

THE EVOLUTION *of* ADAM

WHAT THE BIBLE DOES AND DOESN'T
SAY ABOUT HUMAN ORIGINS

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Introduction

Why This Book?

Evolutionary theory has been around for generations, but in recent years two factors are bringing the issue back into the public eye. The first is the relentless, articulate, and popular attacks on Christianity by the New Atheists. Jerry Coyne, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and others have aggressively promoted evolution and argued that evolution has destroyed the possibility of religious faith, especially a faith like Christianity, whose sacred writings contain the story of Adam, the first man created out of dust several thousand years ago. The second factor has been well-publicized advances in our understanding of evolution, particularly genetics. The Human Genome Project, completed in 2003, has shown beyond any reasonable scientific doubt that humans and primates share common ancestry.

Evolution has crept back into the popular consciousness and has become a pressing issue for many Christians because evolution is typically understood to challenge, if not simply undermine, the story of origins presented in the Bible. Here my goal is not to arrive at final solutions, and it is certainly not to cover the many vital, complex, interwoven issues that evolution has brought to the theological table.¹

My goal is to focus solely on how the Bible fits into all of this. The biblical authors tell a very different story of human origins than does science. For many Christians, the question that quickly surfaces is how to accept evolution and also value Scripture as God's Word.

In other words, “If evolution is true, what do I do with my Bible?” Even limiting the focus this way is far more than any one book can adequately handle. My intention here is somewhat modest. I hope to clear away some misunderstandings and suggest different ways of thinking through some perennial problems in order to put interested readers on a constructive path and thus hopefully encourage further substantive discussion.

Let me begin by explaining whom I see as my primary audience. I make two assumptions about my readers. The first is that they consider themselves Christian, of whatever tradition or stripe, and so respect Scripture and recognize that what it says must be accounted for somehow. A significant subset of this group is an evangelical readership, particularly in an American context. Evangelical readers generally tend to live more in the tensions between their deep, instinctual commitment to Scripture and the challenges to that commitment that arise in life in the modern world. Often those challenges come from the natural sciences. This type of burden does not seem to be as pressing in either mainline forms of Christianity or in fundamentalism, and in saying so I mean no slight to either. I am simply addressing here the audience that will likely connect more immediately to the types of arguments laid out in this book and the *need* for engagement that I presume about my readers. I also want to suggest that the matter of evolution, particularly as it touches notions of biblical authority and a historical Adam (the heart of the evolution challenge), seems to me—at least in my experience—more particularly an American evangelical problem than a British evangelical problem. I therefore expect that not all self-identified evangelicals will recognize their own frame of mind in this book (although I still hope something might be gained from reading it).

Second, these same people are convinced, for whatever reason, that evolution must be taken seriously. They may not all agree on how specifically life has evolved, but they accept that evolution is the proper word to describe the process. My aim, therefore, is not to convince people that the Bible is important, nor is it to make people see that evolution is true. My aim is to speak to those who feel that a synthesis between a biblically conversant Christian faith and evolution is a pressing concern. And my purpose here is certainly not to undermine the faith of those who see things differently.

I also wish to state—however briefly—my own precommitments as I engage this topic. My Christian faith is summed up in the Apostles’

and Nicene Creeds, which are expressions of broad Christian orthodoxy. More specifically to the points that will occupy us below, I believe in the universal and humanly unalterable grip of both death and sin, and the work of the Savior, by the deep love and mercy of the Father, in delivering humanity from them. I also try to follow the teachings of Scripture as a whole and Jesus in particular in my life as a follower of Christ—as a husband, father, churchgoer, scholar, and human being.

With respect to Scripture, which is a topic that the ancient creeds do not address, I have sketched some of my views in a previous book.² I do not assume that readers of this book will have read that one, so allow me to state briefly my main thesis since it sits not too far in the background of virtually every topic I cover here.

The most faithful, Christian reading of sacred Scripture is one that recognizes Scripture as a product of the times in which it was written and/or the events took place—not merely so, but unalterably so. In my aforementioned book I tried to advocate for this commonly held position by drawing upon the analogy of the incarnation. As Jesus, the Word, is of divine origin as well as a thoroughly human figure of first-century Palestine, so is the Bible of ultimately divine origin yet also thoroughly a product of its time.

Stating the matter this way does not provide a solution for how the Bible should be interpreted in its particulars. Rather, it provides a general attitude for how readers today should approach the Bible: we should gladly accept and expect that the Bible will through and through bear the marks of its historical settings. In *Inspiration and Incarnation*, I touch on three specific areas, all of which play some role in this book, but in particular the first and third do: (1) Our knowledge of the cultures that surrounded ancient Israel greatly affects how we now understand the Old Testament—not only here and there but also what the Old Testament as a whole is designed to do. (2) Because Scripture is a collection of discrete writings from widely diverse times and places and written for diverse purposes, the significant theological diversity of Scripture we find there should hardly be a surprise. (3) How the New Testament authors interpret the Old Testament reflects the Jewish thought world of the time and thus accounts for their creative engagement of the Old Testament. It also helps Christians today understand how the New Testament authors brought together Israel's story and the gospel.

Further, this “human dimension” of Scripture is not an unfortunate state of affairs that must be tolerated, an unhappy condescension on God’s part. Instead, the “incarnational” reality of Scripture is—as is the actual incarnation of Christ—a mark of God’s great love for his people, evidence of how low he is willing to stoop in order to commune with his creation. I make no sort of ontological statement here; in other words, I do not suggest that Scripture is a union of divine and human “substances” in the same way that Jesus of Nazareth is. The incarnation is an analogy, a means of explaining one thing in terms of another. I only mean to make the point that we should expect of Scripture the same sort of embrace of the human that Jesus himself willingly took on, even to the point of emptying himself of his divine prerogative and becoming our brother (Phil. 2:6–8). I also emphasize that the incarnation is the grand mystery of the Christian faith—essentially incomprehensible. This by no means diminishes its value as an analogy for Scripture, although I readily admit that it means using such an analogy is hardly the final word—and I have never intended it to be.

Following upon that, I firmly believe that understanding Scripture from the vantage point of those historical circumstances in which it was written or its events took place is a vital responsibility of Christian readers (and where trained biblical scholars can be of help). I do not mean to suggest that historically oriented readings are the only viable approaches. The church has a grand history of contemplative readings of Scripture (*lectio divina*) or other similar methods that are aimed directly at communing with God in a deeply spiritual sense. The historical approach I take in this book is in no way a slight to such readings. Nor do I wish to say that academic readings of Scripture have greater worth than how Christians in general read the Bible for spiritual nourishment.

Yet the topic before us in this book requires nothing less than an enthusiastic engagement of Scripture in context, for the question of evolution cannot be addressed any other way. Hence, I wish to be crystal clear at this point—respecting at the outset differences of opinion on this matter—that the issues I raise in this book and the conclusions (exploratory and tentative at some points) that I reach are an *outworking of my Christian convictions* of what it means to be a responsible reader of Scripture in my time and place. Scripture records a story with deep historical impulses, and thus we must engage Scripture on that level when the situation calls for it, as it does here.

Although there is certainly a core set of convictions that define historic Christian doctrine, I believe that our theological articulations are always works in progress. The truth-value of any theological iteration cannot be judged simply by how well it conforms to past views. Certainly we must be careful to walk the thin line between hardened traditionalism for its own sake and airy speculation for the sake of novelty. Both are wrong, but I take it as axiomatic that a healthy theology is one that shows a willingness—even an expectation—to revisit ways of thinking and changing them when need be. Although veterans of the science-faith discussion will quickly see there is little truly novel in what follows, I realize that at least some readers will be venturing into new territory.

Finally, the title of the book, *The Evolution of Adam*, reflects my contention that our thinking about Adam must change—or perhaps better, continue to change. As will be clear from the chapters that follow, I am not arguing in this book that Adam evolved. Rather, I am arguing that *our understanding of Adam has evolved* over the years and that it must now be adjusted in light of the preponderance of (1) scientific evidence supporting evolution and (2) literary evidence from the world of the Bible that helps clarify the kind of literature the Bible is—that is, what it means to read it as it was meant to be read. Furthermore, all of this can be done in a way that respects and honors the authority of the Bible. Indeed, reflecting on the nature of Scripture like this is the very expression of honor and respect.

“Science and Faith” or “Evolution and Christianity”?

There are many thoughtful books out there that speak to the compatibility of natural science and faith.³ But phrasing it this way is too general and therefore will be of little help in addressing the tensions between evolution and Christianity.

The biblical writers assumed that the earth is flat, was made by God in relatively recent history (about 4,000 years before Jesus) just as it looks now, and that it is the fixed point in the cosmos over which the sun actually rises and sets. Most Christians don’t have a problem in reconciling this biblical view with science. I say “most” because there are groups that do not seem to be convinced. There is in fact a Flat Earth Society,⁴ and one well-known group continues to advocate for a six-thousand-year-old earth where humans and dinosaurs coexisted.⁵

Others contend that the universe only looks old, that God created the cosmos with “apparent age.”⁶ In my opinion, these specific positions are problematic—scientifically and theologically—but I will leave it to others to explain how. As I said, the readers I have in mind here are already committed to keeping Scripture and natural science in conversation. These other views, rooted in a precommitment to read the Bible literally at virtually every point despite evidence to the contrary, avoid engaging science by reinterpreting it to conform to that conviction. To the contrary, it is clear that, from a *scientific* point of view, the Bible does not always describe physical reality accurately; it simply speaks in an ancient idiom, as one might expect ancient people to do. It is God’s Word, but it has an ancient view of the natural world, not a modern one.

Evolution, however, is a game changer. The general science-and-faith rapprochement is not adequate because evolution uniquely strikes at central issues of the Christian faith.⁷ Evolution tells us that human beings are not the product of a special creative act by God as the Bible says but are the end product of a process of trial-and-error adaptation and natural selection. This process began billions of years ago, with the simplest of one-cell life forms, and developed into the vast array of life on this planet—plants, reptiles, fish, mammals, and so forth—and humanity. These humans also happen to share a close common ancestry with primates. Some Christians reconcile their faith with evolution by saying that God initiated and guides this process, which is fine (and which I believe), but that is not the point here. The tensions that evolution creates with the Bible remain, and they are far more significant than whether the earth is at the center of the cosmos, how old it is, and whether it is round or flat.

