



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

THE FOUR HYPOTHETICAL DCOCUMENTS

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

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

D was essentially the book of Deuteronomy. Second Kings records that Hilkiah the priest

located a copy of the Law of Moses when the Jerusalem temple was being restored. According to the Documentary Hypothesis, however, Deuteronomy was drafted at this time as a pious fraud to justify Josiah's reformation. The Documentary hypothesis claims that Deuteronomy was largely a rewriting of earlier texts and was done during the postexilic period, following the return from the exile. These earlier texts included large portions of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers.

In Genesis, P referred to God as Elohim since, like E, its author(s) assumed that the divine name, Yahweh, was first revealed at the time of the exodus (see **Exodus 6:3**, a "P" text).

According to this theory, the four documents were composed independently of one another, but were over a prolonged period of time compiled and edited into the present Pentateuch, with much of the original E material deleted. Still, they argued, the Pentateuch retains significant redundancy and contradiction, because the four documents often tell the same, or similar, stories with inconsistent details. Thus, for example, **Genesis 1:1 — Genesis 2:4a** was identified as the P account of creation, while the rest of **Genesis 2** was seen as a throwback to the earlier J rendition.

BIBLICAL REFUTATION OF DOCUMENTARY HYPOTHESIS

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

WAS YAHWEH KNOWN PRIOR TO THE EXODUS?

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

*‘Although the text implies that the name LORD was unknown previously, in context the emphasis in the passage falls on the understanding of God that comes with knowledge of the name. In this way God responds to the worsening plight of the Israelites and Moses complaint in 5:23 that God has done nothing at all to rescue them’—NAB note on **Exodus 6:3***

CONCLUSION

Many scholars today have abandoned the Documentary Hypothesis, agreeing that it is based on a faulty understanding of ancient Near Eastern literature, and that it is false.

One source of this material is the NIV Archaeological Study Bible.

For more information about the writing of the Pentateuch, please see the following article on this website:

“Did Moses Write the Torah or Pentateuch — Why It Matters?” –

<https://bibleauthenticity.org/did-moses-write-the-torah-pentateuch/>