

DEUTERONOMY EXTRAS

Who wrote Deuteronomy and when?



INTRODUCTION...

Throughout the film series I have followed the witness of the book of Deuteronomy itself about its origins, understanding the text as the written record of a series of sermons (with some other material) preached by Moses shortly before his death. However, many modern scholars take a different view on the origins of Deuteronomy. I think that it is important to acknowledge that difference and take some time to explain why I hold the view that I do. I believe that there are strong reasons for believing that Deuteronomy is largely Mosaic, as it claims.

WHY DON'T THE FILMS TALK ABOUT THIS?

I spent some time weighing up whether I should include some discussions of this in the film series, but in the end decided not to do so. The main reason for that is that I think that this discussion is subtly off topic. The vision for my films is to seek to listen to the Bible, and to God speaking through it, whereas this is a debate about the Bible itself. The two are obviously connected, and I do hope that viewers of the films will go away having learnt lots about Deuteronomy. However, that is only ever a means to an end – we study Deuteronomy so that we can hear God speaking through it. When planning the film series, I concluded that to devote significant time to essentially academic discussions of dating and authorship would actually distract from that primary purpose.¹

My intended audience in the films is not academic Bible scholars, but ordinary Christians seeking to know more of God. Obviously, there is some overlap between the two categories, but the concerns of each are different. While determining the origins and dates of Biblical books is one of the primary focuses of modern academic biblical studies, it is only ever of preliminary concern for the ordinary Christian. It is one part of a host of different beliefs that underpin what we believe about the Bible, and how we read it. Those beliefs also include our belief in the existence of God, our faith in Jesus, what we believe about the Holy Spirit, our understanding of scripture as a whole, and various other elements. It is important for us to be able to be confident that what we believe is built on

¹ I will confess that my own experience in planning and writing the series has contributed to that conclusion. When studying Deuteronomy for its own sake I found that the text came alive, and God was really speaking to me through it. Once I turned to these academic questions though I found the process much drier and harder work and was much less conscious of God's voice.

a solid foundation, but we don't all have to prove every element of that foundation each time we come to the Bible.

My experience as a pastor suggests that different people respond quite differently to these questions. My wife and I are examples of the two ends of the spectrum. I am always wanting to prove everything, whether that means studying the arguments for the existence of God or for the Mosaic origin of Deuteronomy. By contrast, Liz finds that all rather tedious – she's put her faith in God and just trusts him on the details. The difference is more one of temperament than intellect or faith. She's every bit as clever as I am, and my faith in God is pretty strong – we just respond differently in this area.

Those who share Liz's temperament will probably have been relieved that the film series didn't focus in on questions of Deuteronomy's date and authorship – and they probably aren't going to read this essay. Others who are more in the middle of this continuum, will probably care that there are cogent reasons for holding to a traditional view on the Mosaic origin of Deuteronomy, but be much less interested in actually exploring that view for themselves. They may well be reading this – but probably won't need to read much further. The final group though are those like me – people who want the whole argument. The beauty of an internet-based resource is that I am able to examine these issues for those who want to explore further, but without forcing them on those who don't.

There are also practical reasons for exploring questions around the origin of Deuteronomy in a supplementary essay, and not in the films themselves. I do not think that film is a format that naturally lends itself to this form of detailed discussion, and this form of detailed discussion is also very difficult to make visually compelling on film. I concluded it would work much better to provide these thoughts in a written form than on film.

While I have spent considerable time and energy reading Deuteronomy and studying what has been written about it, I am aware that I am a preacher and not an Old Testament scholar. There are others far cleverer and better informed than I am who have also written on this subject, both in general and more specifically regarding the origins of Deuteronomy. I would commend the following:

- Amy Orr-Ewing *Why Trust The Bible?* (IVP, 2005)
- K.A.Kitchen *On The Reliability Of The Old Testament* (Eerdmans, 2003)
- Christopher Wright *Deuteronomy* (Hendrickson, 1996), p6-8
- J.G.McConville *Deuteronomy* (IVP, 2002), p21-40
- Ajith Fernando *Deuteronomy* (Crossway, 2012), p25-32
- Daniel I. Block *The Gospel According to Moses* (Eugene Oregon, 2012), p21-60

Amy Orr-Ewing's general book and Christopher Wright's commentary are relatively slim volumes that should be easily accessible to all. The other four books are weightier and longer, and probably more aimed at academics and preachers. The page numbers given after the books specifically on Deuteronomy concern the discussions of authorship and dating – but I'd recommend the rest of the books too.

TWO DIFFERENT VIEWS...

