

Lesson 8: Ancient Near East Literary Background to the Books of Moses

Introduction

This is going to be a different kind of lesson. I am pausing our interpretation of the books of Moses to address some questions about the historicity of the Pentateuch and the contribution of Ancient Near Eastern literature to our understanding of the biblical text. If you would rather stay in the biblical study of the Pentateuch, feel free to skip ahead to lesson 9 where we began our look at the book of Exodus. You will not miss any significant aspect of the story if you do skip ahead. If you would like to get some more background information on types of literature in the Ancient Near East and how that literature helps us read our Bible, then stay with me for this lesson.

I've been listening to the *Hardcore History* podcast by Dan Carlin. He is great at reading a wide range of historians on a given topic and then bringing it all together with enthusiasm and insight. His series that I have just started is *King of kings*. It is about Cyrus the Great of Persia. Carlin tells the story of Thermopylae and the 300 Spartan warriors who stood up to the entire Persian army. What interests me is how Carlin uses his references. For most of the story he relies on Greek historian Herodotus who was a toddler when the battle took place, so though not a contemporary, he was quite close. Carlin tells how the 300 Spartans arranged themselves across the narrow pass of Thermopylae against the 1 million strong Persian army in this very cinematic kind of "You shall not pass" moment. And then Carlin adds in a quote taken from Plutarch. It's a great line. He calls it a Clint Eastwood quote. The Persians tell the Spartans that if they lay down their weapons and shields then they are all free to go. Nothing will happen to them. To which the Spartans respond, "Come and get them."

A little later in the podcast, Carlin gives a biblical view of the Persians by quoting the sack of Babylon that happens after the feast of Belshazzar. It's the handwriting on the wall passage from Daniel 5. Carlin loves the passage, especially what the hand wrote, "Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin," which means, numbered, numbered, weighed, divided. Carlin reads what Daniel tells Belshazzar, "Mene - God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it. Tekel - you have been weighed on the scales and found deficient. Upharsin - your kingdom has been divided and given over to the Medes and Persians (Daniel 5:26-28)."

Then Carline makes this comment, "None of that is true but that's how the Bible story goes (*Hardcore History King of kings* podcast, 28:55)." Wait a minute. In the story about the three hundred you used a quote from Plutarch to put words in the mouths of the Spartans, regarding their weapons, "Come and get them." Well, Plutarch was a teenager during the Apostle Paul's missionary journeys. That's 500 years after the battle at Thermopylae. And you present Plutarch's quote as part of the story, without commenting on its truthfulness. Then when you come to tell a story in the Bible, you make the comment that we know it never happened. And you say it in an off-hand way as though all your listeners are going to agree, "Of course, it is in the Bible. We know it is not true. It is a bit of interesting anti-babylonian PR." But then I am left asking, "How do we know it never happened?" That's my first question. My second question is, "Why did Dan Carlin feel the need to make sure we knew he was not actually suggesting the biblical account is true?" I doubt he believes that Plutarch's "Come and take them" quote actually happened. What stands out to me is that he found no need to clarify about the truthfulness or lack of truthfulness of his Greek sources, and yet did feel this need to distance himself from the biblical account.

What is going on there? I believe Dan Carlin is giving us a typical example of scholarly pressure to devalue the historicity of the Bible. Why does he do that? Is there solid evidence that the biblical story is fictitious? Carlin does not claim to be a historian or biblical scholar. He is recommunicating an attitude that is likely present in the scholars he is reading. And like Carlin, we could go to these scholars and get a lot of good historical information. We just need to be asking, "What are their presuppositions? What leads them to this prejudice against the Bible as a historical source, especially when they are ready to accept so many other less well-attested documents?"

This is a question I want to address. Christians should have no fear at all over the finds of archaeology and all the interesting parallels or similarities we see in the Bible and in the ancient world. I love reading ancient flood myths, and the creation stories, and law codes, and covenant examples that come outside of the Bible. Ancient history is not a threat to the Bible or to a Christian's walk with God. The interpretations of that history, however, can be a threat to the Christian worldview, especially when we take scholarly assertions as fact without recognizing the presuppositions that lead to those claims and interpretations about the history. "Why do we know that the biblical story of Belshazzar never happened? Why do we know that Moses did not write the Pentateuch? Why do we know that Abraham is just a myth like king Arthur? What is the basis for such assertions?" I do not think we know those things at all. We have good reason for believing in the historicity of Moses and Abraham and Belshazzar.