If evolution is correct, one can no longer accept, in any true sense of the word “historical,” the instantaneous and special creation of humanity described in Genesis, specifically 1:26–31 and 2:7, 22. To reconcile evolution and Christianity, some assert that there was a point in the evolutionary chain where God elevated two hominids (or a group of hominids) to the status of image-bearer of God (Gen. 1:26–27). According to this scheme, “image” is understood as the soul, God-consciousness, or other qualities that make us human. That way of thinking allows evolution and Genesis to coexist somewhat but eventually proves inadequate for me. One reason is that it does little to ease the tensions with the Bible, for this hybrid of

modern and ancient accounts of human origins is hardly what the Bible depicts: two humans created specially by God. This hybrid view does not adhere to the Bible but rewrites it.

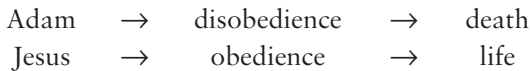
Also, although what “image of God” means in its fullest biblical witness may be open for discussion, in Genesis it does not refer to a soul or a psychological or spiritual quality that separates humans from animals. It refers to humanity’s role of ruling God’s creation as God’s representative. We see this played out in the ancient Near Eastern⁸ world, where kings were divine image-bearers, appointed representatives of God on earth. This concept is further reflected in kings’ placing statues of themselves (images) in distant parts of their kingdom so they could remind their subjects of their “presence.” Further, idols were images of gods placed in ancient temples as a way of having a distant god present with the worshippers.

Genesis 1:26 clearly operates within the same thought world: “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and *let them have dominion* over the fish, . . . birds, . . .cattle, . . . all the wild animals, . . . every creeping thing” (emphasis added).⁹ Humankind, created on day 6, is given authority to rule over what God had made on days 4 and 5. The image of God is not that spark in us that makes us human rather than animal—like reason, self-consciousness, or consciousness of God. In Genesis it means that humans represent God in the world, nothing less but certainly nothing more. This is not to dismiss the question of what makes us human and how humanity uniquely reflects God, especially given the challenge of evolution; but “image of God” is not the biblical way of addressing those ideas.

Attempts to reconcile Genesis and evolution are understandable, but they invariably lead to making some adjustments in the biblical story, and these adjustments always move us away from a strictly literal/historical reading of Genesis toward something else—call it “symbolic” or “metaphorical” or some other term. Unless one simply rejects scientific evidence (as some continue to do), adjustments to the biblical story are always necessary. The only question is what sorts of adjustments best account for the data. Part of this book is aimed at thinking through the parameters for answering that question.

Yet Christians have a bigger problem than dealing with Genesis if they want to reconcile Christianity and evolution: Paul. Here we come to the heart of the matter, what I believe is the ultimate source of concern for Christians who are seeking a synthesis between the Bible and evolution.

After a virtual silence in the Old Testament, Adam makes a sudden and unprecedented appearance in two of Paul’s Letters (Rom. 5; 1 Cor. 15).¹⁰ There Paul draws an important analogy between Adam and Jesus. Just as the first Adam introduced *sin and death* to all humanity through his *disobedience* in the garden of Eden (eating the forbidden fruit), now Jesus, the second Adam (see 1 Cor. 15:47), introduces *life* through his *obedience* (death on the cross and resurrection). The first Adam is a “pattern” for the second (Rom. 5:14), and Paul’s point looks straightforward enough.



For Paul’s analogy to have any force, it seems that both Adam and Jesus must be actual historical figures. Not all Christian traditions will necessarily see it that way, but this is clearly a commonly held assumption today and the root reason why Christianity and evolution are in such tension for many, in my opinion. A historical Adam has been the dominant Christian view for two thousand years. We must add, however, that the general consensus was formed before the advent of evolutionary theory. To appeal to this older consensus as a way of keeping the challenge of evolution at bay is not a viable option for readers today. The same argument from consensus was used against Galileo’s observation that the earth revolves around the sun, and that old consensus eventually (slowly) failed to persuade. We should be cautious not to repeat that same mistake.

The problem is self-evident. Evolution demands that the special creation of the first Adam as described in the Bible is not literally historical; Paul, however, seems to require it. After all, what purpose does the actual obedience of the second Adam (Christ) have if there was no first Adam who disobeyed? So, as the argument often goes, if there was no first Adam, then there was no fall. If there was no fall, there is no truly inescapably sinful condition and so no need for a Savior. If evolution is true, then Christianity is false. When the issue is framed this way, the discussion tends to move toward one of two extremes: Christians either choose Paul over Darwin or abandon their faith in favor of natural science.

As we can see, the issue is not whether science and religion in general can be reconciled. The issue before us is more pressing: can evolution and a biblically rooted Christian faith coexist? When the

biblical authors presented their view that the earth does not move (Pss. 96:10; 104:5), they were only expressing their assumptions about the nature of the cosmos and were hardly touching on matters central to the faith. But with Genesis and Paul on the origin of humanity, we seem to be dealing with biblical teachings that are of far greater importance: they address questions of who we are and why we do what we do. It is easy to see how, for some, a clear choice has to be made: either evolution is right about human origins, or Paul and Genesis are right. That is the dilemma many face. Deep Christian commitments lead one to read Paul and Genesis with utmost seriousness, but scientific sensibilities do not allow one to dismiss evolution.

As I see it, there are four options before us:

1. *Accept evolution and reject Christianity.* Plenty of people find themselves here, but their assumptions about how Genesis and Paul ought to be read may be part of the problem. If one is convinced of evolution and also assumes that the Bible—since it is the Word of God—is required to give a scientifically and historically accurate account of human origins, option 1 may be the only option. One of the purposes of this book is to offer a very different path for learning what to expect from the Bible where it touches on creation.

2. *Accept Paul's view of Adam as binding and reject evolution.* This option means that the overwhelming evidence for evolution must be rejected. Like the first option, it also assumes that the Bible is prepared to give us accurate information about human origins, and so one must choose between the two.

3. *Reconcile evolution and Christianity by positing a first human pair (or group) at some point in the evolutionary process.* This option is seriously considered by respected thinkers who are trying to bring evolution and Christianity into some meaningful conversation. I respect their efforts but, as I hinted above and hope to make clear in what follows, I do not think this is the best way to proceed. It seems to me that this approach is driven by a perceived theological need to preserve some sort of a first pair in order to preserve Paul's theology. The irony, however, is that in expending such effort to preserve biblical teaching, we are left with a first pair that is utterly foreign to the biblical portrait. As I see it, this is enough of a problem to warrant alternate solutions.

This third option also shares one shortcoming with the previous two: a failure to properly address Genesis as ancient literature and Paul as an ancient man. Once those ancient settings are adequately

understood, there will be less of an urgency to align scientific models and biblical literature (an urgency that is far less pronounced in the third option, to be sure). This brings us to the fourth option.

4. *Rethink Genesis and Paul*. An alternate way forward is to reevaluate what we have *the right to expect* from Genesis and Paul. This will help us think synthetically about how Christianity and evolution can be in dialogue. I am writing this book to present one way of pressing forward that synthesis for those interested in such an exercise.¹¹

Overview of the Book

This book is divided into two parts, the first dealing with Genesis and the second with Paul. In part 1 we will look at when Genesis was written and why, which are two related questions. Widely convincing answers to those questions have been offered over the last several generations of biblical scholarship, and becoming familiar with them may help us look more productively at the evolution-Christianity discussion.

Specifically, two important developments in biblical scholarship in the nineteenth century have had significant and deserved influence on how we read Genesis today. One was the new field of biblical archaeology. The other was an innovative answer to long-standing problems concerning when the Pentateuch was written and by whom. These developments are not above criticism, to be sure, but they started conversations that have shed considerable light on *when and why Genesis was written*. Answers to those questions in broad outline have been accepted in some form by most biblical scholars, including many evangelicals. Listening in on that conversation helps disarm the alleged “conflict” between Genesis and evolution, for it shows us that Genesis is an ancient Israelite narrative written to answer pressing ancient Israelite questions.

To anticipate the point, modern scholarship understands the Old Testament as a whole, and Genesis and the Pentateuch in particular, to be Israel’s statement of national self-definition in the wake of Babylonian captivity (586–539 BC). The Old Testament is not aimed at simply providing objective historical information, and certainly not scientific information that conforms to modern expectations. Genesis in particular shows us how Israel thought about itself amid its own

troubled history and among the surrounding nations. Having a good handle on what a portion of Scripture was written to do, especially the opening chapters of Genesis, reorients the kinds of questions we might ask of Genesis when the topic turns to evolution. To be direct, the more we understand the kind of information Genesis is prepared to offer, the less likely we will feel the need to reject Genesis in view of evolution, reject evolution in view of Genesis, or bring the two into uneasy “harmony.” Science and Scripture speak two different languages and accomplish quite different things. My goal in part 1 is to reflect on the “language” of Genesis.

But again, the central concern for many Christians is not so much Genesis but Paul’s appeal to Adam in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15. As mentioned above, for many Christians the analogy requires that both Adam and Jesus be historical figures. But understanding Paul’s Adam is actually quite challenging, much more than a matter of accessing the “plain meaning” of a few verses in his Letters. Paul’s understanding of Adam has a much broader context. Clarifying that context has been the ongoing work of scholars of the New Testament and Second Temple Judaism.¹² The sheer volume of material those scholars have produced—even over the last fifty years—is absolutely overwhelming. Yet some dimensions of those scholarly conversations can filter down to where they are needed, and I hope I will do justice to those discussions. Among other things, to shed light on how Paul handles Adam specifically, we will look at how Paul uses the Old Testament in general.

I will show that Paul’s use of the Adam story serves a vital theological purpose in explaining to his ancient readers the significance for all humanity of *Christ’s death and resurrection*. His use of the Adam story, however, cannot and should not be the determining factor in whether biblically faithful Christians can accept evolution as the scientific account of human origins—and the gospel does not hang in the balance.

In the concluding chapter I offer nine theses for how Adam can be understood today. Some of these theses summarize main points in the book, while others add further points for consideration.