The book's claims about itself are relatively straightforward, as hopefully comes through in the film series. It claims to be predominantly the words of Moses, with more than 96% of the text presented as spoken by him. His words are mainly sermons, although towards the end there is also a song (32v1-43), a series of blessings (33v2-29), and some other instruction (e.g. 27). The remaining 4% of Deuteronomy is presented as the words of an editor. The texts suggests that Moses himself wrote down some of what he preached (e.g. 28v58, 27v3).² As the last chapter of the book records Moses' death though, it is clear the final form of the book was drawn together by a later editor. There is no clear indication of who this editor was, or when they wrote. I think that Deuteronomy 34v10 suggests that significant time has passed since Moses' death – but I could easily be wrong.

This understanding of Deuteronomy's origins was universally accepted by both Jewish and Christian commentators until the 18th Century. Over the past 200 years though it has been supplanted in most academic circles by a view that Deuteronomy was written much later, and probably in stages.

The starting point for this new thesis was the observation of similarities between parts of Deuteronomy and the reforms of King Josiah of Judah (640-609 BC) by W.M.L de Wette in 1805, an observation that became one of the foundations of an analysis of the origins of the whole Pentateuch (Genesis – Deuteronomy) by Julius Wellhausen in 1885. Wellhausen's thesis, known as the 'Documentary Hypothesis,' became the dominant view on the origins of the Pentateuch for over a century, and remains highly influential today.³

In this view, the core of the book of Deuteronomy (usually seen as chapters 12-26) is identified as being the 'book of the law' whose discovery is recounted in 2 Kings 22, and it is usually seen as having been written around this time. There are then various different hypotheses as to exactly when it was written, and by whom, and how the rest of the book of Deuteronomy then came to be written and compiled.⁴ While there are significant differences between the details of how different commentators would re-construct the pre-history and date of Deuteronomy, the majority of critical scholars today would follow this reconstruction of Deuteronomy's origins to some degree.

² For more on the subject of whether Moses was responsible for writing down his sermons, see Daniel Block 'Recovering the Voice of Moses: the Genesis of Deuteronomy' in *The Gospel According to Moses* (Oregon, 2012)

³ Most academic books on any of the first five books of the Bible will give some form of overview of the 'Documentary Hypothesis' – but for those without access to academic commentaries there is also a Wikipedia page on it at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Documentary_hypothesis. As is often the case with Wikipedia articles, it largely ignores more conservative scholarship, but it does give a helpful overview of this hypothesis for those who are interested. For an analysis that is less accepting of the Documentary Hypothesis, I have found the following helpful: Daniel Block 'Recovering the Voice of Moses: the Genesis of Deuteronomy' in *The Gospel According to Moses*, p21-51, and Gordon McConville *Deuteronomy* (IVP 2002), p21-33.

⁴ Again, most academic commentaries on Deuteronomy will sketch out the broad outlines of the various views, but for those without access to academic libraries there is a Wikipedia page at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deuteronomist> (albeit again largely ignoring more conservative scholarship).

CRITIQUING THE CRITICS...

The 'Documentary Hypothesis' and subsequent sceptical reconstructions of the composition of the Pentateuch are examples of the 'historical-critical' method of biblical scholarship. It is a method that sets aside the traditional understandings of the different Biblical texts and seeks instead to examine them from a more 'neutral' viewpoint using literary and historical techniques.

On the basis of this research many Biblical books have been re-dated, deconstructed into various original sources, and traditional views of their authorship rejected. This process is often reported with very high levels of confidence and precision. One of my main reasons for rejecting many of the conclusions drawn on this basis is that I am profoundly sceptical of how much weight these techniques can bear.⁵

I have been very influenced by a masterful essay written by C. S. Lewis in 1959, *Fern-Seed and Elephants*.⁶ Lewis critiques some of the problems with this methodology as applied to New Testament studies.⁷ It is an intriguing essay in part because the genesis of much historical-critical scholarship lay in the use of techniques of literary criticism, which Lewis was so familiar with from his own work as a Professor of English Literature. Lewis explores various ways in which he distrusts not the conclusions, but the methodology of 'modern' biblical scholars. Towards the end of the essay, he makes a telling observation: "everywhere, except in theology, there has been a vigorous growth of scepticism about scepticism itself."⁸

My own academic journey is far shallower and less brilliant than that Lewis', but I have found myself with similar doubts about the methodology of the historical-critical method. In my case the doubts came from my experiences as an undergraduate, when I studied history. As its name suggests, one of the foundations of the historical-critical method was the application of historical methods to biblical studies.