What's our goal for this lesson? I am not out to try to prove that the Bible is God's word or prove the historicity of all the biblical stories. I do not think that is possible for any historical document. We can show proofs that support the rationality of believing in the historicity of the Bible, but we cannot absolutely prove that what we have is the accurate interpretation of a historical event. In the end I have to come to a decision myself. And to be forthright, I have come to a fixed conviction. I have as a basic presupposition this belief that the Bible is the word of God, and the Bible is true on all events about which it speaks. It is true and truthful, factual, correct when it speaks about historical events. I am not out to prove that right now. I am just telling you what my presupposition is. It is a belief supported by a number of factors, but ultimately resting on faith. We have to start somewhere as a foundation of knowledge, whether it is our self, whether it is other scholars whether it is something revealed from God. I start with these two truths (1) God exists and (2) the Bible is his word. So then, if proof of the Bible is not the goal, what is the goal?

1. The Apologetic goal

I have two goals in mind. My first goal is to address some of the scholarly presuppositions, so that we grow in our discernment of reading scholarly discoveries and benefit from the good without swallowing the whole interpretation that might be given. For example, scholars agree that there are many ancient flood stories, several in the ancient near east and others throughout the world. That is agreed on. Nobody really disputes that. How to understand the origins of those stories is not agreed on, though some scholars will present their interpretation as though it is fact. They will tell you how the stories all came to be. But that is a theory coming out of their own presuppositions. The goal is to grow in our ability to learn from history without uncritically accepting an interpretation about the historical findings.

2. The Interpretive goal

My second goal is to help you grow as an interpreter of Scripture by better understanding the literature and culture in the Bible. In fact, this is where the more important benefit lies. Critics of the Bible raise some very good questions. And these challenges force us to consider more carefully what we have in the Bible. The study of ancient near eastern literature and culture has provided us with good answers to skeptical questions. But answering the critic is not the primary benefit. The primary benefit is that in the end, thanks to the critic, we understand the Bible better. They required us to do some hard work and careful thinking. They are keeping us accountable to our claims about the Bible. That's a healthy thing.

So, as we spend a little time now answering some questions, I hope you will be strengthened in your ability to defend the historicity of the Bible. Even more, I hope you will have better insight into how to read and interpret the Bible yourself. You may not care much about the questions, but I can assure you, the answers turn out to be pretty helpful for future study.

What is the Documentary Hypothesis?

Now, we are going to have to limit our discussion somehow, because the historicity of the Bible is a huge topic. I am going to focus in on the documentary hypothesis because this is a primary view

about the books of Moses for non-evangelical Bible scholars and because it is something you will likely come into contact with whether you know it or not.

Scholars do not agree on the details of the hypothesis. There are a lot of versions out there. Here is the basic idea. We start with some very good observations, like, "If Moses wrote the Pentateuch, where did he get his source material from for all of Genesis, the creation, the flood, Abraham, and so on? Moses was not there. How does he know that stuff? And who wrote the end of Deuteronomy about his death? He did not write about that did he? So, who wrote it?" These are good, basic source questions which grew into full-blown skepticism.

In 1878, in his *History of Israel*, the German scholar Julius Wellhausen promoted the view that the Pentateuch and the book of Joshua were but together by a later editor who worked from four different sources. Maybe you have heard about this. It is the JEDP idea, the J or yahweist source, the E or elohist source, the P or priestly source, and the D or Deuteronomic source. So today, if you read a moderate or liberal commentary on the Pentateuch, the author will spend a good bit of time arguing which parts of a particular passage come from JEP or D. The J source uses the name Yahweh and provides a more primitive view of God. The E source uses the name Elohim and is generally associated with the Northern kingdom of Israel. The P source focuses on temple ceremony. It is the priestly source. It desires to centralize power in Jerusalem. And the D source focuses on one God who has made covenant with one people.

