

Until fairly recently a majority of scholars espoused the Documentary Hypothesis to explain the composition of the Pentateuch, the first five Old Testament books. This theory asserts that these writings were actually based on four books, none still extant, referred to (for ease of identification) as J (Yahwist or Jahwist), E (Elohist), D (Deuteronomist) and P (Priestly Code). The main arguments for this theory are the existence of repetition and apparent contradiction within these five books, as well as the use of different names for God. According to this hypothesis:

J, the oldest document, included large portions of Genesis, passages from Exodus and Numbers and a few short texts from Deuteronomy. In Genesis, J referred to God as Yahweh (“the Lord”) because the Biblical author believed that people began using the name Yahweh early in human history (see 4:26, a “J” text).

E, written somewhat later, followed the same story line as J. In Genesis, E referred to God as Elohim (the more generic “God”) rather than as Yahweh because, according to adherents of E, the name Yahweh was not revealed until the exodus period (see Ex 3:15, an “E” text).

D was essentially the book of Deuteronomy. Second Kings records that Hilkiah the priest located a copy of the Law of Moses when the Jerusalem temple was being restored. According to the Documentary Hypothesis, however, Deuteronomy was drafted at this time as a pious fraud to justify Josiah’s reformation.

Rewritten during the postexilic period following the return from the exile, included large portions of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. In Genesis, P referred to God as Elohim since, like E, its author(s) assumed that the divine name, Yahweh, was first revealed at the time of the exodus (see Ex 6:3, a “P” text).

According to this theory the four documents were composed independently of one another but were over a prolonged period of time compiled and edited into the present Pentateuch, with much of the original E material deleted. Still, they argued, the Pentateuch retains

significant redundancy and contradiction because the four documents often tell the same or similar stories with inconsistent details. Thus, for example, [Genesis 1:1 — 2:4a](#) was identified as the P account of creation, while the rest of [Genesis 2](#) was seen as a throwback to the earlier J rendition.

In refuting these arguments it is helpful to recognize that repetition was an essential part of ancient Near Eastern narrative. Storytellers often repeated details two or more times (sometimes from a different perspective or with differing details), and narrators often recounted parallel stories (cf. the three instances of a patriarch passing off his wife as his sister: Abraham in chs. 12 and 20 and Isaac in ch. 26). For a much later example, see the accounts of Paul's conversion in [Acts 9,22 and 26](#). In an ancient narrative, repetition was viewed not as evidence of multiple authorship but as confirmation of a single author.

The argument about the names Yahweh and Elohim may be based on a misunderstanding of certain passages, such as [Exodus 6:2-3](#). This passage appears in the NIV as "I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them." This rendering makes it sound (in line with the P portion of the Documentary Hypothesis) as though the patriarchs did not know the name Yahweh ("the LORD"), thus allowing such scholars to attribute to J the passages in Genesis referring to Yahweh. But the text may alternatively be translated, "I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty. And my name is the LORD. Did I not make myself known to them?" Rendered in this way, these verses do not assert that Abraham had never heard of "the LORD."

Many scholars today have abandoned the Documentary Hypothesis, agreeing that it is based on a faulty understanding of ancient Near Eastern literature and that it contributes nothing helpful to our understanding of the Pentateuch.