When Wellhausen (and others) wrote in the 19th Century, he was using the most up to date historical methodology. Central to that methodology was the 'objective' application of 'scientific' methods, to "tell how it really was."⁹ In the 135 years since Wellhausen wrote though, historical scholarship has grown much more sceptical and diffident. The possibility of objectivity in academic research is now largely dismissed, as is the quest for 'scientific' methods for assessing history. Historians no longer make the grand claims of their predecessors to be able to confidently state 'how it really was', and most current historical scholarship is much more sceptical of its own possibilities.¹⁰

⁵ The Documentary Hypothesis itself is an excellent example of this precision and confidence. The growing divergences from it, even amongst critical scholars, is perhaps an illustration of how shaky the foundations of that confidence may be.

⁶ Available as part of the collection of essays *Fern Seed and Elephants* (Fontana 1975) p104-125.

⁷ The same criticisms are as valid (if not more so) when applied to Old Testament studies.

⁸ C.S.Lewis *Fern-seed and Elephants*, p119

⁹ The quote is a famous line from the great German Historian, Leopold von Ranke – I remembered it, but without access to a historical library have had to source it from wikiquotes: https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Leopold_von_Ranke

¹⁰ A classic work that covers these trends is Professor Sir Richard Evans' *In Defence of History* (available in various editions)

I am relieved to see that there is now a growing current of scepticism about many of the previously accepted conclusions of biblical scholarship, including the 'Documentary Hypothesis'. It is a scepticism that I heartily share. History is one of my passions, and I do believe that historical study can shed significant light on the study of the Bible – as can literary analyses. In the films, for instance, I mention how scholars have identified parallels between the structure of Deuteronomy and that of many ancient treaties. Such insights can help us to better understand the Biblical text against the backdrop of the world in which they are set.

However, I believe that much biblical scholarship over the past 200 years has placed more weight on historical (and literary) techniques than they are capable of bearing. As will become clear below, I do not think that historical or literary study of Deuteronomy (and indeed many other biblical books) is able to tell us very much at all about its origins and dates with any degree of certainty.

ANALYSING CRITICAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF DEUTERONOMY...

At the heart of traditional critical understandings of Deuteronomy since De Wette has been the identification of a form of Deuteronomy (usually seen as chapters 12-26) with the "book of the law" recovered by King Josiah, as described in 2 Kings 22-23 and 2 Chronicles 34. This was then set alongside a critical reconstruction of the development of Israelite religion, in which religious practices evolved over time into what we now read in the final form of the Old Testament.

In this understanding, the heart of Deuteronomy is not just seen as an inspiration for the royal reform programme and centralisation of religion under Josiah, it is seen as a product of it. It was produced by someone close to the royal reform programme, to bolster the movement. This core was then supplemented over time with the rest of what is now Deuteronomy, with the final form having been written around the time of the Exile (which explains how 'Moses' could have so accurately predicted the Exile itself).

This reconstruction is ingenious and compelling – the problem is that there is so little historical evidence to support it. The most compelling feature of the thesis is the identification of 'the book of the law' found during Josiah's reforms with Deuteronomy (in some form). However, all that can show is that that part of Deuteronomy could not have been written after Josiah's reforms. Both Biblical accounts seem to assume that it was in fact written some time before – and on the basis of these accounts there is no reason at all to conclude that the book could not have been written centuries beforehand.

Linking the writing of Deuteronomy with Josiah's reforms clearly therefore has to rest on other evidence, and it is here that the reconstruction of Israelite history and religion becomes so key. I say 'reconstruction' because Wellhausen and those who have come after him have a radically different understanding of the history of Israel, and particularly Israelite religion, to that presented in the Bible. Surprisingly though this is not primarily based on external sources but on a re-reading and reinterpretation of the Biblical texts. The reason for this is that there is virtually no external written evidence for the early history (religious or otherwise) of Israel.

The earliest mention of Israel in an extra-Biblical text is a one-line inscription on a stone stele erected by the Egyptian Pharaoh Merneptah in 1209BC. The reference is so brief that it cannot really tell us anything except that an entity called 'Israel' existed at the time.¹¹ There are then no more references to Israel in any extra-Biblical sources for the following 450 years,¹² until some brief mentions in Assyrian sources from the 9th Century BC (the time of the divided monarchy).

Even then the external written evidence is very thin. We only have a couple of brief inscriptions (one sentence or two) written in Israel itself prior to the exile, along with a handful of brief accounts and inscriptions from Israel's neighbours and enemies, and these texts are concerned with contemporary events.¹³ It is difficult to draw any conclusions with any confidence about the early history of Israel from extra-biblical texts – there is essentially silence.

