the book of Exodus. When we examine blocks of material, I have tried to follow the natural divisions of the text.

References to the rest of the Old Testament have been kept to a minimum. To have included all the relevant material would have added considerably to each chapter and shifted the focus of the book from the Pentateuch to the Old Testament as a whole.

Although I seek to include in part 2 the best insights of contemporary studies, I want to keep the presentation as straightforward as possible and thus have deliberately avoided engaging in a detailed critique of the views of other scholars. Three factors have persuaded me to adopt this approach. First, to interact meaningfully with all that has been said would take this study far beyond an introductory guide. Second, since many writers discuss the pentateuchal material from the perspectives of source and/or form criticism, it has to be recognized that they are addressing quite different issues from those being examined here. While this does not automatically exclude the possibility of meaningful interaction, it does make it much more difficult to achieve. Moreover, for every passage under consideration, it would have required a detailed discussion of past and contemporary views on the process by which it was composed, something that would have added considerably to the length of this volume. Third, the primary purpose of part 2 is to focus the reader’s attention on the content of the Pentateuch itself rather than on the diverse opinions of contemporary scholars.

4. Though I have tended to restrict the study of particular themes to individual books, certain themes cannot easily be restricted in this way (e.g., land, descendants, blessing). Themes that may be dominant in one book (e.g., Genesis) are sometimes picked up elsewhere in the Pentateuch as important motifs echoing earlier material. As such, they are important indicators to the overall unity of the Pentateuch in its received form.

A number of chapters have appeared in print elsewhere; to varying degrees I have modified and updated these to conform to the overall presenting pattern adopted in this volume. Some of the material in chapters 3 and 5 first appeared in my book *Abraham in the Negev: A Source-Critical Investigation of Genesis 20:1–22:19*.⁵ The discussion of the Passover in chapter 4 incorporates some material from my article “The Passover Sacrifice,” in *Sacrifice in the Bible*, edited by R. T. Beckwith and M. Selman.⁶ Chapters 5 and 9 first appeared respectively as “The Composition of the Sinai Narrative in Exodus xix 1–xxiv 11”⁷ and “Genealogies, Seed and the Compositional Unity of Genesis.”⁸ Some of the material in chapter 6 first appeared in my article “Authorship of the Pentateuch,” in the *Dictionary of the Old Testament: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*, edited by T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, and is used by permission of InterVarsity Press (USA). Chapter 12 was originally published as “Abraham Re-assessed Theologically: The Abraham Narrative and the New Testament Understanding of Justification by Faith,” in *He Swore an Oath: Biblical Themes from Genesis 12–50*, edited by R. S. Hess, P. E. Satterthwaite, and G. J. Wenham.⁹ Much of the material in chapters 13–16 was first published in 1994 in the *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, edited by D. A. Carson and others; I am grateful to the publishers, Inter-Varsity Press (UK), for permission to reproduce this in a modified form.

Except where otherwise indicated, biblical quotations are from the NIV, and all biblical references follow the English rather than the Hebrew scheme of numeration. All Hebrew words have been transliterated according to standard practice; however, where for the ordinary reader the transliteration does not reflect the actual pronunciation of a Hebrew word, I have added this in parentheses.

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5. T. D. Alexander, *Abraham in the Negev: A Source-Critical Investigation of Genesis 20:1–22:19* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997).

6. T. D. Alexander, “The Passover Sacrifice,” in *Sacrifice in the Bible*, ed. R. T. Beckwith and M. Selman (Carlisle: Paternoster; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 1–24.

7. T. D. Alexander, “The Composition of the Sinai Narrative in Exodus xix 1–xxiv 11,” *VT* 49 (1999): 2–20.

8. T. D. Alexander, “Genealogies, Seed and the Compositional Unity of Genesis,” *TynBul* 44 (1993): 255–70.

9. T. D. Alexander, “Abraham Re-assessed Theologically: The Abraham Narrative and the New Testament Understanding of Justification by Faith,” in *He Swore an Oath: Biblical Themes from Genesis 12–50*, ed. R. S. Hess, P. E. Satterthwaite, and G. J. Wenham (Cambridge: Tyndale House, 1993), 7–28; 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994), 7–28.

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SOLI DEO GLORIA.

Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible	ca.	circa, approximately
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by D. N. Freedman. 6 vols. New York, 1992	CahRB	Cahiers de la Revue biblique
alt.	minor alteration to a quote	CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
AnBib	Analecta biblica	CBQMS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
AOTC	Apollos Old Testament Commentary	CC	Continental Commentaries
ATANT	Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments	CCSOT	Communicator's Commentary Series: Old Testament
BA	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>	chap(s).	chapter(s)
BAR	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>	CJT	<i>Canadian Journal of Theology</i>
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>	CRC	ChiRho Commentary
BBB	Bonner biblische Beiträge	CTJ	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
BBC	Blackwell Bible Commentaries	DSB	Daily Study Bible
BETL	Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologicarum Iovaniensium	EC	Epworth Commentaries
Bib	<i>Biblica</i>	ECC	Eerdmans Critical Commentary
BibSem	Biblical Seminar	EPSC	Evangelical Press Study Commentary
BibS(N)	Biblische Studien (Neukirchen, 1951-)	Erlsr	<i>Eretz-Israel</i>
BS	<i>Bibliotheca sacra</i>	esp.	especially
BSC	Bible Student's Commentary	ESV	English Standard Version
BST	Bible Speaks Today	ET	English translation
BTB	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>	EvQ	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
BWANT	Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament	FB	Focus on the Bible
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft	FOTL	Forms of Old Testament Literature
c.	century	HBM	Hebrew Bible Monographs
		HCOT	Historical Commentary on the Old Testament
		HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible
		HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>

IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching	NET	The NET Bible (New English Translation)
IBD	<i>The Illustrated Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by J. D. Douglas. 3 vols. Leicester: Inter-Varsity; Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1980	NETR	<i>Near East School of Theology Theological Review</i>
IBS	<i>Irish Biblical Studies</i>	NIBCOT	New International Biblical Commentary Old Testament
IBT	Interpreting Biblical Texts	NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
ICC	International Critical Commentary	NIDOTTE	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> . Edited by W. A. VanGemeren. 5 vols. Grand Rapids, 1997
ILR	<i>Israel Law Review</i>	NIV	New International Version, 2011 (1984 if so specified)
Int	<i>Interpretation</i>	NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
ITC	International Theological Commentary	NJPS	<i>The Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures; The Jewish Publication Society Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text</i> , 2nd ed., 1999
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>	NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>	NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>	NT	New Testament
JDT	<i>Jahrbuch für deutsche Theologie</i>	NTT	<i>Norsk Teologisk Tidsskrift</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>	OBO	Orbis biblicus et orientalis
JJS	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>	OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
JPSTC	Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary	OT	Old Testament
JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>	OTG	Old Testament Guides
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>	OTL	Old Testament Library
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series	OTM	Old Testament Message
KJV	King James Version	OTS	Old Testament Studies
LHB	Library of Hebrew Bible	PIBA	<i>Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association</i>
lit.	literally	PW	Preaching the Word
LOS	London Oriental Series	PWCJS	<i>Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies</i>
LXX	Septuagint, Greek OT	RB	<i>Revue biblique</i>
mg.	marginal reading or note	RBL	<i>Review of Biblical Literature</i>
MLBS	Mercer Library of Biblical Studies	REBC	Revised Expositor's Bible Commentary
MT	Masoretic Text	RSV	Revised Standard Version
NAC	New American Commentary	RTP	<i>Revue de théologie et de philosophie</i>
NACSBT	NAC Studies in Bible and Theology	SBJT	<i>Southern Baptist Journal of Theology</i>
NCB	New Century Bible	SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
NCBC	New Cambridge Bible Commentary		
NDBT	<i>New Dictionary of Biblical Theology</i>		

SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series	TS	Texts and Studies: Contributions to Biblical and Patristic Literature
SBLSymS	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series	<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology	UMI	University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, MI
<i>ScrHier</i>	<i>Scripta hierosolymitana</i>	VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
SemeiaSt ser.	Semeia Studies series	VTSup	Vetus Testamentum Supplements
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series	v(v).	verse(s)
SP	Samaritan Pentateuch	WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
SSN	Studia semitica neerlandica	WEC	Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary
StudBib	Studia Biblica	WestBC	Westminster Bible Companion
TBAT	Theologische Bücherei: Altes Testament	WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
<i>TD</i>	<i>Theology Digest</i>	WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
<i>Them</i>	<i>Themelios</i>	YNER	Yale Near Eastern Researches
TI	Text and Interpretation	ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>TJ</i>	<i>Trinity Journal</i>	ZDPV	<i>Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina-Vereins</i>
TLJS	Taubman Lectures in Jewish Studies		
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries		

PART 1

Pentateuchal Criticism

1

Introduction to Pentateuchal Criticism

Since at least the third century AD, the term “Pentateuch” (derived from the Greek *pentateuchos*, “five-volume work”) has been used to denote the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Jewish tradition has favored the designation “Torah,” usually translated as “law,” although “instruction” would perhaps be more accurate. Penned originally in Hebrew, the books of the Pentateuch were already important texts by at least the fourth century BC, and over the years they have had a significant influence, both knowingly and unknowingly, upon the religious outlook of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. In spite of this, most people today have only a passing familiarity with their contents, and much within them is likely to strike the modern reader as strange and/or incomprehensible.

For an introduction to the *contents* of these five books, the reader should consult part 2. The opening chapters, here in part 1, provide an introduction to contemporary academic approaches to the Pentateuch and offer a critique of them from an evangelical perspective. After almost a century of relative stability, Pentateuch criticism is currently in a state of turmoil as various theories vie with one another in an attempt to dethrone the Documentary Hypothesis as *the* explanation for the process by which these books were composed. Naturally, it is not possible to do justice to all that has been said, and I am conscious of the limitations of what follows. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this contribution may provide a basis for and a stimulus to further study.