After Wellhausen, the German Scholar Martin Noth, working in the second half of the 20th century, is generally credited with the refinement of the Documentary hypothesis that is broadly accepted. He argued that the first four books of the Pentateuch were written by J and E and then edited by P, the priestly source. And then the D source wrote Deuteronomy. All of this is said to have been written well after king David, so not anywhere near Moses in the 1400s BC. J is said to be the earliest around 850 BC and the D the latest around 621 BC. The date of D is more precise because it is argued that the King of Judah Josiah did not actually find the book of the law in his reforms of the temple, but that under his reforms the book of Deuteronomy was written. It is a going back and rewriting history.

To get into the theory much further would take a lot amount of time, especially considering the significant amount of disagreement among scholars on how to decide who wrote what. So, with any given passage, you have lots of different people arguing how to divide it out between JED and P. We could ask, "Why believe in this theory anyway?" The disagreement among documentary hypothesis scholars on the vast majority of detail, suggests that the hypothesis is not really that helpful. It does not get us to an end result or into further understanding. A number of scholars, and I think Robert Alter, the Jewish author that I have quoted, would fit this category. They would reject the usefulness of trying to trace back the sources. Instead, they have decided to focus on the literature we do have, rather than an imaginary theory on how that literature came to be. The more this newer group of biblical scholars study the Pentateuch, the more they affirm that we have got a unified work of literature that bears the stamp of one author. So, not all non-evangelical scholars are going to agree with the documentary hypothesis or even with its usefulness. There are other scholars out there who will argue for the unity of authorship for various parts of the Bible. But still the documentary hypothesis is widely commented on or it provides presuppositions that still exist. So, let's consider three of the assumptions made by documentary hypothesis scholars about the literature of the Pentateuch and then see where our answers to those assumptions will lead us.

Assessing the Documentary Hypothesis Assumptions Using Ancient Near Eastern Literature

The first assumption is one that you may have heard of before. This is it.

1st Assumption: The Hebrews were an oral society whose tradition was later gathered and written down.

The idea here is that the text of the Pentateuch came down over hundreds of years as oral tradition. And that tradition contained various versions of similar stories that were available for a later editor to put together in order to form the biblical text.

That some of the early sources of Genesis came down as oral tradition may be true. We don't know. We have notices by the ten toledoth or generations references used to structure Genesis that Moses may have had ancient, written genealogical records at his disposal for some of what he wrote. Details of the other narratives, about Adam and Noah and Abraham and Isaac and Joseph, might have come down in written form or might have come down in oral form. We do not know that. So, the idea about oral transmission of sources prior to Moses might be a true theory. But to suggest that the Hebrews at the time of Moses must have passed down their traditions orally is to reject the cultural milieu in which the Bible says Moses lived. Let me explain that. In other words, major peoples all around Israel were writing things down during the time period of Moses, so why would we assume that Israel was not?

Since we are told Moses grew up in the royal house of Egypt, let's consider Egypt first. If we suppose the history of Moses is true, then what kind of exposure would Moses have had to written texts. Well, Egypt was writing long before Moses. The pyramid texts predate him by 1500 to 1000 years. The *Tale of Sinuhe* is a narrative story from Abraham's period. There is wisdom literature, like the advice from a father to a son against adultery that looks very biblical. There are also hymns, like the *Hymn to the Sun* from Moses' own time period, which elevates one god above all others. There are royal records, including records of military campaigns written by officials out in the field, providing a parallel for how we might imagine Moses and some of his co-officials, like Joshua, writing down events as they happened in the field.

Egyptian sources

Example	Year	Origin	Type	Significance
Pyramid texts	29 th -25 th century	Egypt	Pyramid texts	Shows early theological sophistication
Tale of Sinuhe	1960 BC	Egypt	Narrative	Gives picture of the times of Abraham
Instruction of Vizeier Ptah-hotep	2450 BC	Egypt	Wisdom	Example of ANE wisdom advice including advice against adultery
Universalist Hymn to the Sun	1413-1377 BC	Egypt	Hymn	Elevates one god above all others and asserts self-existence
Hymn of Victory of Mer-ne-Ptah	1230 BC	Egypt	Hymn/royal annal	Mentions Israel as a people not in Egypt
Annals of Thutmose III	1490-1436 BC	Egypt	Royal annals	Royal officials recorded campaigns in the field, which may also be supposed of Moses.

