

## THE MOSAIC AUTHORSHIP OF THE PENTATEUCH

DUANE L. CHRISTENSEN and MARCEL NARUCKI\*

In a recent book John Barton opted for a position intrinsically inadequate for understanding Biblical literature. His commitment to a neutral stance is a commitment to a certain way of perceiving reality, which is—ironically—another brand of fundamentalism, one that is particularly modern and reduces reality to the intellect.

Barton speaks forcefully in response to what he perceives to be a threat to the historical-critical method, stemming from an understanding of Scripture that tends toward the normative as expressed by the theological argument of Brevard Childs. As he put it:

It is a pity if they [Childs and those of his thinking] waste their time in trying to show that we should read the Old Testament in such a way, for that can never be shown by biblical criticism of any kind, but only by theological argument lying outside the biblical critic's province.<sup>1</sup>

What is most amazing about this statement is that, for Barton and those of his persuasion, the Biblical critic's province can be outside the theological engagement and that it can and should call into question any "tendency to seek the normative." Such an approach claims an autonomy and detached neutrality that is alien to the theological concerns in Scripture about faith, conversion, and the way of a people called to live under God. The theological attitude and argument of Childs considers the canonical process through which the text becomes normative as Scripture. Only the whole text as Scripture bears witness to the truth and life within it. The canonical shape provides a critical theological judgment against any reading of the tradition that isolates and therefore falsifies the smaller traditions within it. Thus there is a theological testimony of the whole. Though the canon itself is normative, before the canon of Scripture received its final form there were already norming principles operating within the experience of ancient Israel. Ultimately God himself is the norming norm, but the God of Israel is a God who reveals himself concretely in history, as the late G. Ernest Wright was wont to say.<sup>2</sup>

\* Duane Christensen is professor of Old Testament languages and literature at American Baptist Seminary of the West and Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, and Marcel Narucki is a student at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, California.

<sup>1</sup> J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 207.

<sup>2</sup> See G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology* (SBT 8; London: SCM, 1952).

This view of history is theological and requires a rather different hermeneutic than that of a view of history that empirically focuses on cause and effect. The theological hermeneutic sees the horizontal procession of history from a vertical relation. If God is ultimately the norming norm who reveals himself within the history of Israel, and if history is shaped by real persons, then we are now in a position to begin to affirm the person of Moses as a normative influence within the history of the people of Israel. So in this sense of a creative norming event happening through a particular person for a particular people we can claim Moses' authorship of the Pentateuch.

When a significant event occurs in a person's life its full meaning is not often made clear until some time has passed and until a remembrance, a making present of that event through time, has been allowed to leaven that personal history. This is all the more true when God comes into a person's life. The meaning of an event where God touches a human life is unraveled in time. It is the event itself that holds the significance and truth, but the full meaning of it is made manifest when the initial event has time to touch, arouse and suppress all the various energies that constitute a human life and history. This is also and especially true with Moses and the people of Israel. The event of the life of Moses, especially the Moses of Sinai, is the moment in time when God revealed himself and called a people to himself. The full revelation is made manifest when the people of God continue to remember and respond to the event. Out of this remembering and response comes a Scripture that continually looks back to the event for its authority and power. So it is that Moses is the authority within the Pentateuch. Future generations would remember the authority, the authorship, of their covenant with God and the law by which they are called to obey him by recognizing and claiming the man Moses in their midst.

In our time the historical-critical method may mark a period of individuation that makes it possible to reengage with greater integrity and freedom. The individuation process achieves its purpose only to the extent that the new individual reengages with the community and the tradition creating that community. The new engagement is characterized by a greater integrity to the whole person and a more profound freedom that must be exercised. The historical-critical method creates a new context from which a theological hermeneutic may proceed with a greater integrity and a greater freedom, and therefore with a greater participation in the life of Scripture. Hence the question of Mosaic authorship is a timely one and is, at bottom, a theological one which seeks to reengage itself with the tradition and to understand that tradition by means of participation. Without first passing through an historical-critical knowledge our looking toward Moses' authority would be unauthentic and false to history.