At this moment in history, the state of scientific knowledge is driving Christians to rethink some important issues. The challenge of evolution is here to stay, and its effect on how Christians read Genesis and Paul must be deliberately addressed. It is always a difficult subject to suggest that something outside the Bible can significantly

affect how the Bible is to be read. We will come back to this now and then throughout the course of the book. Let me say here that I understand the theological sensitivities surrounding such reluctance; what we “have always believed” seems to be at the mercy of the dictates of science. The matter cannot be expressed quite so simply, however, as we shall see.

Moreover, as much attention as we might give to preserving the past, it is equally important to give adequate thought to preparing the church for the future. I feel that if we do not engage Scripture with future believers in mind, we will unwittingly erect unnecessary and tragic obstacles to belief. Part of what drives this book is my concern to help prevent that scenario.

1

Genesis and the Challenges of the Nineteenth Century

SCIENCE, BIBLICAL CRITICISM,
AND BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

For Christians, the nineteenth century was rough. In the span of about twenty years, three independent, technical, and powerful forces converged to challenge the historical reliability of Genesis (not to mention other parts of the Old Testament). Separately each of these forces was a handful. Together they formed a relentless tidal wave that has had a lasting and powerful impact on how Genesis is read. The conflicts that ensued are the very stuff of the liberal-versus-conservative divide, particularly in the United States, that a century and a half later still generates considerable heat and precious little light.

Despite this relatively negative appraisal, familiarity with the legacy of the nineteenth century and its lasting impact on Genesis can ease evolution and Christianity toward meaningful dialogue. Understanding that legacy will also let us see more clearly the nature of the conflict that still exists for some today and so perhaps help us move beyond those tensions. In other words, moving forward requires first looking back.

One of those three forces that reared its head in the nineteenth century is natural science's advance and its effect on how we understand the history of our planet. Since the eighteenth century, geology had made its presence known, showing by means of the fossil record that the earth is millions upon millions of years old—far older than most people had taken for granted, far older than a literal interpretation of the Bible allows. Darwin's work in the nineteenth century followed on the heels of these discoveries. His theory of human origins further challenged the biblical view of the origin of life, to put it mildly. Understandably, evolution and the account in Genesis were deemed incompatible on the scientific level.

Almost everyone knows something about the basic impact of evolution—a theory claiming that humans and primates are cousins was bound to get its fair share of press. But the second and third forces, generally lesser-known, are as important for understanding the major shift in reading Genesis.

The second force is developments in biblical studies, often called biblical criticism. Biblical criticism is often understood as being condescending toward the Bible, or even atheistic. It is not uncommon to hear the objection that biblical criticism tends to undermine the Bible and even poison the faith of unsuspecting believers. Unfortunately, this has too often been the case, but such motivations hardly describe the heart of the matter.

Understood in a more neutral fashion, biblical criticism refers to the academic study of the Bible that is marked mainly by a historical investigation into the date and authorship of biblical books. In this sense, evangelical biblical scholars today are engaged in biblical criticism and in many cases find themselves in some level of agreement with secular counterparts (although this observation hardly does justice to the long history of dis-ease). At any rate, in the early years the focus of this investigation was the date and authorship of Genesis; it is even fair to say that the modern academic study of the Old Testament began as a series of questions about who wrote Genesis, which expanded to the Pentateuch as a whole.¹

Biblical criticism is a far less exciting topic than evolution: no media coverage or mass controversy—just a lot of Hebrew and some other ancient languages. But the impact has been significant. The traditional view was that one man, Moses, living in the middle of the second millennium BC, was solely (more or less) responsible for writing the first five books of the Bible. A few premodern readers had already

begun to question the traditional view, however gently, and we will look at two examples below. But it is not until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that we begin to see some earlier questions bubble over into detailed arguments for why the Pentateuch could not have been written by one man at one time.

The issue came to a boiling point in the work of the nineteenth-century German Old Testament scholar Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918), whom we will meet more properly in the next chapter. He proposed a theory about the authorship of the Pentateuch that, although both strongly contested and widely accepted, has had an unparalleled effect on how the Pentateuch is viewed—and Old Testament scholarship has not been the same since. The bottom line is that for Wellhausen and many other biblical scholars before and since, the Pentateuch *as we know it* (an important qualification) was not completed until the postexilic period (after the Israelites were allowed to return to their homeland from Babylon beginning in 539 BC). There were certainly long-standing written documents and oral traditions that the postexilic Israelites drew upon, which biblical scholars continue to discuss vigorously, but the Pentateuch as we know it was formed as a response to the Babylonian exile. The specifics of Wellhausen’s work no longer dominate the academic landscape, but the postexilic setting for the Pentateuch is the dominant view among biblical scholars today.

This is extremely significant. Knowing something of when the Pentateuch came to be, even generally, affects our understanding of why it was produced in the first place—which is the entire reason why we are dipping our toes into this otherwise esoteric pool of Old Testament studies. The final form of the creation story in Genesis (along with the rest of the Pentateuch) reflects the concerns of the community that produced it: postexilic Israelites who had experienced God’s rejection in Babylon. The Genesis creation narrative we have in our Bibles today, although surely rooted in much older material, was shaped as a theological response to Israel’s national crisis of exile. These stories were not written to speak of “origins” as we might think of them today (in a natural-science sense). They were written to say something of God and Israel’s place in the world as God’s chosen people.

Complementing the work of biblical criticism was a third factor, the growing field of archaeology of ancient Israel and the surrounding area, or as it is commonly referred to, biblical archaeology. This field posed serious challenges of its own, in some respects more serious

than the work of Wellhausen and other biblical critics. Wellhausen worked wholly with “internal data,” the Bible itself. But archaeology introduced “external data”: texts and artifacts from the ancient Near Eastern world, Israel’s neighbors and predecessors. These findings have helped us understand more deeply the intellectual world in which the Bible was written. Israel now had a context, which meant that scholars could compare and contrast Israel’s religious beliefs with those of the surrounding nations.

The most famous of these findings are Babylonian texts that look very similar to Genesis 1 and the flood story (Gen. 6–9), both of which we will explore in chapter 3. These texts do not directly affect the question of Adam, which is the central issue for the evolution-Christianity dialogue. Other texts that later came to light are more immediately relevant for Adam, but we will only glimpse at them, leaving our discussion of Adam mainly for part 2. Here in part 1 we will focus on the profound and lasting impact these other nineteenth-century discoveries had—and continue to have—on our understanding of the opening chapters of Genesis in general (chaps. 1–11). Focusing there is not beside the point, however. A proper understanding of the Adam story is directly affected by how we understand Israel’s primordial stories as a whole in light of the nineteenth-century developments in biblical scholarship.

These Babylonian texts helped scholars to see how Genesis functioned for Israel, and in this sense they complemented the internal analysis of Wellhausen and other biblical critics. Placing Genesis in its ancient Near Eastern setting strongly suggests that it was written as a self-defining document, as a means of declaring the distinctiveness of Israel’s own beliefs from those of the surrounding nations. In other words, Genesis is an argument, a polemic, declaring how Israel’s God is different from all the other gods, and therefore how Israel is different from all the other nations.

This is all well and good, but here is the problem: the ancient Israelites, in making this polemical case, freely adapted the themes of the much-older stories of the nations around them. It quickly became self-evident that the rather bizarre Babylonian stories were disturbingly (if only partly) similar to the creation and flood stories of Genesis, which raised the obvious question of the historical value of Genesis 1–11 as a whole: if these chapters look so much like Mesopotamian myth, how can they still be God’s revealed Word? The stories of the early chapters of Genesis may have seemed fanciful to modern

readers beforehand—with a talking serpent and trees with magical fruit. But there was now external, corroborating evidence that Genesis and pagan mythologies were connected somehow, at least indirectly.

It is not hard to understand why traditionalists reacted vigorously and unyieldingly to these two developments in biblical scholarship. For some the truth of the gospel itself was under attack—casting doubt on the historical value of Genesis was only a few steps removed from casting doubt on anything the Bible says, including Jesus and the resurrection. After all, if God is the author of all of Scripture, undermining one part undermines the whole.

Given the assumption that inspiration and historical accuracy are inseparable, conservatives sensed that the trapdoor to the slippery slide to unbelief was cracking open, and it needed to be slammed shut quickly. That is why there was such resistance to biblical criticism of the Pentateuch and to accepting the implications of the ancient Near Eastern evidence. And with all that going on, as if conservatives did not have enough to worry about from biblical scholars, throw Darwin into the mix. Now we have a scientific theory of origins that, along with biblical criticism and biblical archaeology, converged to produce powerfully coherent and persuasive explanations for what Genesis is and how it should be understood. The tensions that resulted were considerable and, from a historical point of view, wholly understandable.

I do not mean to imply that Genesis got a free pass before the nineteenth century. As I mentioned above, European scholars (such as the philosopher Spinoza, 1632–77) began challenging traditional views of Genesis (and other portions of the Bible) as early as the seventeenth century, and geology had already been a force to be reckoned with since the eighteenth century. But the nineteenth century was a profoundly influential time. It did away with any hope for pasting new ideas piecemeal onto old views. Now the one-two-three punch of biblical criticism, biblical archaeology, and science demanded a fresh *synthesis* of new and old.

That synthesis proved to be a difficult step for many to take, for it required rethinking some long-held beliefs about the Bible, particularly regarding its historical value, and whether the books were written by eyewitnesses or long after the events they describe. Instead of synthesis, there was deep conflict, and clear battle lines were quickly drawn. Generations of traditionally minded biblical scholars dedicated their entire careers to defending the Bible from these threats, and separatist Bible colleges and seminaries began dotting the landscape with greater

density. Contemporary evangelicalism and fundamentalism arose out of this conflict; although some of the emotion has subsided, the debris from early bombshells still clutters much of the evangelical and fundamentalist landscape, and neutrality is rare. Those who are part of an American mainline denomination or were reared in evangelical or fundamentalist denominations likely owe their ecclesiastical identity to this unfolding of events; they are living among these old tensions.