So, here is our response to the assumption that the Pentateuch came down as oral tradition.

Response to the 1st Assumption: *By the time of the life of Moses, the empires of the Ancient Near East were all producing written records.*

The record given to us in the Pentateuch fits with the times in which it claims to have been produced. Our response is not only that Egypt was writing during the time of Moses, but that all the major empires were writing. The Sumerians were writing. The Hittites were writing. The Babylonians were writing. We have king lists and flood stories and Hammurabi's law code. We have all the suzerain-vassal treaties. We have the Armana letters, around the time of Joshua's conquest of the promise land, written by Canaanite rulers to Egypt asking for help against invaders. No help came.

Other sources

Example	Year	Origin	Type	Significance
Sumerian king lists	Early 2 nd millennium	Sumer	List form	Genealogical lists as found in Pentateuch Refers to a flood Long lives of kings before flood, not after
Gudea King of Lagash	2143-2124 BC	Sumer	Royal annal	Dreamed of a pattern of a temple he must build parallel to a heavenly temple.
Royal annals	2 nd millennium	Hittite kingdom	Royal annal	Covenant lawsuit material – what happens when a vassal breaks covenant
International treaties	2 nd millennium	Hittite kingdom	2 nd mill. treaty form	Parallels treaty form used in Pentateuch
Code of Hammurabi	18 th century BC	Babylon	Law code	Parallels to Pentateuch law code
Armana letters	14 th century BC	Canaanite	Letter	Rulers ask Egypt for help against attacking force. Could be a reference to the conquest of Canaan by the Israelites.

That is our first assumption that the text came down orally. The assumption that the Hebrew tradition was not written as it happened but passed down orally over hundreds of years before being put into written form. We can reject that assumption for the writings that come from the time of Moses. Peoples were writing. Moses could have written just as the Bible says Moses wrote.

Another assumption by supporters of the documentary hypothesis, is that the style of the Pentateuch is best explained by various authors.

2nd Assumption: *The style of the Pentateuch is best explained by various authors.*

So, we are going to have to consider some examples of style. And here are three points of style that scholars have noticed.

1. *First, the name used for God is varied throughout the Pentateuch.*

For example, the first account of Creation in Genesis 1:1-2:3 uses the name Elohim usually translated as God in English, whereas the second account of Creation in Genesis 2:4-25 consistently uses Yahweh Elohim, translated as LORD God. Why do that? Why just use the name Elohim in basically the first chapter and the name Yahweh in the second chapter? Well, some scholars suggested that one author wrote the first account, another author wrote the second account, and a third person put the two accounts together.

2. *Second, shifts occur in some texts between the 1st person and the 3rd person.*

This happens more in the Psalms and the prophets. You will be reading along as the prophet speaks about God in the 3rd person, “The Lord says to Israel...” and then the text will switch to first person, “I say to you O Israel...” And you are left for a moment wondering who is the “I”? And then you figure out that it is the Lord. It just switched. Well, for example, in Exodus 3:15, where Moses is supposed to tell the people the LORD God has sent him, he then is to switch into first person as though speaking for God and say, “This is My name forever and this is my memorial name to all generations.” So, there is supposed to be a switch from 3rd person about God to 1st person as though God is speaking directly.

To be honest, when I read that sort of thing, I just think, “Well, that is the style of the Bible.” But some scholars think it indicates two different styles of two different writers, one who wrote in 1st person and another who wrote in 3rd person, and then they get mashed together by an editor.