In Scripture the apparent contradictions and ambiguities constitute part of the revelation. The Word of revelation comes into history, not to obliterate it or to make it nonhistorical but to enter into it as a recreating

force. As Robert Alter remarked on another occasion: "The biblical outlook is informed, I think, by a sense of stubborn contradiction."<sup>3</sup> The apparent contradictions and ambiguities in Scripture reveal not an abstract God but a God who actually enters into the human process.

The underlying view of reality and history in the pure critical-historical mind makes Mosaic authorship inconceivable. The absence of a normative hermeneutic, or the belief that there cannot be one, cuts it off from the hermeneutic world of Scripture, which has as its foundation a hermeneutic of participation in the life of God's Word as living, judging and transforming. The historical-critical mind reads a text; it does not hear Scripture. The theological testimony of the whole Scripture, which evolved out of the normative influence of Moses on generations who looked back to him to make present his authority, is validated in the experience of the hearing community. What is called for, so it seems, is a calculated naiveté which submits not only to the integrity of the whole text but also to the hearing of Scripture within the community that remembers and therefore interprets its own historical situation under God and his prophet Moses.

Remembering means making the past present. Remembering is presence. It suggests more than a recall of data. It is a making present of the past that recreates the present through presence. Remembering signals the transmission of the norming presence from generation to generation. Moses is not only the author of the Pentateuch but of the whole Scripture, and he continues to be the authority within community and is in some sense the author of community. One might rephrase the original proposition and say, "Moses is still the author of the Pentateuch."

Much of Scripture as we know it was probably performed and sung in liturgical settings in ancient Israel, and thus the form of Scripture is essentially poetic. This fact suggests something more about the nature of Scripture itself and points to a hermeneutic whose comprehension supports Mosaic authorship. Poetry is the ideal tool for theology. It is a way of seeing that is not just a system for interpretation but a way of life, a way of making present that which lies beyond the bounds of human experience and understanding. Scripture is a symbolic theology in which symbols actually communicate the presence of that which they symbolize. This is not to say that there was not a Moses or that it would not be important if there were not a Moses. On the contrary, what really happened in history became presence through symbol. The power is in the event itself, which becomes a transforming symbol actually making present the event through time. The nature of the symbol is intimately related to the nature of sacred time. Even the material on which the law was written was treated as having presence and power. Only a symbolic consciousness can know presence. The fact that the poem of Scripture was probably sung at a special time set aside suggests a quality of *ekstasis* in worship, in which remembering is acted out by the whole person and by the whole community. It is a remembering that is larger

<sup>3</sup> R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981) 154.

than the individual or even the community. It is a remembering of the prophet Moses, chosen by God to presence this people with himself.

At this juncture we would like to share a personal experience that took place in a church in Boston some years ago. The whole thing was set up in order to make a point. In preparation for a talk with a group of senior high-school students a copy of Webster's *Intercollegiate Dictionary* was placed on top of a piano. That evening, during the course of his address, Duane Christensen made the following statement: "Now, according to Webster (and he pointed to the dictionary), nuclear fission is 'the splitting apart of the nucleus of an atom into fragments, usually two fragments of comparable mass, with the evolution of approximately 100 million to several hundred million electron volts of energy.'" <sup>4</sup> What was he saying? He knew full well that when Noah Webster first compiled his dictionary of the English language neither he, nor anyone else, knew anything about subatomic physics. Was he lying when he said that "Webster says"? No, all he was saying is: "It stands written in the book that you and I know as Webster's *Dictionary*."