The question of Genesis was not settled forever during the nineteenth century—far from it, as anyone familiar with Old Testament studies can attest. Important trajectories were set, but in the same way that evolutionary theory has not stood still since Darwin, neither has Old Testament scholarship. Not every theory posed during that generative era has remained convincing, and some things have been rejected. Biblical scholarship has moved beyond some initially unguarded conclusions, and rightly so. So to be clear, I am not advocating a return to the glory days of the nineteenth century any more than contemporary evolutionists are advocating a return to Darwin.

Still, the nineteenth century was unquestionably a pivotal moment in recent intellectual history, with huge implications for a good many things, including how we read Genesis, and thus also for the evolution discussion. These developments are foundational to the academic study of Scripture, but they are not always understood where they most need to be: in on-the-ground discussions concerning evolution and Christianity. In the remaining chapters of part 1, we will look at these academic developments a bit more closely for what they have to say about when Genesis was written and why, and what difference that makes for how we think about Genesis and evolution.

2

When Was Genesis Written?

I mentioned above that some see biblical criticism as simply undermining or unnecessarily complicating what the Bible says. But a blanket negative appraisal can obscure a seldom-appreciated fact: modern scholarship on the Pentateuch did not come out of nowhere. The question of when the Pentateuch was written and why is not an outside imposition of modern biblical critics. Rather, many of the questions that modern scholars address are generated by the Pentateuch itself and had already captured the attention of some readers long before the modern period (as we will see below). Modern biblical scholarship, whatever its promises and pitfalls—and there are both—grew out of earlier attempts to address obvious questions.

It is hard to appreciate where modern scholarship has landed on the issue of Genesis and the Pentateuch without first understanding how it got there. Toward that end, we begin this chapter by looking at how the Pentateuch itself raises its own questions about who wrote it and when. Then we will move to how the problem of the Pentateuch was generally settled in modern scholarship, and especially in the nineteenth century. This will lead us briefly beyond the Pentateuch to the Old Testament as a whole to see the impact that the Babylonian exile had on the formation of Israel's Scripture as a self-defining statement. Seeing the Old Testament as a whole in this light, and Genesis in particular, can also be a model for how contemporary Christians can appropriate the theology of Genesis.

This chapter intentionally takes a step back from the evolution discussion to sketch a bigger picture of what the Old Testament is and what we have the right to expect from it. Adjusting our expectations about the Old Testament and Genesis is perhaps the first and most important step to take when discussing the relationship between evolution and Christianity. Any meaningful talk of Adam's place in that discussion, which will come up more specifically in the chapters to follow, must take place against that larger backdrop.

The Problem of the Pentateuch

For a very long time, careful readers have noticed that the Pentateuch needs some explaining, since it raises its own questions. This is especially true of Genesis, particularly the creation stories in its opening chapters.¹ These chapters, so pivotal for setting the stage for much of the following drama of the Old Testament, are nevertheless a veritable minefield of interpretive challenges. Seeing these challenges does not require vast learning but arises naturally from the text itself during the normal course of reading. For example:

- In Genesis 1, how can there be days 1, 2, and 3 (1:3–13) before a sun and moon are created on day 4 (1:14–19)?
- Why doesn't Genesis 1 mention the creation of angels, since they are part of God's creation and play such prominent roles later in the Old Testament?
- Why does God say, "Let *us* make humankind" (1:26; 3:22)?
- What does it mean to be made in the image and likeness of God (1:26)?
- How does the formation of one man (Adam, in 2:7) and one woman (Eve, in 2:21–25) relate to the creation of humanity as a whole, male and female (1:26–27)?
- Are Adam and Eve created perfect and immortal?
- Why does God not want Adam to have the knowledge of good and evil (2:15–17)? What does it mean to be like God (3:22) if Adam does acquire that knowledge?
- What drives Adam and Eve to disobey God and Cain to kill Abel?
- Is Adam's sinfulness hereditary in some way?
- Who is really to blame, Adam or Eve?

- Why are Adam and Eve only banished for eating the forbidden fruit (3:22–24) when God said they would die on the very day they eat of it (2:17)?
- If Adam and Eve are the first humans, and Cain their only surviving offspring, how can Cain be afraid of retaliation for murdering his brother (4:13–16)? Where did he get his wife (4:17)?
- Who/what is the serpent in the garden, and what is it doing there in the first place (3:1–7)?
- Why does God need to ask where Adam and Eve are in the garden (3:9)?

These questions are among those asked by the earliest known biblical interpreters—beginning with Jewish interpreters living two hundred years or so before Christ. And these and other questions continued to be addressed by Jewish and Christian interpreters for hundreds of years. No doubt many reading this will recognize a good number of these questions, and one or two may even have been a source of embarrassment in teaching children’s Sunday school. (What teacher has not been asked by a precocious eight-year-old where Cain found his wife?) The above questions come from the first four chapters of Genesis, and this list is not exhaustive. If we continue reading Genesis—the flood story, tower of Babel, Abraham and his descendants—similar questions will come up, and they all require some sort of answer for people who look to the Bible for divine guidance.

For this reason the long history of Jewish biblical interpretation has been anything but bashful about engaging the many interpretive challenges of Genesis.² These writings are so voluminous that theological libraries have shelf after shelf of commentaries and other books dealing with how Genesis and the rest of the Bible were handled by these early interpreters—apparently showing that there has always been a need to apply a lot of energy and creativity in addressing a myriad of interpretive problems. Such creative engagement can be seen in the Dead Sea Scrolls (first or second century BC), other generally pre-Christian Jewish works (Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha), and early interpreters like Philo and Josephus (first century AD). Later Judaism continued such careful interaction with the biblical texts in its official documents (Mishnah and Talmud, second to fifth centuries AD), Aramaic paraphrases of Scripture (targumim, from before Christ to well into the medieval period), and medieval commentaries (midrashim).

Likewise, Christians from the earliest years produced writings that record their own attempts to address the interpretive challenges of Genesis. Second-century church fathers such as Justin Martyr, Melito of Sardis, Theophilus of Antioch, and Irenaeus of Lyons all wrote on Genesis and dealt not only with some of the questions listed above but also with the added concern of showing how the creation narratives and the gospel of Jesus Christ are related. Later writers of the third century (Tertullian, Origen) and fourth century (Cyril of Jerusalem, Athanasius of Alexandria, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa) continued spirited discussions and debates about how to understand the biblical creation narratives. Rounding out our list of early Christian writers is Augustine (354–430), especially his work *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, where he shows, among other things, how much intellectual effort is required to handle Genesis well, and how ill-advised it is to read the creation stories literally.

It is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these [cosmological] topics, and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation, in which people show up vast ignorance in a Christian and laugh it to scorn.³

This is not the place to look into the vast history of premodern Jewish and Christian interpretation on Genesis; we are only scratching the surface here. My point is that Genesis is not now and never has been an easy book to understand. It raises its own questions and requires skill and learning to handle well; thoughtful people have been doing that since long before the modern era. To be sure, some may be convinced that answers to at least some of these questions are clear, but it would not take much digging to appreciate the diversity of compelling opinions offered on some of these questions. (In chap. 6 we will look at some of that diversity concerning Jewish interpretations of Adam.)

What distinguishes modern biblical scholarship from some of this early history we have just glimpsed is not the pointing out of ambiguities and inconsistencies in Genesis. That is old hat. Rather, modern scholars have tended to focus on the historical questions raised by those ambiguities and inconsistencies; namely, how did such an ambiguous and inconsistent text come to exist in the first place? In other words, the questions are about authorship and date. In addition to ambiguities and inconsistencies, an added impetus for asking these questions

of Genesis pertains to perceived anachronisms. The following reflect these various modern concerns at various points in Genesis:

- Why are there two such clearly different creation stories at the very beginning of the Bible? (1:1–2:3 and 2:4–25)⁴
- Why is proper sacrifice mentioned so suddenly at the dawn of time? Why does it play such a big role with Cain and Abel? (Gen. 4)
- Why is the flood story so choppy, repetitive, and internally inconsistent? (Gen. 6–9)
- Why are there two stories of the nations being dispersed? (Gen. 10 and 11:1–9)
- Who is Melchizedek? How can he be a priest of “God Most High” way back in Abraham’s day? (14:18)
- Why are there two covenant-making stories with Abraham? (Gen. 15 and 17)
- How can Abraham be described as a law keeper long before the law was given? (26:5)
- How can the concept of Israelite kingship be mentioned long before Israel existed as a nation? (36:31)

These and other questions (summarized later in the chapter) led modern biblical scholars to question seriously—and eventually reject—the traditional view that Genesis and the Pentateuch were written in the second millennium BC by one man, Moses. Again, modern scholarship is hardly beyond fault, and all arguments need to be judged on their own merits. But modern biblical scholars, beginning especially in the eighteenth century, did not create a problem where there had been none. They were heirs to a long-standing history of probing the meaning of Genesis, because Genesis itself demands close inspection. Genesis generates its own questions.

Two Early Examples

The question of authorship that defines much of modern scholarship is not an entirely modern issue. Let me illustrate with two examples. The first concerns Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Pentateuch. Deuteronomy is largely a series of speeches by Moses, given on the brink of the promised land. (He was not allowed to enter Canaan; see Num.

20:12.) The traditional view is that Moses wrote this book along with the other four, but Deuteronomy nowhere claims that. More important, the content of the book argues against it. Specifically, the beginning and end of Deuteronomy raise serious questions about Moses's role in writing Deuteronomy, and at least one early interpreter from about AD 400, whom we will meet in a moment, picked up on this.

The first five verses of Deuteronomy present the entire book as a third-person account *about* Moses. Thus in 1:5 we read, “Moses undertook to expound this law as follows,” followed by a third-person account of what Moses said. It seems that someone other than Moses wrote this (see also 4:41, 44; 5:1). In 1:1 we see a more compelling piece of evidence. We are told that the following words are what “Moses spoke to all Israel *beyond the Jordan*” (emphasis added). This comment *about* Moses, in the *past* tense, is spoken by someone who apparently made it into *Canaan*—on the other (west) side of the Jordan River from where Moses gave his speeches on the plains of Moab. According to Numbers 20:12 and Deuteronomy 32:48–52, Moses never made it into Canaan, and so it is safe to conclude that Moses did not write at least the opening portion of the book.