Before focusing on the Documentary Hypothesis, it may be helpful to briefly survey how the Pentateuch has been approached in the modern period. During the past 250 years, scholarly research on the Pentateuch has developed around four main methods: *source* criticism, *form* criticism, *traditio-historical* criticism, and *literary* criticism. Since each method addresses a specific set of issues, it is important to understand how they differ from one another. Moreover, as we shall observe, the rise of each method signaled a new stage in the study of the Pentateuch.

Source Criticism

Source criticism was the first of these four methods to be employed, and it has established itself as a major tool in pentateuchal criticism. This method, which to some extent originally came into being by chance, seeks to uncover the *literary* sources that may have been used in the composition of the books of Genesis to Deuteronomy. Although pushed into the background by other methods during most of the twentieth century, it continues to exercise considerable influence, particularly in relation to the exegesis of the pentateuchal books and scholarly reconstructions of the history of ancient Israel. In chapter 2 we shall trace the development of this method from its origins in the middle of the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, by which time there evolved the influential *Documentary Hypothesis* of Graf, Vatke, and Wellhausen. For the present it is sufficient to recognize this hypothesis as proposing that four distinctive source documents were combined during a period of five or six centuries to produce the Pentateuch as we now know it, the end of this process coming in the fifth century BC.

Form Criticism

Following the almost universal acceptance of the Documentary Hypothesis, biblical scholars turned, perhaps not surprisingly, to consider the *oral* phase that was thought to lie behind the source documents. Pioneered by Hermann Gunkel in the early decades of the twentieth century, a new methodology arose, subsequently termed form criticism. This approach sought to analyze the pentateuchal material into different categories on the assumption that each had its own particular life setting (technically known as *Sitz im Leben*). By identifying the form of a particular passage, it was thought possible to recover the historical context in which the material was composed. Fundamental to the development of this method was the belief that Genesis consisted of numerous short episodes that originally circulated both orally and independently of one another. Only at a much later stage were these oral compositions brought together and committed to writing, eventually creating the four source

documents from which the Pentateuch was composed. A fuller description of this method comes in chapter 3.

Traditio-Historical Criticism

Having determined (1) the earliest oral forms of the pentateuchal material and (2) the four main source documents, the next stage in the history of pentateuchal criticism was to describe the process by which the former were combined to produce the latter. Since this method was interested in the *history of the traditions* underlying the Pentateuch, it was designated traditio-historical criticism. Two of the main scholars associated with the development of this approach are Gerhard von Rad and Martin Noth. Regarding their contribution, see chapter 3.

The preceding three methods all focus on the process by which the Pentateuch was composed. Form criticism identifies the earliest oral stage, traditio-historical criticism describes the process leading up to the formation of the longer written source documents, and finally, source criticism explains how the source documents were brought together to create the Pentateuch as we now have it. In following chapters we shall outline in more detail the use and results of these methods, at the same time evaluating the success of each in achieving its objectives.

Literary Criticism

The past thirty years have witnessed the introduction of an alternative way to view the Pentateuch, known as literary criticism. While interest remains strong in uncovering the process by which the Pentateuch was composed, many scholars either have acknowledged or are gradually recognizing the need to comprehend the Pentateuch in its final form. This shift in emphasis entails a switch from a diachronic (through time) to a synchronic (at the same time) reading of the text. Instead of locating portions of the text in different historical periods, literary criticism seeks to understand the Pentateuch as a coherent, unified work composed at one specific point in time. Literary criticism recognizes that the Pentateuch cannot be understood solely on the basis of the components that have been used in its construction: the whole is much greater than the sum of its parts.

Two further dimensions of literary criticism ought to be noticed. First, the designation “literary criticism” embraces a wide range of differing approaches that may be used to interpret texts (e.g., structuralism, deconstruction, reader-response, rhetorical, narrative, feminist). Scholars primarily interested in the study of modern literature have developed many of these approaches. Second, some proponents of literary criticism adopt a very ambivalent attitude toward

historical issues. They are primarily interested in the text alone, viewing questions concerning the growth of the text and its historical context as irrelevant to their particular approach. While there may be a place for adopting an ahistorical reading of some texts, it needs to be asked if this is really appropriate for the study of the Pentateuch.

In theory, the four methods outlined above are complementary, asking different questions of the Pentateuch. In practice, however, literary criticism, by revealing more clearly how the biblical text is constructed, has challenged many of the results obtained by the other methods. For this reason, in recent years literary criticism has had a major impact on the study of the Pentateuch, and it continues to do so. Nevertheless, the results obtained by the other methods still enjoy substantial support. Consequently, as we move into the twenty-first century, the academic study of the Pentateuch is marked by a greater diversity of opinions than possibly at any stage in the modern period. What follows, therefore, makes no claim to be a comprehensive description of all current views. Rather, it is designed to (1) explain how the present state of affairs came into being, (2) evaluate some of the more influential contributions, and (3) offer some tentative suggestions as to how Christians may best approach the Pentateuch as an important theological text.