3. Third, repetition and doublets are used regularly.

I mentioned the issue with doublets in our Isaac and Jacob lesson, where you have two stories of meeting a wife at a well or two stories of lying about a wife being your wife. And documentary scholars would say, “See, two different authors producing different versions of a story put together later by an editor.” Along with doublets we frequently see direct repetition in biblical text. For example, a person will repeat almost word for word what the Lord or some other person has said to them, such as when Abraham’s servant takes up 5 Bible verses in Genesis 24:37-41 to repeat exactly what Abraham had just said in verses 3-8 at the beginning of the chapter. In our day that kind of repetition within the same chapter would be considered poor style. Even more difficult to swallow is the major repetition that happens in Exodus 36-40. This is typically where you stop reading Exodus, where the text repeats all the different materials needed to put together the tabernacle in the same language just used by God when he gave the vision of the tabernacle to Moses in chapters 25-30. What’s up with all that repetition killing the flow of the narrative for us modern readers?

These are all logical questions that come up just from observing the stylistic curiosities in the biblical text, from the different names of God to the switches between 1st and 3rd person to frequent repetition of exact phrases or blocks of text. And for modern authors that can look like bad style. The documentary hypothesis scholars claim these stylistic quirks are examples of various sources being edited by a final author. That is how they explain the bad style.

And that sounds logical. But then archaeology started giving us a multitude of written documents from the time of Moses for us to consider. And to be honest, this was not material that was available to Julius Wellhausen. He did not have these archaeological finds when he was trying to figure this stuff out. What we find is that ancient near eastern literature uses various names for the same god in the same document, shifts from 1st person to 3rd person in a passage, and repeats dialogue word for word in the same text. There is a well-preserved example in the Hittite legend. You can look this up on the internet. It is called King Kirta (or King Keret, depending on who is translating the title), and not only does it include shifts from 1st to 3rd person as you are going along, but it also includes this section of a dream given to King Kirta. It is a long dream and it is given to him by the god El and then it is all repeated verbatim as Kirta carries out the instructions that he was given by El. It is very much like the vision for the tabernacle Moses receives and then carries out.

So, then here is our response to the assumption about style implying various authors.

Response to the 2nd Assumption: On the contrary, the style of the Pentateuch matches the style of other ancient near eastern documents which are presumed to be written by one author.

The logic made sense, but the assumption proved false. Rather than suggesting multiple authors, these quirks of biblical style suggest that the Pentateuch fits well within the style preferences of the ancient near eastern literature. We have to step outside our cultural prejudice on what denotes good style and that will allow us to then consider the effect accomplished by the style the ancients used. So, instead of seeing the two names of God in Genesis 1 and 2 as suggesting different authors or poor writing, we are led to ask, “Why would the same author use these two different names. Why Elohim in the first story and Yahweh in the second?” If I understand that as being intentional, that changes how I approach the text. Now I am asking, “What is the author, what is Moses communicating?” Now, I might come to recognize that the name Elohim communicates to the ancients that we are speaking about God as supreme who rules over everything, the God who creates everything. That is what I get from the name Elohim. And then the same God who is Elohim is also Yahweh. And when we are using the name Yahweh Elohim that suggests immanence or presence of God with man. He is the one who brings man into covenant relationship with himself. Which is more the theme of Genesis 2. So, in this sense the name of God used in the context could

direct us toward the theological theme or could work together with the theological theme of the section.

Likewise, with the repetition, instead of assuming we have bad style or multiple authors, we can accept that we have ancient near eastern style and focus our thinking on, “Why would an author use this style? Why would a servant repeat the exact words of his master or of his Lord?” Well, one reason would be to show obedience. “This is what my master told me. This is what I am doing.” Another reason would be for the biblical author to emphasize a point. If you repeat something twice, even if it is in the mouth of two different people, then it emphasizes the point being made by the speech. Often with biblical dialogue the repetition is meant to highlight a slight change in the words. I have learned this. You should always look. Is there a little change? It sounds like repetition, but it is not quite. So, when Eve repeats the command about the tree, telling the serpent, “God has said, ‘You shall not eat from it or touch it, lest you die.’” The close observer recognizes that Eve added “or touch it” to the command of God and then you are left wondering, “Why did she do that? Why did Eve add that little bit?” It raises a question.