Some have tried to maintain Mosaic authorship by saying that the Hebrew phrase translated “beyond the Jordan” is a fixed geographic term—like “The East River” or “South Central Los Angeles” today; these locations are “east” or “south central” regardless of where the speaker is. So, as the argument goes, perhaps “beyond the Jordan” simply means “East Jordan,” which some believe opens the door to the possibility that Moses could have written Deuteronomy 1:1–5. But this approach cannot gain traction. First, we still have the rather odd scenario of Moses's writing about himself in the third person and in the past tense. Second, the same Hebrew phrase “beyond the Jordan” is spoken by Moses in Deuteronomy 3:25 and 11:30 and refers to the promised land: west of the Jordan. In other words, “beyond the Jordan” means just what it says: the side you are not on. It is a relative geographic term, not a fixed one.

There is good reason, therefore, to conclude that the first five verses of Deuteronomy—which sets up the entire book—are indisputably written by someone who made it to the promised land after Moses died. But there is no indication of how long afterward. I suppose Moses's contemporary Joshua is a possible candidate, although there is no real reason to name him specifically. It is true that Joshua is a *possible* author, but only one possibility among many. It is equally possible that

David wrote it, or Hezekiah, or Ezra, or anyone. Raising a possible solution should not be mistaken for argument. The real issue is what is convincing and persuasive. Joshua is a tempting candidate for some because, if Moses is not the author, at least Joshua would be an eyewitness to the events. The concern for some seems to be the accuracy of what is recorded, which would allegedly be assured if a contemporary of Moses wrote Deuteronomy. But enlisting Joshua as a candidate is arbitrary and will only be convincing if it finds support elsewhere. A reluctance to see Deuteronomy as written long after Moses's lifetime is not a good-enough reason to insert Joshua's name.

The report of Moses's death in chapter 34 is an even bigger problem, for it suggests a time much later than that of Moses. Specifically, verses 6 and 10 sound as though they were written a good time after Moses died. After we read of Moses's death and burial, verse 6 says, "No one knows his burial place *to this day*" (emphasis added). Verse 10 adds, "*Never since* has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses" (emphasis added). The fact that his gravesite is unknown suggests that a lengthy time has transpired.⁵ To maintain Mosaic authorship, one would need to argue that Moses wrote about his future death in the third person and past tense and that he also anticipated that his gravesite would become unknown. In my opinion, this is an extremely unlikely scenario. Verses 6 and 10 also make very unlikely the notion that Joshua is responsible since that would mean that within a few short years the eyewitnesses had trouble locating Moses's burial site. The same holds for verse 10. This statement makes little sense if only a generation or two (or three or four) has transpired. The whole gravity of verse 10 is lost unless we presume that a considerable length of time has transpired: "Moses was great, and even after *all this time* no one like him has come along" (emphasis added).

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the book of Deuteronomy comes to us from someone who lived a long time after Moses.⁶ So who is responsible for all this if not Moses? The church father Jerome (AD 347–420), without any fanfare or elaboration, suggested a sober explanation for the account of Moses's death, and this explanation can be seen in one form or another in various modern interpreters. Jerome proposed that "to this day" in Deuteronomy 34:6 refers to the time of Ezra, the mid-fifth-century-BC returnee from Babylonian exile.⁷

One can only speculate whether Jerome thought Ezra was responsible for more than just this one verse; yet we should be careful not to expect more from Jerome than he is prepared to deliver. Nevertheless,

at least in this one instance, Jerome saw a problem that clearly needed an explanation and offered one that anticipates a commonly held view among biblical scholars. Jerome was not adamant about the point, but neither did he seem all that concerned to defend it. And he certainly wasn't undermining the Bible by suggesting that Moses did not write this. He was addressing an interpretive issue and exercised common sense in doing so.

A second early interpreter is the twelfth-century rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra. Ibn Ezra was brilliant and respected. He also was reluctant to break with tradition too quickly—including the tradition that Moses wrote the Pentateuch. Still, Ibn Ezra found some biblical evidence difficult to reconcile to that tradition and was forthright in noting it:

1. Moses did not cross the Jordan (the problem of Deut. 1:1–5).
2. With respect to Moses's writing the Pentateuch, Ibn Ezra refers cryptically to a "mystery of the twelve." The seventeenth-century philosopher Spinoza (see below) understood this to refer to Deuteronomy 27 and Joshua 8:32, where the entire book of Moses was inscribed on an altar that consisted of twelve stones. Apparently the "book of Moses" was small enough to fit on such a small space and so could not have included the entire Pentateuch during Moses's day.
3. Ibn Ezra felt that the third-person account of Moses's life was a problem for Mosaic authorship, citing Deuteronomy 31:9 ("Moses wrote down this law").
4. According to Genesis 22:2, 14, the mountain of God is called Mount Moriah. Moriah is mentioned elsewhere only in 2 Chronicles 3:1, as the site of the temple. By citing this example, Ibn Ezra may have thought that a reference to Moriah in Genesis is anachronistic. Hence the writer of Genesis lived much later and placed a reference to Mount Moriah in Abraham's day to legitimate the temple site. This would require a date at least in the fifth century for Genesis 22:2, 14, since Chronicles was written no earlier than the middle of the fifth century BC (see the discussion later in this chapter).
5. According to Deuteronomy 3:11, the nine-cubit-long bed of iron of Og king of Bashan "can still be seen in Rabbah." This sounded to Ibn Ezra like an explanation for an ancient relic. He attributed this comment to the time of David, who conquered the city (2 Sam. 12:30).

6. At Genesis 12:6, during Abraham's sojourn through the promised land, the narrator comments, "At that time the Canaanites were [still] in the land." Ibn Ezra concluded that this was written when the Canaanites were no longer in the land—pointing to a time after the final conquest of Canaan under David, a thousand years later. Ibn Ezra, understanding the implications of this passage, writes: "There is a secret meaning to the text. Let the one who understands it remain silent."⁸

Ibn Ezra seems to have thought that a date of authorship from around the time of David would explain at least some of what the Pentateuch says. Biblical scholars would later adopt a similar position, for the time of David and Solomon was one of relative peace for this fledgling nation, a good time to compose their national story. Later scholars, however, would also argue that the time of the early monarchy was only the beginning of a writing process that did not come to an end until after the exile, a point that Ibn Ezra was in no position to adopt in his historical moment. Also, unlike Jerome, Ibn Ezra's difficulties with the Pentateuch are numerous, not just with a verse in Deuteronomy. Although Ibn Ezra's list of difficulties is modest, it has raised an important question for later scholars: is the Pentateuch an essentially Mosaic document that was merely updated here and there, or do these examples indicate when Genesis and the Pentateuch as a whole were written (no earlier than the time of David)?

A concerted exploration of that question would have to wait for a different moment in European history, when open questioning of received traditions came into vogue. Such a critical climate arose in Europe beginning in the seventeenth century, and an early formidable and influential figure was the Jewish philosopher Benedict Spinoza (1632–77). In his 1670 work *Theologico-Political Treatise*, Spinoza lays out his views of the Bible as a whole⁹ and spends his share of time on the Pentateuch. He draws explicitly on Ibn Ezra's work but makes a far grander claim: "From all this [Ibn Ezra's list plus his own observations] it is clearer than the noonday sun that the Pentateuch was not written by Moses but by someone else who lived many generations after Moses."¹⁰ That someone, Spinoza argues, was Ezra the scribe, echoing Jerome's suggestion thirteen hundred years earlier but applying it to the entire Pentateuch, not simply to Moses's death in Deuteronomy 34.

Spinoza's work was influential, and his words were a revealing early indication of where things were headed: the widespread belief that the Pentateuch is essentially a document written long after Moses lived.¹¹ As bold as this claim was, it still fell short of a comprehensive theory for how the Pentateuch came to be. Such a theory would have to wait until the next century, when a physician, not a philosopher, would chart a course leading to a true paradigm shift in the dating of the Pentateuch and, in subsequent generations, the entire Bible.

God Has Two Names

Modern Old Testament scholarship began in earnest in the eighteenth century, and questions about Genesis led the way. One issue in particular came to the forefront: why does God have two names in Genesis, Elohim (God) and Yahweh (typically translated LORD)? It is no exaggeration to say that the answers given to that question gave rise not only to the modern study of the Pentateuch but also to Old Testament biblical scholarship as a whole.

The man typically credited for unwittingly spearheading this revolution in biblical scholarship was Jean Astruc (1684–1766), a French professor of medicine and physician to Louis XV. He apparently was quite industrious. In addition to teaching and tending to the French monarch, Astruc also read a lot of Hebrew and came up with a theory about Genesis that formed the basis for the work of every scholar after him, including Wellhausen and beyond.

Astruc was not out to make a name for himself as a biblical scholar. He was just curious as to how Moses could have written Genesis when he was not an eyewitness to the events.¹² In pondering this question, he noticed that Genesis 1 refers to Israel's God as Elohim but that Genesis 2–4 uses the name Yahweh (startling since that name seems to be introduced to Moses only later, in Exod. 3:13–15). Astruc thought the name change in Genesis was interesting because the difference in name coincided with the different perspectives on creation in those chapters. (We will look more at the differences between the two creation stories in chap. 3.)

Astruc wondered if he could detect a similar pattern elsewhere in Genesis, and so he undertook a systematic analysis of the Hebrew text. He concluded that the presence of two names for God is best accounted for by positing two hypothetical, originally independent

documents that he named, rather unimaginatively, A (Elohim) and B (Yahweh). (Astruc's sources ran through the letter M, but the others are not important for us here.) He thought these documents were ancient memoirs that eventually came to Moses, who then arranged them to form the book of Genesis. Wherever those memoirs overlapped in subject matter, Moses laid them side by side (as in Gen. 1 and 2) or wove them together (as in the flood story). In other words, Moses was the editor of Genesis.

Since he was not a trained biblical scholar, Astruc was not confident about his conclusions. He was also concerned that his views would be misused to undermine the Bible, the very opposite of his intention. He was encouraged by a friend, however, and decided to publish his views anonymously in order to subject his theory to professional criticism and to abandon it if need be. Instead of criticism, however, his argument received wide acclaim, thanks in part to the work of Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1753–1827), a biblical scholar whose own work corroborated that of Astruc.¹³

Here is why Astruc's work became important. As later biblical scholars thought more about Genesis and Astruc's idea of memoirs—or “sources,” as they would come to be called—they noticed something: the patterns Astruc saw in Genesis can also be seen elsewhere in the Pentateuch, which suggested that *Astruc's theory of sources for Genesis could also be applied to the entire Pentateuch*. This was a significant shift, for it suggested (1) that not only Genesis but also the entire Pentateuch was *edited* and (2) that the editing process must have happened *long after Moses*, since the Pentateuch has such long-recognized post-Mosaic elements.