There may not be much extra-biblical written evidence about Israel in this period, but we can draw some insights from comparisons with other written texts from similar periods. Such evidence can be very helpful in illuminating the background against which Deuteronomy was written, but I am very sceptical of how much weight they can bear when it comes to dating the book.

An example would be the comparisons that have been drawn in recent years between Deuteronomy and Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) vassal treaties. I mention this in the films, and I do think that it gives us an interesting insight into a literary form that may well have been an inspiration for how Deuteronomy was structured.

I am unconvinced though by attempts to date the book on the basis of comparison with such treaties. There is considerable debate amongst scholars as to whether Deuteronomy is closer in form to Assyrian treaties (from the mid first Millennium BC) or Hittite treaties (from the mid second millennium). Many then use their conclusions to support an early or late date for the book itself.¹⁴

The problem though is that Deuteronomy can only ever be understood to be loosely based (at best) on such treaties – the form was clearly widely used. In this case it has been adapted for use in a religious context, by a different culture, and in a different language. The analogy seems to be me to be far too inexact to be much use in dating Deuteronomy. It strikes me as being like trying to use medieval and early-modern French royal edicts to date Shakespeare's plays – impossible!

The final extra-biblical strand of historical evidence is archaeology. Again, I believe that archaeology can be very helpful in illuminating the Biblical texts. Indeed, when I was a vicar in central London, I used to do informal tours of 'the Bible in the British Museum' for groups of congregation members. The evidence of archaeology though is by nature

¹¹ Almost all books on the early history of Israel will have something to say about the Merneptah Stele, and again there is also a Wikipedia page https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merneptah_Stele#%22Israel%22.

¹² It should be noted that this silence is not just confined to the nation of Israel – there is nothing about anything at all in this geographic area during this period.

¹³ The only two pre-exilic Israelite inscriptions I am aware of are the inscription at the entrance to the Siloam water tunnel (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siloam_inscription), and an incomplete tomb inscription from the 7th Century (https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1871-1107-1), but there could be more.

¹⁴ This overview of the terrain is largely based on Gordon McConville Deuteronomy (IVP 2002) pp23-24, although my conclusions are my own.

broad and imprecise, and its usefulness in dating a literary text like Deuteronomy can only ever be limited.

All this brings us back to the evidence of the Biblical texts themselves, which are by far the best sources of historical evidence available for the dating of Deuteronomy. A surface level reading of the Bible clearly indicates support for the traditional view of Deuteronomy – as witnessed by the unanimous testimony of 2,500 years of Biblical scholarship, prior to the 18th Century.

Alternative modern views of the religious history of Israel, and with it an alternative dating of Deuteronomy, require something else. It relies on modern scholars' ability to reconstruct what lies behind the Biblical texts as we now have them – confidently identifying the source material the final authors used, where they came from, and separating them out from the explanatory notes of later editors, before then correctly piecing all the evidence back together.

Unfortunately, the problems with this process are myriad. Firstly, much of it is cumulative, with each stage built upon the conclusions of the first. So, for instance, most critical scholars now assume that Deuteronomy was written in stages, with an original core (usually identified as chapters 12-26) supplemented by subsequent editors. The first conclusion here is that the book was written in stages. That is then the starting point for identifying the original core text, which in turn is the starting point for identifying and analysing the next layer in the composition, and so on. Most critical reconstructions of Deuteronomy would postulate at least 3 or 4 redactional layers, and so we have a chain of at least four different links. Even if we assume that each step on its own has a very high probability of being correct (say 75%), then the probability that the final conclusion is correct is far far less (if each step has a 75% probability, then four consecutive steps being correct has a probability of just 32%).¹⁵

In reality though, there are many more steps than this in the process of discerning Deuteronomy's proposed original context. It requires a particular understanding of the development of Israelite religious traditions, and the ability to match the different parts of Deuteronomy to different stages and places in that development. That in turn requires an ability to correctly identify the origin and dates of other books found in the Bible, many of which are re-dated by critical scholarship using these same methods.¹⁶

All these questions are then also influenced by each individual scholar's philosophical and methodological assumptions. For instance, how should claims to divine inspiration and prophetic predictions be handled? Wellhausen's analysis of the development of Israelite religion was based in part on the assumption that religious practices grow more complex over time – a viewpoint that seems to a priori rule out the divine origin of the Old Testament

¹⁵ I have adapted this point from C.S. Lewis *Fern-seed and Elephants*, p120.