It is a bit like the phrase "Hoyle says" among card players. There is no game in the current issue of *Hoyle's Card Games* that is still in the actual form of the first edition of this particular reference work. <sup>5</sup> Moreover some of the games discussed in the latest edition emerged long after the death of Sir Edmund Hoyle in 1769. When we say "Hoyle says" to settle an argument in a game we are not making a statement on matters of higher criticism. We are only saying, "It is written in the bible of the card player that such and such is the case." Similarly when the NT says "Moses says" or "Moses wrote," Jesus and the apostles are saying nothing more than "It stands written in the books that you and I recognize as the Torah of Moses, the Pentateuch." Nothing is said here on matters of so-called higher criticism.

When it comes to ascribing authorship of sacred tradition within a community of faith we should be careful that we do not say more than we mean. When Robert Robinson wrote the words of the hymn "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing" almost two hundred years ago, the second stanza began with "Here I raise mine Ebenezer." In the hymnal used in the First Baptist Church of Richmond, California, the words are "Here I raise to Thee an altar." <sup>6</sup> We can understand why the editors of this particular hymnal made the change. The reference to the story of Ebenezer in 1 Samuel 7 is not as familiar to the average worshiper today as it was two hundred years ago. But at the top of the page the author of the hymn is still Robert Robinson. Did he write the hymn as it stands in this

<sup>4</sup> This particular quotation is taken from *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Houghton Mifflin, 1969) 496.

<sup>5</sup> E. Hoyle, *The Accurate Gamester's Companion* (9th ed.; London: T. Osborne and W. Reeve, 1748), evolved into the standard bible of the card player, *Hoyle's Card Games* (New York: Methuen, 1979).

<sup>6</sup> *Praise—Our Songs and Hymns* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983 [1979]) 35.

popular hymnal? Well, yes and no. He is the author of the hymn, though all the individual words we sing are not his—at least not in the manner in which he originally composed them.

Research in Deuteronomy over the course of the past several years suggests that the Hebrew text in its present form, as preserved by the Masoretes, is a musical composition.<sup>7</sup> The canting tradition of the synagogues preserves accurate memory of the original performance of the text during the period of the second temple in Jerusalem and perhaps earlier, if Suzanne Haik-Vantoura is correct.<sup>8</sup> In short, though details in her decipherment of the musical information preserved in the accentual system of the Hebrew Bible may change with further research, much of Haik-Vantoura's work is likely to stand the test of time. The Bible as we have it is not a collection of independent books, which certain scribes in antiquity gathered together into a library as such. It is a single book, by a single author—if we are to give credence to the common affirmation in public worship that it is the Word of God. That being the case, we can now say much more about the canonical process that brought the book to us than can our predecessors.

The doctrinal basis of the Evangelical Theological Society speaks of the Bible as "inerrant in the autographs." What, however, is an autograph within the canonical process, at least in its earlier stages in ancient Israel? The book of Deuteronomy was the center of a complex process of canonical activity, from at least the time of Josiah to the dedication of the second temple in Jerusalem at the end of the sixth century B.C. So far as Deuteronomy is concerned, that process included much more than the mere compilation of the Pentateuch. It also included the Former Prophets, or what some would call the Deuteronomic history, within a larger canonical entity that David Noel Freedman has called the "primary history."<sup>9</sup> It may have included both the Latter Prophets and the Writings as canonical categories as well, though perhaps not in the form we now know. Arguments in favor of an early seventeen-book canon of the Hebrew Bible, constructed around the book of Deuteronomy, which was transformed into a twenty-two-book canon by the time of Josephus and subsequently into a twenty-four-book canon within rabbinic Judaism have already been published in this *Journal*.<sup>10</sup>

It was an encounter with the metrical structure of the Hebrew text of Deuteronomy that led to a new model for understanding the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. The book of Deuteronomy enjoyed generations of use within public worship in ancient Israel before its use at the center of canonical activity in the time of Josiah.

<sup>7</sup> See nn. 11 and 14 below and the forthcoming commentary on Deuteronomy in the Word Biblical Commentary series.