With this we have moved beyond Ibn Ezra and Spinoza's procedure of simply pointing out problems in the Pentateuch and offering piecemeal solutions. Now we have arrived at the threshold of a theory that claims to explain how those problems came to exist in the Pentateuch to begin with. Astruc's theory was the key: *different documents written by different authors at different times, compiled together by a later editor*.

For the next generation or two, Old Testament scholars would be working with this basic template to see how best to explain the properties of the Pentateuch. Theories were posed—some accepted, some rejected, some modified—all of which paved the way for crucial and lasting, if also controversial, developments in the nineteenth century.

Wellhausen and a Postexilic Pentateuch

No Old Testament scholar has had more of a lasting impact on his field than Julius Wellhausen.¹⁴ Not unlike Darwin in his field, Wellhausen synthesized a lot of data and developed a theory that caught on quickly with most specialists at the time yet was also hotly contested by others and even maligned and reviled by some. Like Darwin, Wellhausen's ideas have had to be refined, adjusted, and in some cases abandoned as further discoveries came to light. Today many of the details of Wellhausen's arguments no longer dominate the academic conversation, but two general insights remain as a virtually unquestioned foundation for subsequent work: (1) that parts of the Pentateuch were composed over several centuries, and (2) that the Pentateuch as a whole was not completed until after the Israelites returned from exile. Because of Wellhausen's towering importance, it is worth our while to take a few moments and look at the basic outline of his theory.

Wellhausen argued that a careful reading of the Pentateuch reveals various patterns, such as distinct theological viewpoints and use of vocabulary (esp. the names of God). Working from what Astruc, Eichhorn, and several others proposed, Wellhausen grouped together sections of the Pentateuch that exhibited similar characteristics. Wellhausen concluded, as others had before him, that these groupings of texts dispersed throughout the Pentateuch were originally four distinct documents that were put together in the present form by an editor living after the return from exile.

Specifically, Wellhausen identified these four sources (or documents) as J, E, D, and P, and in that order.¹⁵ J stands for "Jahwist" (Astruc's B), whom Wellhausen identifies as an anonymous tenth-century-BC author who hailed from the southern kingdom of Judah and preferred to use Yahweh to refer to God ("Yahweh" is spelled "Jahweh" in German, hence the J). The E (Elohist) source is a ninth-century work from the northern kingdom of Ephraim, reflecting that author's preference to refer to God by the Hebrew word "Elohim." A lot of Genesis is made up of J and E.

Next comes D (Deuteronomist), which stands for Deuteronomy and other parts of the Pentateuch that express similar theological themes. The D source dates to the late seventh to sixth century BC, near the time when the southern kingdom, Judah, was taken into exile in Babylon. The final source, considered postexilic by Wellhausen, is P (priestly, Astruc's A). Like E, this author preferred Elohim. He was

also responsible for the kinds of things that Wellhausen thinks priests would produce: the tabernacle section in Exodus, the regulations in Leviticus, and laws in general—almost anything that sounds like ritual and legalism. According to Wellhausen, all of this was brought together by an editor in the middle of the fifth century BC.

As radical as all this might seem, dividing the Pentateuch into sources was not earth shattering in that academic climate. Even conservative scholars acknowledged (and continue to acknowledge) that there were some sources behind the Pentateuch, although they typically assigned the editing job to Moses, as did Astruc.

Wellhausen was controversial for another reason. He claimed that the editor responsible for cutting and pasting the sources to create the Pentateuch was driven by a striking—for some, disturbing—agenda. Wellhausen argued that the legal and ritualistic material (P), which the Bible says was given to Moses on Mount Sinai, was written last, about one millennium after Moses. The postexilic editor, however, wishing to lend support to priestly authority, *put the law at the very beginning of Israel's history*. His editing job was only partially successful, however, for all sorts of clues were left that people like Wellhausen claimed to have found—such as anachronisms and theological contradictions.

Wellhausen's theory, if correct, completely overturned—frankly, obliterated—any sense of the Pentateuch's value as a historical document, and so one can easily understand the controversy that Wellhausen generated. The historical picture the Pentateuch gives is actually a deception. Only after we untangle the mess created by the propagandist editor and put the sources into their proper order is the true history of Israel revealed. That picture shows a movement of Israel's religion from simple to complex, or better, from free to legalistic, and this is why Wellhausen placed the sources in their particular order.¹⁶

The sources J and E are the earliest, where we see a simple, free, unencumbered relationship with God, devoid of ritual, as when Abraham builds altars wherever he travels (e.g., Gen. 12:8; 13:18). Ritual is a later imposition, which begins with D and starts to squelch spontaneous religious expression. According to Wellhausen, here we see the beginning of Jewish dogma, carefully guarded by the developing ruling and priestly class. Worship is now to be controlled by a clergy and performed under their careful gaze in only one place, the place Yahweh will “choose” (Deut. 12, esp. v. 21): Jerusalem. For Wellhausen, D does not give us a second-millennium-BC, divinely inaugurated, Mosaic legislation that sets the template for Israel's legal history.

Rather, Deuteronomy is revisionist history, mid-first-millennium propaganda, where words are put into Moses's mouth.¹⁷

What D began was carried through with greater force in P. Here Wellhausen saw priests running amok, making all sorts of regulations for what should be sacrificed when, how many, and for what reason. Thus P is legalism pure and simple and, according to Wellhausen, would eventually give rise to Judaism, a religion completely contrary to the spirit of free religious expression depicted in J and E. So D and P and the Judaism that arose from them were a different religion altogether from what the Old Testament itself really describes—provided one knows how to decipher the clues left in the text, which Wellhausen claimed to have done. For Wellhausen, the law was not the starting point for the history of ancient Israel, but for the history of Judaism.

Wellhausen is important to us because of how pivotal his work has been in establishing the importance of the postexilic period for the compilation of the Pentateuch, despite the shortcomings of his theory that were brought to light from the beginning and ever since. For one thing, his specific theory is laced with a distinct tinge of anti-Semitism, which has not helped his legacy, especially among Jewish scholars.¹⁸ Many Christians were not too happy with him either. If the law was postexilic propaganda rather than Israel's premonarchic national foundation, the biblical presentation of Israel's history would be turned completely upside down and thus call into question the general reliability of the Old Testament as a historical source. In his mind, ironically, Wellhausen's theory was an attempt to rescue the Old Testament for Christianity. He understood true Israelite religion to be reflected in J and E. The legalism of D and P were later impositions. The antilegalistic teachings of Jesus reflected Israel's true faith as seen in J and E (and one can perhaps see here Wellhausen's German Lutheranism coming through, with its tendency to dichotomize Old Testament law and New Testament grace).

Regardless of what might have motivated Wellhausen, the theory itself was far from problem-free. For example, it is hard to maintain the notion that Israel's legal and ritual dimensions are entirely postexilic when we consider that other ancient Near Eastern religions displayed similar patterns of legal and ritualistic behaviors centuries—even millennia—before the exile. This has come to light more clearly from archaeological discoveries after Wellhausen's time, so perhaps he can be forgiven for jumping the gun. Hence Wellhausen's theory that the "legalism" of the Pentateuch arose only after the exile has been abandoned. Some scholars today argue that P is preexilic, even if the

Pentateuch as we know it came to be only after the exile. Further, even to speak of discrete sources appearing in strict chronological sequence seems a bit quaint in today's scholarly atmosphere.

Also, soon after Wellhausen presented his Documentary Hypothesis, other scholars posed theories that were in some measure complementary but also headed in different directions. For example, as early as the turn of the twentieth century, Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932) felt the need to go beyond simply identifying written sources to pondering the existence of smaller oral or written units that lay behind the sources. (This approach is known in English by the nondescript term *form criticism*, which reflects the German term.) Gunkel did not dismiss Wellhausen, but he was influenced by studies in folklore at the time that focused on oral, prewritten tradition. Since Gunkel's time a significant amount of work has been done on oral "sources," which for some scholars has called into question the very notion of written sources as Wellhausen thought of them. Truth be told, source criticism has had an interesting journey throughout the twentieth century and first decade of the next. It remains a pillar of Old Testament study in most research universities and seminaries, although by no means the sole or even preferred method everywhere. Source critics certainly disagree on many details, and other schools of thought advocate approaches that have little to do with analyzing sources.

This is not the place to trace that in-house debate, however. For our purposes, the important point is that Wellhausen's theory brought together many generations, even centuries, of observations about the content of the Pentateuch. He posed his theory in a compelling manner, and the heart of the matter continues to be a stable element in current scholarship: *The Pentateuch was not authored out of whole cloth by a second-millennium Moses but is the end product of a complex literary process—written, oral, or both—that did not come to a close until the postexilic period.* This summary statement, with only the rarest exception, is a virtual scholarly consensus after one and a half centuries of debate. To admit this point does not in any way commit someone to one particular theory of how the Pentateuch came to its present form (and it does not in and of itself disallow some writing by Moses, hypothetically). It is only to admit that what we have cannot be explained as an early (second-millennium-BC) document written essentially by one person (Moses). Rather, the Pentateuch has a diverse compositional history spanning many centuries and was brought to completion after the return from exile.

To round out our discussion on this last point, the following is a summary of the evidence that supports the contemporary scholarly consensus.

1. *The entire Pentateuch is written in the third person and in the past tense.* The Pentateuch is self-evidently a story about characters in Israel's past: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob—and Moses. The clear impression is that all of these figures, including Moses, are presented as figures from the distant past. When seen from this perspective, comments such as Numbers 12:3, where Moses is called the most humble man on earth, make sense. (Otherwise Moses would be proudly claiming world-renowned humility for himself.) It also helps explain much of what follows below.

