

Preface

Jiří Moskala

Dean, Seventh-Day Adventist Theological Seminary

The goal of the present publication, *Exploring the Composition of the Pentateuch*, is to present fresh evidence on a subject that has preoccupied scholars for more than two centuries. The composition of the Pentateuch has been one of the most hotly debated issues, as it lies at the center of the understanding and interpretation of the Pentateuch. The traditional view that Moses was the primary author or the principal contributor to the Pentateuch was challenged by nineteenth- and twentieth-century critical scholars, resulting in pentateuchal studies going through remarkable scrutiny. Different hypotheses of the composition of the Pentateuch and their rewriting were proposed (including the documentary theories with J, E, D, P sources). In recent years, new interest has been sparked among scholars of different persuasions, especially among evangelicals, regarding this particular field of study. This current attention has involved looking at the question of authorship with new eyes and new approaches, being boldly critical of the critical approaches, theories, and presuppositions as well as closely examining and analyzing the critical arguments and redoing comparative studies in relation to old material and new discoveries.

These new approaches to pentateuchal studies (literary and structural analysis, comparisons with ancient Near Eastern documents and the biblical text, ritual and rhetorical studies, form criticism, narrative analysis viewing the Pentateuch as a story, studies related to different literary genres within one document, and content comparison with archaeological data) led to the rejection not only of the classical distinction between J and E, but also to the redating of classical sources and to a dissatisfaction with the standard source criticism. This discontent leads one to ask of Mosaic authorship: innocent until proven guilty

or guilty until proven innocent? In other words, should Moses be assumed as the author, as in text and tradition, or should methodological doubt override that assumption until demonstrated otherwise?

It is obvious that only a few things can be proven from extrabiblical evidence. As a matter of fact, material from certain periods is very sporadic or even non-existent. Documents of ancient Near Eastern provenance cover only particular events from the second and first millennia BC. Unfortunately, few documents have survived or were even produced in ancient times, so scholars can only compare the biblical text with the historical documents that are available. It is good to remind ourselves that scholars build hypotheses and theories that may or may not fit the history as presented in the Pentateuch and may not be true to the reality of life from that time. The crucial thing is how we interpret historical evidence. This observation may be helpful for a reader who is not used to dealing critically with extrabiblical evidence. We should have realistic expectations of what can be demonstrated from evidence. As we know, historical research is dealing with the question of probability.

Faith does not stand on proofs but on the biblical testimony. However, evidence from extrabiblical documents, ancient history, cultural background, or comparative studies may enrich and confirm a faith position and/or the ancient tradition of believers. So we should not overestimate the value of extrabiblical evidence. It is significant but cannot overthrow the testimony found in the Scriptures. Ultimately the reader has to decide whether to believe reconstructed history built on extrabiblical evidence or the internal evidence of the biblical witnesses. It is best when they can be harmonized; thus, the analysis of the available documents is always crucial. Christians and Jews who take the biblical text at face value have no problem in assuming Moses's authorship of the Pentateuch (plus any updating and editorial remarks made when putting it together), even though it hardly can be proven or demonstrated on the basis of the extrabiblical evidence.

For these reasons, the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary chose to sponsor a conference on the composition of the Pentateuch. On April 3–5, 2016, a group of outstanding scholars met at the SDA Theological Seminary, located on the campus of Andrews University in southwest Michigan, to tackle the problem of the composition of the Pentateuch from a synchronic perspective. These scholars (from a variety of denominational and faith backgrounds) are making contributions in terms of its historical development and effectively engaging the wider scholarly audience.

I would like to express my deep appreciation to all seventeen authors who submitted cutting-edge papers using their expertise on a variety of important aspects related to the synchronic reading of the Pentateuch. My wholehearted thank you goes to our sponsors, the North American Division of Seventh-day

Adventists, Andrews University School of Graduate Studies and Research, the Horn Archaeological Museum, and Ed Zinke. The four editors, under the skillful leadership of Kenneth Bergland, who, together with L. S. Baker Jr., Felipe A. Masotti, and A. Rahel Wells, sacrificed enormous time and dedicated countless hours to the production of this volume, deserve a million thanks. I hope this publication will stir fruitful discussion among biblical scholars in seeking fresh approaches to the old question of the authorship of the Pentateuch and even finding more convincing model(s) for the origin of the Pentateuch's composition.

