

Did Moses write the Pentateuch?

[Scott Simmons](#)

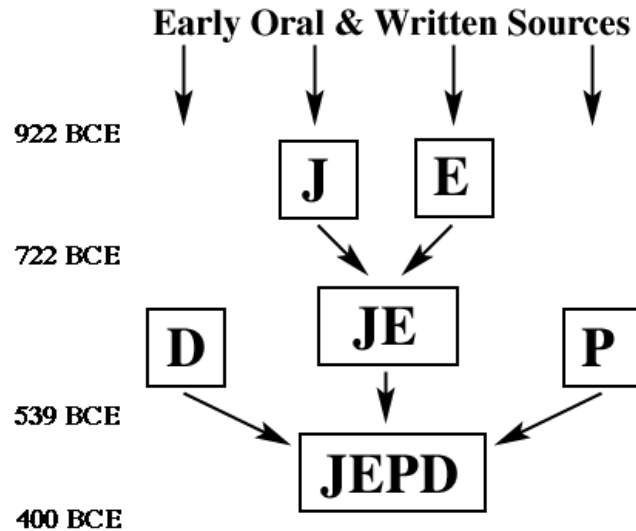
Director of Curriculum
Third Millennium Ministries

This is a question that is frequently asked, especially since the religion departments in many universities have promoted views contrary to what most evangelicals have traditionally believed to be true. To answer this question, we'll look first at the most popular of these approaches to understand the challenges to Mosaic authorship. We'll then look at reasons to believe in essential Mosaic authorship. Finally, we'll look at some insights from what we can gather from the composition of the Pentateuch.

Documentary Hypothesis

The most significant challenge to Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch is called "Documentary Hypothesis." Sometimes it is referred to as the Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis, named after the 19th century originators of the theory. Briefly stated, the documentary hypothesis states that very little if any of the Pentateuch was actually written by Moses. Instead they suggest that it was composed over many centuries as different sources were written and compiled together. Writers who teach this theory suggest that the Pentateuch as we now have it came from four sources dating back to the days of Solomon and completed by around 400 B.C. These four sources are:

- *Yahwist (J)*: This writer is believed to have been writing in the Southern Kingdom of Judah during the divided kingdom. He used the word Yahweh for God (in German, this starts with a J).
- *Elohist (E)*: This writer is believed to have written in the Northern Kingdom of Israel (Ephraim) during the divided kingdom. He used the word Elohim for God.
- *Deuteronomist (D)*: Deuteronomy (and Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings) was believed to be written during the reign of King Josiah in 622 B.C. They argue that the story in 2 Kings 22 does not tell the story of Deuteronomy being rediscovered but actually being written for the first time.
- *Priestly Writer (P)*: This source was responsible for the book of Leviticus, the genealogies, and sections on the priesthood and worship. These priests supposedly edited the Pentateuch into its final form sometime after the return from exile in 539 B.C. and before about 400 B.C.



There are many reasons why this theory developed, and some of these findings have been very influential among evangelical writers. However, the documentary hypothesis is largely governed by (1) naturalistic presuppositions that do not permit the possibility of God intervening into history in extraordinary ways, and (2) historicist presuppositions that impose evolutionary views of history on the development of the Bible. They assume that the monotheism of the Pentateuch could not have been possible in the days of Moses, but must have developed gradually over time. If we reject these presuppositions and approach the Scriptures on their own terms, we can find some very compelling reasons to believe that Moses was the essential author of the Pentateuch.

Mosaic Authorship

We'll look at the evidence for Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch by considering evidence within the Pentateuch, elsewhere in the Old Testament, and in the New Testament.

Pentateuch

Explicit Evidence

Moses is consistently called the author within the Pentateuch. In fact, there are numerous places where the Pentateuch gives us explicit testimony that Moses was the author of at least parts of the Pentateuch (see Exodus 17:14; 24:4-7; 34:27; Leviticus 1:1; Numbers 11:16-25; 33:2; Deuteronomy 31:1, 22-24). For instance, Deuteronomy 31:9 says:

So Moses wrote down this Law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel.

This verse tells us that Moses was the author of at least part of the Law, but it's also likely that this verse refers to the whole Pentateuch, often simply called "the Law."

Implicit Evidence

But there is also implicit evidence in the Pentateuch that shows it was written by someone like Moses. First, parts of the Pentateuch show that it was written by someone who was an eye-witness to the accounts it records. For instance:

- Exodus 15:27 mentions there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees in Elim.
- Numbers 11:7-9 describes in detail the look and taste of the manna that God provided the Israelites in the wilderness.

Second, the text shows that the author was familiar with the land of Egypt. For instance:

- The crops mentioned in Exodus 9:31-32 are Egyptian, not Canaanite.
- The author also mentions in Exodus 25-26 that the tabernacle should be made of acacia wood, and acacia trees are found in the Sinai Peninsula but are rare in Canaan.
- Exodus 26:14 mentions that the outer covering of the tabernacle should be made from the hides of sea cows that can be found in the sea near Sinai but not in Canaan.

And third, there are more words that are borrowed from the Egyptian language used in the Pentateuch than anywhere else in the Bible. For instance:

- Joseph's title, "overseer of the house" in Genesis 39:4 translates an Egyptian technical term for his position.
- The personal names Potiphar, Potipherah, and Asenath point to a writer who was familiar with Egyptian.
- The word "magician" in Genesis 41:8, 24 is a translation of an Egyptian term.
- Joseph's lifespan of 110 years as recorded in Genesis 50:26 reflects the Egyptian ideal lifespan.