<sup>8</sup> S. Haik-Vantoura, *La Musique de la Bible Révélée* (Paris: Dessain et Tolra, 1976), now available in English translation by D. Weber (Berkeley: BIBAL, 1988).

<sup>9</sup> D. N. Freedman, "Canon of the OT," in *IDBSup* 131-132.

<sup>10</sup> D. Christensen, "Josephus and the Twenty-Two-Book Canon of Sacred Scripture," *JETS* 29 (1986) 37-46.

The sharp distinction made between prose and poetry in the Bible has prevented scholars from seeing clearly the actual genre of Deuteronomy.<sup>11</sup> Some two hundred years ago Robert Lowth commented in passing that the law codes throughout the Mediterranean were sung at the festivals of antiquity:

It is evident that Greece for several successive ages was possessed of no records but the poetic: for the first who published a prose oration was Pherecydes, a man of the isle of Syrus, and the contemporary with king Cyrus, who lived some ages posterior to that of Homer and Hesiod: somewhat after the time Cadmus the Milesian began to compose history. The laws themselves were metrical, and adapted to certain musical notes: such were the laws of Charondas, which were sung at the banquets of the Athenians: such were those which were delivered by the Cretans to the ingenuous youth to be learned by rote, with accompaniments of musical melody, in order that by the enchantment of harmony, the sentiments might be more forcibly impressed upon their memories. Hence certain poems were denominated *nomoi* which implied convivial or banqueting songs, as is remarked by Aristotle; who adds, that the same custom of chanting the laws to music, existed even in his own time among the Agathyrsi.<sup>12</sup>

More recently T. Georgiades has shown convincingly, at least for ancient Greek literature, that the distinct concepts of music and poetry as we understand them were not known in antiquity:

The ancient Greek verse line was a singular formation for which there is no analogy in Western Christian civilization. It was, if you will, music and poetry in one, and precisely because of this it could not be separated into music and poetry as two tangibly distinct components. For this particular vehicle of meaning the Greeks, however, had a special term: *mousikē*.<sup>13</sup>

The work of Haik-Vantoura is built on the same observation. Like ancient Greek literature, the Hebrew Bible emerged in the form of *mousikē*—a combination of music and language.

The book of Deuteronomy is poetry in its entirety, as Duane Christensen has argued elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> Though it contains a lyric "Song of Moses" (chap. 32), most of the book is in the form of didactic poetry of a lesser nature so far as heightened speech goes. The composer of the original was Moses, but the text as we have it enjoyed a life of its own for generations in the public worship of ancient Israel. Like Robert Robinson's hymn, individual words no doubt changed in usage through time. Indeed the

<sup>11</sup> See D. Christensen, "Form and Structure in Deuteronomy 1-11," in *Das Deuteronomium* (BETL 68; 1985) 135-144.

<sup>12</sup> R. Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (London, 1985) 54-55.

<sup>13</sup> T. Georgiades, *Music and Language: The Rise of Western Music as Exemplified in Settings of the Mass* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1982) 6.

<sup>14</sup> See D. Christensen, "Prose and Poetry in the Bible: The Narrative Poetics of Deuteronomy 1,9-18," *ZAW* 97 (1985) 179-189.

very structure of the greater "Song of Moses,"<sup>15</sup> which we now call Deuteronomy, may have changed as it developed in public performance by a long line of singers in the festivals and in Levitical circles of ancient Israel through hundreds of years. The concentric structural patterns, found at virtually all levels of analysis, bear witness to its tightly woven composition. That structure points to an author. On one level of observation that author is Moses, who composed the original Torah in musical form. But on another level the author is God himself, at work through a long chain of poet-prophets, like Moses, in ancient Israel who recited this text in public worship and who made it the center of an elaborate canonical process that gave us the Bible itself as the Word of God.

<sup>15</sup> Another student, Michael Lannon, argued this point with unusual force in an unpublished 1985 paper, "Deuteronomy: A Song of Power and the Power of Song."