2. *There is no claim in the Pentateuch that Moses is its author,* and only certain passages refer to Moses as doing any writing (Exod. 17:14; 24:4; 34:27–28; Deut. 31:9, 24). Taken at face value, this actually implies that Moses's authorial role was quite limited at best and that his writings were combined by a later editor. Some argue that the biblical witness to Moses's limited writing activity is evidence that he was the essential or primary author of the *entire* Pentateuch, but most do not find this compelling.¹⁹

3. *The Pentateuch contains numerous explanatory comments that reflect a time well beyond that of Moses.* In addition to the beginning and end of Deuteronomy and Ibn Ezra's list, other examples include the reference to Edomite kings as ruling "before any Israelite king reigned" (Gen. 36:31 NIV). This comment assumes that the nation of Israel with a monarchy already existed even though that state of affairs did not come to pass until around 1000 BC (with Saul and then David).

4. *The Pentateuch assumes that conditions present at the time of writing were in existence in ancient times.* For example, Genesis 14:14 refers to the city of Dan; yet according to Joshua 19:47, Laish/Leshem was not renamed Dan until the conquest of Canaan. Also, there are various references to Philistines as existing in patriarchal and prepatriarchal times (Gen. 10:14; 21:32, 34; 26:1, 8, 14–15, 18), although the archaeological record indicates that they did not settle in Canaan until the twelfth century BC.

5. There are a number of "doublets" in the Pentateuch (two versions of the same story). *The presence of these doublets suggests a complex literary (perhaps oral) history* rather than just one author repeating himself in various ways on the same topic (e.g., two creation accounts in Gen. 1 and 2; two stories of the Abrahamic covenant in

Gen. 15 and 17; two incidents of Abraham's passing Sarah off as his sister in Gen. 12 and 20 [and Isaac also tried it in Gen. 26]; two calls of Moses in Exod. 3 and 6; two incidents of Moses and water from the rock in Exod. 17 and Num. 20).

6. Related to the previous point, *these doublets are not easily harmonized but present significantly different points of view*. As Astruc concluded long ago, these doublets are best understood as originally independent traditions (although not necessarily written documents) that were brought together by an editor respectful of maintaining both traditions, rather than one author working in one place and time (e.g., Gen. 1 and 2 are not just two creation accounts, but very different and independent accounts; likewise for the genealogies in Gen. 10 and 11).

7. Although beyond our scope, the Hebrew in which the characters of the Pentateuch speak did not exist during the second millennium BC. Rather, by comparing Hebrew with other languages of the ancient Near Eastern world, linguists have demonstrated that *the language of the Pentateuch reflects the state of Hebrew in the first millennium BC*. Whatever language the characters of Genesis might have spoken in history, it was at best a distant precursor to what we know as "Biblical Hebrew," and so the Pentateuch as we know it is a first-millennium product.

Other issues could be mentioned, but the factors outlined above are clear enough for our purposes. Nuances may be disputed, but the overall point remains. As Spinoza says, "It is clearer than the noonday sun" that the Pentateuch was not written by Moses.²⁰ This does not mean that the Pentateuch was written out of whole cloth during this time, however. Daniel Fleming suggests an analogy with Renaissance paintings where Madonna and Child are redressed like Italian nobles: "The stories [of Genesis] are imbued with the details of their tellers' own time."²¹ Older traditions are shaped later.

It is only fair to mention that some more traditionally minded scholars (Christian and Jewish) have contested at least some of these points, and they are more than free to do so. Leaving aside relatively uninformed lay reactions to biblical scholarship, classic treatments can be found for those interested in looking into the issue for themselves.²² There should be no objection raised to the presence of countervoices or looking at old problems in fresh ways. The questions of pentateuchal scholarship are fair game for everyone, and no one can predict from whom the next great insights will come. (Remember that Astruc was a physician.)

It is unlikely, however, that debunking the postexilic setting of the Pentateuch as we know it is likely to succeed. We may not know exactly the mechanisms by which the Pentateuch came about historically—and we may never know. But the evidence from the Pentateuch itself, in the opinion of an overwhelming majority of biblical scholars over the last several generations, is best explained by the hypothesis that the Pentateuch as we know it was shaped in the postexilic period.

In a book on evolution, why is it so important for us to see the Pentateuch as a postexilic work? Because it helps us understand the broad *purpose* for which it was compiled. That purpose can be put into sharper relief by taking a step back from the Pentateuch and looking at the Old Testament as a whole. The date of the Pentateuch is one part of a larger cluster of issues: *What is the Old Testament? When was it written? Why was it written?* As with the Pentateuch, the strong scholarly consensus is that the Old Testament as a whole owes its existence to the postexilic period. Although our focus is on Genesis, looking at the Old Testament as a whole, even briefly, will flesh out what we have seen about the date of Genesis and Israel's self-definition. The next chapter will make the same point from a different angle.

The Old Testament, the Exile, and Israel's Self-Definition

It is common for Christians to think of the “biblical period” of the Old Testament as extending from Genesis to the fall of Jerusalem and Israel's deportation to Babylon in 2 Kings 25 (about 586 BC). This is the bulk of the story, and Ezra, Nehemiah, and a couple of the Minor Prophets form a postexilic postscript to bring the whole sad story to a stuttering, anticlimactic ending. The exilic and postexilic periods become something of a postbiblical dark age. All that is worth knowing has happened: Israel has failed, and it is time to move on.

But such a scenario hardly tells the whole story. This alleged “post-biblical” period is actually the *biblical* period, meaning the time in which the Hebrew Old Testament as we know it took shape as a final and *sacred* collection of texts. There is little serious question that Israel documented, recorded, told, and retold its own story—orally and in writing—long before the exile. Few would dispute this. It is unlikely, however, that these early records of ancient deeds, court politics, and temple liturgies were thought of as sacred Scripture at the time. That is a later development, and the motivation for it was Israel's national crisis.

The exile was the most traumatic event in Israel's ancient national history and was therefore extremely influential on how the Israelites thought of themselves as the people of God. The Israelites understood themselves to be God's chosen people: they were promised the perpetual possession of the land, the glorious temple as a house of worship, and a son of David perpetually sitting on the throne. With the exile, all of this came to a sudden and devastating end. Exile in Babylon was not simply a matter of relocating. It meant to the Israelites that their God had turned his back on them. It also meant that God could no longer be worshiped in the Jerusalem temple as required. Israel's connection with God was severed: no land, no temple, and no sacrifices. Rather than prompting the other nations to acknowledge the true God, which was Israel's national calling, Israel was humiliated by these nations. Rather than the nations streaming to them (Isa. 2:2–4), they were slaves in a foreign land. Israel was estranged from God.

The impact of this series of events cannot be overstated. Since these long-standing ties to Yahweh were no longer available to them, the Israelites turned to the next best thing: bringing the glorious past into their miserable present by means of an official collection of writings. Some of these writings were collected and edited at that time, with additions and thorough updating—like the Pentateuch. Others only came into existence then. Either way, the trauma of the exile was a significant factor—if not the driving factor—in the creation of what has come to be known to us as “the Bible.” Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann puts it well:

It is now increasingly agreed that *the Old Testament in its final form is a product of and response to the Babylonian Exile*. This premise needs to be stated more precisely. The Torah (Pentateuch) was likely completed in response to the exile, and the subsequent formation of the prophetic corpus and the “writings” [poetic and wisdom texts] as bodies of religious literature (canon) is to be understood as a product of Second Temple Judaism [postexilic period]. This suggests that by their intention, these materials are . . . an intentional and coherent response to a particular circumstance of crisis. . . . Whatever older materials may have been utilized (and the use of old materials can hardly be doubted), the exilic and/or postexilic location of the final form of the text suggests that the Old Testament materials, understood normatively, are to be taken [understood] precisely in an acute crisis of displacement, when old certitudes—sociopolitical as well as theological—had failed.²³

The central question the exilic and postexilic Jews asked themselves concerned their identity: “Are we still the people of God? After all that has happened, are we still connected to the Israelites of old, with whom God spoke and showed his faithfulness?” Their answer to these questions was to tell their story from the beginning (creation) and from their postexilic point of view—which meant editing older works and creating some new ones. The creation of the Hebrew Bible, in other words, is *an exercise in national self-definition in response to the Babylonian exile*.

An example may help illustrate this, and it comes from Israel’s parallel histories: Chronicles and Samuel–Kings, which sit side by side in our English Bibles. This canonical placement is a shame, since for many readers there hardly seems to be any sense in reading Samuel–Kings and then continuing right along and reading “the same thing” in Chronicles. But Chronicles is not merely a repetition of Samuel–Kings: it tells Israel’s story quite differently.

The fact that Chronicles comes right after the previous history no doubt contributes to its misunderstanding. In the Jewish canon, however, Chronicles is last.²⁴ It was not until the Greek translation (Septuagint)²⁵ of the Hebrew Old Testament that Chronicles was tucked neatly away after 2 Kings. The Greek translators gave Chronicles a name that betrays their attitude: *Paraleipomenōn*, which means “[book] of things omitted” (from Samuel–Kings). This is hardly a way to encourage readers to dive in. Being placed last in the Hebrew canon is a signal, though, that this is not just a repetition of Samuel–Kings but a book with its own story to tell. Chronicles is a retelling of Israel’s story in light of the return from exile. It is Israel’s declaration that, despite the exile, the same God back then is still with his people today. Whatever else may have changed, Yahweh is still their God.

For example, compare these two accounts of Nathan’s prophecy to David, one from 2 Samuel and the other from 1 Chronicles. Nathan the prophet is speaking for God and makes a promise to David about the longevity of his dynasty.

2 Samuel 7:16: *Your* house and *your* kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; *your* throne shall be established forever. (emphasis added)

Nathan refers to David’s “house”—David will have descendants on his throne perpetually. Compare this to how Chronicles relays the same episode:

1 Chronicles 17:14: I will confirm him in *my* house and in *my* kingdom forever, and his throne shall be established forever. (emphasis added)

There is clearly a lot of overlap between these two accounts, especially the idea that God is going to do something concerning David that will endure “forever.”²⁶ Still, the two accounts report the same event differently. In 1 Chronicles, the house and kingdom are God’s, but in 2 Samuel they are David’s. Likewise, the throne is David’s in 2 Samuel, but in 1 Chronicles it is “his,” referring to Solomon, who built the temple, and who for the author of Chronicles is Israel’s ideal king (not David), the model for Israel’s restored glory in the postexilic period. The message of 2 Samuel is “Don’t worry, David, *your* line is safe,” but the message of 1 Chronicles is “Remember, it is *my* throne and *my* kingdom, and I will put the right person there in time.”