Old Testament

There is also a significant amount of evidence for Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch throughout the Old Testament. Explicit references to Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch can be found throughout the Old Testament (see 2 Chronicles 35:12; Ezra 3:2; 6:18; and Nehemiah 8:1; 13:1). In passages like these, the Pentateuch is frequently referred to as "the Book of Moses" or "the Book of the Law of Moses." For instance, 2 Chronicles 25:4 says:

Yet [Amaziah] did not put their sons to death, but acted in accordance with what is written in the Law, in the Book of Moses.

Here the Law is identified as "the Book of Moses" clearly indicating that the author of 2 Chronicles believed the author of the Torah to be Moses.

New Testament

The New Testament gives further confirmation that Moses was the author of the Pentateuch. In fact, Jesus often spoke of the law in ways that assumed Mosaic authorship (see Mark 7:10; John 5:46; 7:19). And Jesus also said to his disciples in Luke 24:44:

Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.

Here Jesus referred to the three major divisions of the Old Testament, and the first division, the Law, he refers to by its author, Moses. Similar affirmations of Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch can be seen in Romans 10:5 and 1 Corinthians 9:9.

In fact, the witness of Scripture is unanimous in naming Moses as the essential author of the Pentateuch. With all this evidence throughout the Scriptures, it is impossible to deny Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch without undermining the authority of Scripture itself.

Composition of the Pentateuch

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that just because Moses authored the Pentateuch does not mean that he wrote every word of it. A full understanding of Scriptural testimony concerning the Pentateuch gives us reason to believe that he did not. It is very likely that others had a hand in writing the Pentateuch besides Moses, and it is also likely that it was

edited after his death.

Sources

For one thing, it is clear that Moses made use of extra-biblical sources in the composition of the Pentateuch. While most of the Pentateuch deals with events that occurred in Moses' lifetime, Genesis in particular deals with events from early human history. In all likelihood, Moses gained knowledge from a variety of oral traditions that were passed down to him. This would have been true during his formal education in Egypt, and Exodus 3:14 and 18:17-23 teach us that Moses learned much from his father-in-law, Jethro the Midianite.

Moses used written sources as well. He cited one source, the *Book of the Wars of the Lord*, in Numbers 21:14. Moses also wrote the book of Deuteronomy with a similar structure to Ancient Near Eastern treaty documents that were employed in Moses' day. And in Genesis 37, Moses wrote the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife in such a way that it contains minor parallels to an Egyptian story called *The Story of Two Brothers*. The fact that Moses used sources should not cause us to think that he was not fully inspired by the Holy Spirit. In fact, the Holy Spirit likely inspired Moses in his use of these sources; they would have helped his readers to understand God's revelation to Israel in terms that would have been familiar to them.

Scribes

Second, Moses likely used scribes or secretaries in the composition of the Pentateuch. As a young man, when he was educated in the Egyptian royal court, Moses would have become familiar with the practice of hiring scribes and secretaries for the composition of writings. And with all the duties that Moses had as the leader of Israel, he likely employed scribes to compose sections of the Pentateuch for him under his direction.

This would explain many of the stylistic differences that occur in various sections of the Pentateuch. Some narratives in the Pentateuch differ in writing style from other narratives, and the book of Deuteronomy is written in a different style of Hebrew from the rest of the Pentateuch. Deuteronomy is much more repetitive than the other books of the Pentateuch. Moses' employment of scribes does not detract from essential Mosaic authorship though, since any work of the secretaries would have been done under the approval and authority of Moses himself.

Additions

Third, the Scriptures tell us that later writers were directed to add to the writings of the Pentateuch. In Joshua 24:26, we're told that Joshua recorded additional decrees and laws into the Book of the Law of God. In other words, Biblical testimony suggests that Joshua was a contributor to the Pentateuch following the death of Moses. Consequently, some aspects of the Pentateuch are best explained as later additions to the books. The account of the death of Moses in Deuteronomy 34, for instance, could hardly have been written by Moses, but it could have been added by Joshua.

Updates

And finally, the Scriptures give us reason to believe that the Pentateuch occasionally received updates to communicate to later times in Israel's history. The Pentateuch likely received minor updates after the deaths of Moses and Joshua, probably to keep the text current with later generations. For instance:

- Numbers 12:3 calls Moses the most humble man on the face of the earth. It would be hard to believe Moses wrote this, and the fact that it had to be written suggests a later time when people no longer remembered Moses.
- Genesis 14:14 tells us that Abram pursued Lot's captors as far as the city of Dan. Judges chapter 18:29 tells us that the city used to be called Laish but was renamed Dan after the deaths of Moses and Joshua.
- There's evidence that scribes updated the alphabet, spelling, vocabulary, and grammar of the kind of Hebrew likely spoken by Moses to account for changes in the Hebrew language over time.

Conclusion

All these lines of evidence lead us to conclude that the Pentateuch was written under the direction of Moses and so was substantially completed before his death. Moses likely wrote much of it with his own hand, and for other sections he employed scribes who gave him material that he used in compiling the Pentateuch. Moses used his own writings, the works of scribes and extra-biblical source material to complete his work in the Pentateuch. After the initial conquest of Canaan, Joshua added material like the account of the death of Moses and laws specifically designed for life in the land of Israel. And as the Pentateuch was copied over time, minor edits were made to the document to update it for later generations. This approach is faithful to the Bible's claim that Moses authored the Pentateuch, and it also addresses the kinds of evidence that some writers have used to challenge the traditional understanding that the book was written by Moses.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*. If you would like to discuss this article in our online community, please visit our [RPM Forum](#).

Subscribe to RPM

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [RPM](#), please select this [link](#).