So, we have responded to the second assumption that the style of the Bible implies various authors. And we have said, “No. It actually fits very well with ancient literature.” The third assumption is similar to the style assumption. It is this.

3rd Assumption: The structure of the Pentateuch is best explained by various authors.

I have commented some on structure. If you remember when we talked about the overlapping pattern that biblical authors sometimes use, such as in the story of Isaac overlapping the stories of Abraham and Jacob. That is in Genesis 24-26. And then, there is also the presence of the Judah narrative in Genesis 38 right in the middle of the Joseph story. If we consider this to be bad stitching together of various authors by an editor, we miss what Moses is doing with skillfully weaving Judah into the Joseph story, both as a foil to highlight the character of Joseph and also as the brother who will share with Joseph in the final prophecies regarding the first-born. There is a reason that the Judah story is there. Ancient near eastern parallels can help us recognize these structures that maybe we are not used to in our modern day and thereby help us better interpret what the author is communicating. So, here are two more examples.

1. First, the use of the suzerain-vassal treaty form explains the unity of the various genres found in the book of Deuteronomy.

One of the challenges we are going to see when we read Deuteronomy comes from the shifts of genre through the whole book. You think you are reading one thing and then all of the sudden it becomes something else. You start with historical narrative, and then you move into something like sermon or theological reasoning, which then becomes a long list of laws before you shift into a chapter on curses and a chapter on blessings after which you get more theological reasoning and finally historical narrative which includes a couple of hymns and a report of Moses’ death.

If this is the work of a final editor without any structuring principle, we would have to say that it is a fairly poor job of editing. So, what is the structuring principle. Well, there is more than one. I am going to give you one now, and the other you are going to have to wait until we get to Deuteronomy.

A hundred years ago if you asked a biblical scholar, what genre or literary form contains narrative, law, blessings and curses, they would have said, “None.” We had no archaeological evidence of any such form. Now we have thousands of documents containing this mix of genre. Do you have a guess at what it is? These are the elements we see in the multitude of suzerain-vassal treaties discovered in the ancient near east. We have the title of the great king, a historical prologue, general and detailed stipulations, commands for regular reading and deposition, a call of witnesses, a list of blessing, and a list of curses. All of these elements are present in the book of Deuteronomy. Moses took the suzerain-vassal treaty as a basic form and then he developed it into a fantastic piece of ancient near eastern literature.

And interestingly, these are the elements of a second millennium suzerain-vassal treaty, not a first millennium suzerain-vassal treaty. Scholars have noticed a shift in the pattern from the second millennium to the first millennium. So, before David, in the time of Abraham and Moses, you would encounter one form and after David during the time of the divided kingdom and the exile you would encounter another form. The changes involved dropping out the historical prologue, dropping out the requirement of deposition and reading, and no more blessings. It was a streamlining of covenant. Forget our past relationship, who cares, forget the blessings and you can read it or not, that's up to you. What we are left with is the king's title, a call of witness, the stipulations and the curses. Basically, "Do this law, or I will curse you." That is what you get in the first millennium. And it is not the form that we recognize in Deuteronomy, which includes all the older elements, like the command for regular reading and deposition in Deuteronomy 31:10 and 25, a call to heaven and earth as witnesses in Deuteronomy 32:1, a historical prologue in chapters 1-3, and a list of blessings in 28:1-14.

This is why this is important. The documentary hypothesis theorizes that King Josiah had Deuteronomy written in 621 BC, about 400 years after this second millennium treaty form had become obsolete. So, either Josiah's scribes produced a truly remarkable bit of historical fiction, or Deuteronomy was written according to the form of its times during the second millennium, before David. The historical fact that has come to light in the discover of all these ancient suzerain-vassal treaty documents is that Deuteronomy fits 1400 BC and the time of Moses much better than 621 BC and the time of Josiah. That is the fact. How we interpret that fact is then up to us.

Here is one final example about structure. And it is this.

2. Chiasm explains the repetitions found in the flood narrative while also showing the high level of unity in that story.