What accounts for this difference? Some might suggest that there really is no significant difference at all—just a minor variation in expression that can easily be harmonized. But that solution is difficult to accept. Not only is the wording of Chronicles different, but also Chronicles as a whole thoroughly and consistently tells its own version of Israel’s history.²⁷ Harmonizing these verses obligates one to harmonize everywhere, and that would quickly become an exercise in futility.

The differences between these accounts are theological and must be explained on the basis of their differing historical settings. The focus of 2 Samuel is still on the hope of continuing David’s line. But the author of Chronicles wrote long after the Israelites had already returned from Babylon—no earlier than the mid-fifth century BC, judging from the names listed toward the end of the genealogy in 1 Chronicles 1–9. He had a different perspective. David’s perpetual line had been broken in exile. For the author of Chronicles, the lesson of the exile is that Israel’s royal dynasty is not dependent on the establishment of David’s house and throne, as 2 Samuel has it. It is not really David’s throne at all but God’s, and God will put the right person there when and how he wishes.

It is a scholarly consensus that the author of Chronicles was working from the text of Samuel–Kings (although not necessarily the exact version we have, and perhaps also from sources older than Samuel–Kings). That means that he changed the wording of this older text in order to communicate the theological convictions of his postexilic community. The author of Chronicles changed a dashed promise into

a messianic hope.²⁸ He is declaring that Israel's ultimate hope is not in whether David's literal line has continued but in what God is doing with *his* throne to return Israel to its bygone days of favor.

Connecting postexilic Israel to its preexilic glory days is why 1 Chronicles begins with nine chapters of names. Most readers today gladly skip over them, but for postexilic Israelites, the genealogy made a vital point: it traced Israel's history from the postexilic period all the way back to Adam. (1 Chron. 1:1 is the only explicit reference to Adam in the Old Testament after Gen. 5.) Thus Chronicles is a postexilic rewriting of Israel's entire history to remind the Israelites that they are still the people of God—regardless of all that has happened, and regardless of how much they have deserved every bit of misery they received. They remain God's people, and their lineage extends to the very beginning, to Adam.²⁹ The exile prompted the Israelites to write a new national history that would be meaningful to them. Rather than simply repeating the stories of the past, they rewrote them to speak to their continued existence as God's people; they rewrote the past in order to come to terms with their present. Chronicles is not a "history" such as we might expect as modern readers. It is a "theological history" that can only be properly understood as a response to the exile.

This is just one example from one book that illustrates a larger principle about the Old Testament as a whole. As Brueggemann says above, the Pentateuch was brought into its final form during this time. The other portions of the Old Testament (Poetical, Historical, Prophetic books) also owe their existence to the experience of exile because they were either written or reshaped then. Below is a snapshot of how the Old Testament as a whole is a product of the exilic and postexilic periods. This information can be verified and elaborated upon by looking at almost any Old Testament introduction, introductions to commentaries, or in some cases a good study Bible.

- The *Deuteronomistic History*³⁰ (Joshua–2 Kings) was likely written around the time of the exile, although it clearly relies on earlier documents and traditions (e.g., the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah [1 Kings 15:23] and of Israel [1 Kings 15:31]). Some postulate a second edition at some later point. Either way, this collection of books recounts Israel's history from just after Moses's death to the Babylonian exile and the release of King Jehoiachin (2 Kings 25:17–30, about 561 BC), which means these books reached their final form no earlier than the exilic period.

- In addition to 1 and 2 Chronicles, *Ezra and Nehemiah* are obviously postexilic historical books, since they recount Israel's return to the land after the Babylonian captivity. Other details indicate that these books were written no earlier than the latter half of the fifth century BC. Likewise, *Esther* was written no earlier than the middle of that century, since it is set during the reign of the Persian king Xerxes. Given its well-known and numerous historical inaccuracies, the book is typically dated between the fourth and third centuries BC.

- Of the Poetic books, few would dispute a postexilic date for *Ecclesiastes*, and many suggest the Hellenistic period (after the conquest of Alexander the Great in 332 BC). Granting a Solomonic core, which is debated, *Proverbs* has multiple authors and an editorial history that at least extends beyond the time of Hezekiah (d. 687 BC; see Prov. 25:1). Many scholars see good reason to pose a postexilic date, although the setting of the book of Proverbs is a thorny issue. There is no clear consensus on the date of *Job*: dates range from 700 to about 200 BC, with perhaps an older oral tradition behind it. The final form of the *Psalter* is a big topic of discussion. The shape of the Psalter is clearly intentional: "five books," mimicking the Pentateuch, which alone suggests a time well after the return from exile. The Dead Sea Scrolls show that books 4 and 5 of the Psalter were still in considerable flux near the time of Jesus. Further, there are numerous postexilic psalms (e.g., Ps. 137). *Song of Songs* is notoriously difficult to date, in part due to the lack of any reference to historical events. Some argue that linguistic evidence points to a postexilic date, while others see the parallels between Song of Songs and earlier Egyptian love poetry as pointing to a date as early as the tenth century BC. At present it is best to remain open to different possibilities.

- Among the Prophetic books, *Jeremiah*, *Ezekiel*, and *Daniel* clearly deal with the exile and subsequent events. Still controversial to some is the book of *Isaiah*. Chapters 40–66 seem to assume that the exile is a past event (e.g., 42:22–25; 47:6). This is one of several factors that have led to the virtually unanimous scholarly consensus that Isaiah (like the Pentateuch) was written over several centuries extending well past the exile, which means that the final form of that book as a whole stems from that period. *Daniel* is routinely dated to the second century. Also, there has been much work in recent years on the twelve *Minor Prophets*. Scholars are seeing more clearly how those books are a collective literary product (hence referred to as "the Book of the Twelve"). At least Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are clearly written during the exilic

and postexilic periods. The final collection of the Book of the Twelve is dated to the Persian period (539–322 BC), if not later.

There is good reason to believe that the Old Testament as a whole is fundamentally a postexilic document. Again, few scholars would care to deny a prehistory—in some cases a lengthy and extensive prehistory, whether oral or written—to at least some portions of the Old Testament. Also, there are some parts that cannot be dated with any certainty. Still, there is a strong consensus that the postexilic period played a vital role in (1) the production of numerous books or parts of books and (2) the final editing of older material and eventually shaping of the entire Old Testament as sacred Scripture.

It was after the exile that Israel's sacred collection of books came to be—not out of a dispassionate academic interest on the part of some scribes but as a statement of self-definition of a haggard people who still claimed and yearned for a special relationship with their God. The Bible, including the Pentateuch, tells the old story for contemporary reasons: Who are we? Who is our God?

The questions that led to the formation of the Old Testament are the same ones that have occupied the minds and hearts of people of faith ever since. The Bible already models that process of bringing the past to bear on the present, which leads to the following and final point of this chapter.

The Creation Story and the Church's Self-Definition

In this chapter we have looked at some interpretive questions raised within the Pentateuch itself—particularly how they affect the issue of authorship, how these questions are addressed, and how that discussion came to a head in the nineteenth century. How the Pentateuch came to be and the importance of the postexilic period for forming the Pentateuch and the Old Testament are not side issues. These factors help reorient our expectations of what questions the Bible as a whole and Genesis in particular are prepared to answer. The crisis of the exile prompted Israel to put down in writing once and for all an official declaration: “This is who we are, and this is the God we worship.” The Old Testament is not a treatise on Israel's history for the sake of history, but a document of self-definition and spiritual encouragement: “Do not forget where we have been. Do not forget who we are—the people of God.”

The creation stories are to be understood within this larger framework, as part of a larger theologically driven collection of writings that answers ancient questions of self-definition, not contemporary ones of scientific interest. Later in part 1 we will look more closely at what this self-definition looks like. For now, we will content ourselves with the following observation. Christians today misread Genesis when they try to engage it, even minimally, in the scientific arena. Rather, they must follow the trajectory of the postexilic Israelites and ask their own questions of self-definition as the people of God: *In view of who and where we are, what do these ancient texts say to us about being the people of God today?*

Israel's historical moment, that of national crisis, drove their theologians to engage their past creatively. The first Christians were in an analogous situation. Their view of that same history was shaped by a defining moment—not one of crisis but of good news, the appearance of the kingdom of heaven and the Son of God, crucified and raised. *That defining moment shaped how the New Testament writers engaged Israel's story*—better put, it forced a fresh engagement of that story. They believed Jesus to be the focal point of that drama. In my estimation, demonstrating how Jesus both confirms and reshapes that story is a central concern of the New Testament writers. Its authors echo the pressing question of the postexilic Israelites: in view of what has just happened, what does it mean to be the people of God? In answering that question, the New Testament constantly refers to the Old Testament—about 365 citations and over 1,000 allusions.³¹ With each citation and allusion we see the New Testament authors at work, rethinking and transforming Israel's story in view of this new thing that God has done in Christ—bringing past story and present reality into conversation.

The defining moment for the New Testament writers remains the defining moment for Christians today. The Old Testament—including Genesis—is the church's *theological* self-defining document recast in light of the appearance of God's Son. Proper contemporary appropriation of Israel's self-defining documents, therefore, requires a theological engagement, not scientific harmonization. Reducing Genesis to a book of scientific interest is not just awkward and off topic; it also is sub-Christian since it fails to follow the path blazed for us by the New Testament writers. (I will say more in chap. 6 on how Paul specifically handles his Bible in the light of Jesus's resurrection.)

This theme of self-definition will become clearer as we focus next on the creation stories in Genesis and what they tell us about how the Israelites saw themselves and their God vis-à-vis the surrounding cultures. Israel's creation stories are potent claims about who they were. Understanding those claims against the backdrop of the world in which they were written, in my opinion, lays to rest any notion that these writings have any relevance to modern debates over human origins. Once that is understood, we can move to a discussion about Paul and how all of this bears on evolution and Christianity, which is the topic of part 2.