The flood narrative in Genesis 6:9 – 9:19 really gets torn apart by the documentary hypothesis with various parts attributed to the J source, other parts to the P source, and other parts to some final editor. One of the observations that supposedly supports various authors is the requirement for Noah to take on board two pairs of all animals in chapter 6 and then the requirement in chapter 7 that he take on board seven pairs of clean animals. For the life of me, I cannot understand why this is proof of more than one author. Critics say this is evidence of two authors because the first author just knew about the two pairs and the second author wanted to make sure there were seven pairs of clean animals. But if that's the case, I say it is also evidence of poor editing. It really would not have been that hard for the editor to adjust one set of instructions to fit the other set of instructions, so that they both match. So, that either in chapter 6 we have two pairs plus seven pairs of clean animals or in chapter 7 we have two pairs plus seven pairs of clean animals. You can really easily put them together. But in the end it is not really that much of a mystery, after all. Why add the seven pairs of clean animals in chapter 7? Well, if we are going to sacrifice some lambs when we get out of the ark, we better have more than two. That's not so hard to figure out. And I did not need the author to tell me that in chapter 6. If he adds it in chapter 7, I can figure out what is going on.

What we have in the flood account is not a stitching together of several stories. What we have is an artfully communicated, unified narrative. We are not trained to look for chiasmic parallels in literature, so we often do not see this. Our western training is much more linear. But once start looking, once you start seeing biblical examples, then you begin to notice parallelism in the Bible. And when that happens you start seeing it quite frequently, because it is there a lot.

For example, with the flood story, have you ever noticed that 40 days of rain is not the only use of the number 40 in the story? Probably not, because we know the Sunday School story and the 40 is just mentioned once. And so, when we read it, we do not even notice that there are two 40s. Or have you noticed that the number 150? And that the number 150 is used twice? As it turns out, the flood narrative is an 11-part chiasm. We start and end with a reference to Noah and his three sons. One reference to Noah and his sons would fit well with what we have seen throughout Genesis, but the double reference, that stands out. That is not happening throughout Genesis. So, to see Noah and his

three sons at the beginning and Noah and his three sons at the end suggests parallelism. And that gets us to start looking. What do we see in between?

A Noah and sons (6:9-10)

B Vow to destroy thru flood/promise to establish covenant (6:11-22)

C Entrance into the ark, clean animals for sacrifice mentioned (7:1-9)

D The Flood begins, 40 days of rain mentioned, reference to year, month, day (7:10-16)

E The Waters prevail for 150 days (7:17-24)

F God remembers Noah (8:1a)

E' The Waters recede for 150 days (8:1-5b)

D' The Flood ends, 40 days after mountains visible, reference to year, month, day (8:6-14)

C' Exit from the ark, clean animals for sacrifice mentioned (8:15-22)

B' Vow not to destroy thru flood/establishment of covenant (9:1-17)

A' Noah and sons (9:18-19)¹

In the second frame in 6:11-22, we have a vow to destroy the earth by flood and a promise of covenant then in 9:1-17 we have a promise never again to destroy the earth by flood and the cutting of covenant. In the third frame, we have in 7:1-9 the family of Noah entering the ark and the clean animals being mentioned then in 8:15-22 the family of Noah exiting the ark and the clean animals being mentioned. In the fourth frame we have in 7:10-16 40 days of rain and the mention of the year, month and day, then again in 8:6-14 another mention of 40 days after the appearance of the mountain tops and the mention of the year, month and day. Finally, in 7:17-24 the waters prevailing for 150 days followed in 8:1b-5 by the waters receding for 150 days.

In the very center of the chiasm we have these words in 8:1a, "But God remembered Noah and all the beast and all the cattle that were with him in the ark..." We know this does not mean that God forgot all about Noah, like he got distracted." The language that God remembered is covenantal language. It means that God brought to mind the promise he had made to Noah. He did not forget Noah during the chaos of the storm, but he carried him through just as he had promised.

The structures of ancient near eastern literature do not support the assumption that the Pentateuch is best explained by various authors. To the contrary, we can now give this response.

Response to the 3rd Assumption: *The structure of the Pentateuch is best explained as well unified literature employing ancient near eastern forms.*

The archaeological discoveries in ancient near eastern literature have done what archaeological findings steadily do, prove that the Bible is the most accurate source text for its times. And yet, I believe that the many scholars will continue to hold the Bible up to higher standards than they hold any other ancient text and will continue to feel the need to distance their own opinions from the assertions of scripture. I believe many scholars hold to two basic presuppositions that affect how they think and feel about the Bible.

First, there is widespread anti-supernaturalism in the modern scholarly world. This underlies everything. Scholars are under pressure to reject the belief that God acts in our world. So, if Deuteronomy predicts that a king will reign in Israel or that Israel will experience the full curse of destruction and exile, then Deuteronomy must have been written after those events because prophecy is supernatural and the supernatural does not happen. Therefore, prophecy does not happen. Maybe it got written just before the events happened, so that it is a pretty good guess. A 621 BC writing of Deuteronomy removes all the supernatural from the prophecies in the book.

¹ This chiastic outline depends on examples provided by Duane Garrett in *Rethinking Genesis*, David Dorsey in *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament*, and Gordon Wenham in *WBC Vol. 1 Genesis 1-15*.

This anti-supernatural bias can underlie the view of scholars who otherwise seem positive about the biblical story. Recently, I listened to a couple of interviews of the Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson who champions many conservative values and clearly loves Old Testament narrative. Yet, as you listen closely, you discern that Peterson's view of God and the stories of the Bible align with a rejection of the supernatural. He is a psychologist, and he has a very high view of the human mind. And that is how he understands religion. Religion is a product of the human mind. He loves the story of creation, and of Cain and Abel, and of Jesus, because he sees in these stories support for his worldview, his narrative, which while supporting conservative values, rejects the objective existence of God. So, when we take something potentially good from a scholar like Jordan Peterson, we also need to recognize what are his presuppositions. What are underlying his views and his claims.

Along with this anti-supernatural presupposition, some scholars also hold to an anti-religious bias. Not only does the Bible purport supernatural interaction in the world, but the Bible itself is a religious book and so some scholars assume cannot be taken seriously as history. If the source is religious, then it cannot be objective.

We can push back against both presuppositions. It is actually irrational to claim a belief in God and then assert that God cannot work in the world supernaturally. If belief in God is rational, then belief that God acts is rational. If God is real, then we should expect supernatural events to be part of the historical record. Or we have a false record.

And though religious people are biased, that does not mean that religious people cannot produce accurate history. All people are biased. A Marxist historian is going to lean towards an interpretation of history that supports his views. An atheist is going to lean towards an interpretation that supports his views. And both will choose what to write about in history according to what their worldviews claim to be significant. All people have presuppositions that underlie their interpretation of the world and their interpretation of history. Everybody acts out of a worldview.

As Christians, we can learn from all people. We owe a great debt to archeologists and scholars of ancient history, whether Christian or not Christian, who have provided us with invaluable insight into the times and cultures that surround biblical history. We should be grateful. At the same time, we should also be discerning, recognizing that scholars are going to interpret the historical data according to their own presuppositions. And they usually are not going to tell you what those presuppositions are.

These are my presuppositions. The LORD God he is true. He has created the heavens and the earth. He is not defined by us. We are defined by him. He is not a result of our imagination. We are a result of his imagination. And because he is good and powerful and loving and wise, he has communicated to us through his word, the Bible.

Reflection Questions

1. Have you encountered the Documentary hypothesis before? (That the first five books were not written by Moses or any other one author but are a collection of writings by various sources identified as JEDP which were put together by a final editor.)
2. Have you heard that the Hebrews handed down their traditions orally, not writing them until much later? What stands out to you in the two above charts providing samples of ANE literature?
3. Consider the responses made to the 2nd and 3rd assumptions about ancient near eastern style and ancient near eastern structure. How could understanding the style and structure help us to interpret Scripture? What principles come to mind?
4. If a scholar does not believe that supernatural events can occur, then how might that belief affect his or her interpretation of the biblical text?
5. What do you think about the statement, "We cannot trust religious texts as accurate historical sources?" What are some of the pros to that idea and some of the cons?