¹⁶ For instance, most critical scholars think that the rest of the Pentateuch is much later than it appears, consisting of various redactional layers culminating in a post-Exilic final document. They would also redate the second half of Isaiah (and some parts of the first half) to the exile or later and see all the history books as being written much later than the events they describe (albeit based on earlier sources). Indeed, in critical re-datings of the Old Testament the earliest acknowledged book is Amos, written in the late 8th Century BC – making it very difficult to use historical tools to shed light with any confidence on the earliest history of Israel.

Law that it claims for itself, as well as being highly questionable on simply observational grounds.¹⁷

For this process to hold firm, each step needs to be built on extremely strong foundations. In recent years though those foundations seem to have been cracking, even amongst critical scholars. Few scholars now hold to the 'Documentary Hypothesis' as Wellhausen proposed it, and recent scholarship has cast doubt on the closeness of the links between Josiah's reforms and Deuteronomy.

There are now a variety of proposed contexts and origins for the core of the book, from circles of rural Levites to Northern priests, or courtly wise men.¹⁸ It feels to me like the whole edifice is a pack of cards, and that the bottom row is tottering and close to falling. There are too many variables, too many unknowns, too much conjecture and guesswork, and too many linked hypotheses.

I find myself thinking back to comments made by C. S. Lewis about similar reconstructions of the developments in early Christian theology:

"This seems to involve knowing about a number of long dead people...things of which I believe few of us could have given an accurate account if we had lived among them; all the forward and backward surge of discussion, preaching, and individual religious experience. I could not speak with similar confidence about the circle I have chiefly lived in myself. I could not describe the history even of my own thought as confidently as these men describe the history of the early Church's mind. And I am perfectly certain no one else could."¹⁹

Lewis was writing about a different field of Theology, but the issues are the same – and the difficulties inherent in reconstructing the evolution of Old Testament religion are arguably even more formidable.

At this point many readers may be expecting me to propose an alternative analysis of the available evidence to prove the traditional view of a largely Mosaic origin for Deuteronomy – but I cannot do so. In recent decades there have been some brilliant defences of the traditional view and for the possibility of dating Deuteronomy in the pre-monarchic era of Israel's history – and I am profoundly grateful to the scholars who have undertaken this important work.²⁰ I believe that their theses are well-researched and well-argued, and that they show that it is perfectly reasonable to come to a 'traditional' conclusion on the basis of historical-critical study.

However, I do not believe that they can prove the matter any more decisively than those on the other side of the argument (and I do not think that they would claim to do so). It is not that I do not think that this view is true – it is that the limitations of the available evidence

¹⁷ For instance, a quick glance at the history of the charismatic movement in the Church of England should be enough to prove that sometimes religious practices can grow less complex over time.

¹⁸ There are numerous studies of the field for those who wish to dig deeper, but I would recommend the short summary in Daniel Block 'Recovering the Voice of Moses: the Genesis of Deuteronomy' in *The Gospel According to Moses*, p25, and slightly fuller one in Gordon McConville *Deuteronomy* pp21-33.

¹⁹ C. S. Lewis *Fern-seed and Elephants*, p13.

²⁰ Gordon McConville's *Deuteronomy* is a particular tour de force, exploring this in some detail in the introduction as well as relevant parts of the commentary. He simply argues for a pre-monarchic dating for Deuteronomy, rather than seeking to prove Mosaic authorship – although of course a pre-monarchic date does leave open the possibility of Mosaic authorship. In his introduction he also refers to most of the other significant work in this field to that point.

mean that I do not think historical-critical study is even remotely capable of proving the matter one way or another.

My reasons for holding to a traditional view of the Mosaic origin of Deuteronomy are therefore not primarily historical (or literary) but theological. It is to these that I now turn.

THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS...

I believe that the most important question to ask in any analysis of the origin and dates of any Biblical book is "what do I believe the Bible is?" It is a question which is rarely explicitly asked, but which changes everything.

This is perhaps best illustrated by looking at the origins of modern critical scholarship. For nearly 2,000 years almost everyone reading the Bible had accepted the 'traditional' understandings of who wrote which books and when. Then in a comparatively short period of time, that all changed. The trailblazers of this new scholarship weren't cleverer than the great minds that had gone before them (or less so), they didn't have access to lots of new historical sources, and they didn't study the Bible more intensively than their predecessors.

What changed was their starting point – their answer to that question: "what do I believe the Bible is?" They no longer accepted it as the inspired word of God, and instead began to investigate it from a human perspective. The result was a completely different way of reading the Bible – and perhaps unsurprisingly, a completely different set of conclusions about it.

I believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God, and that while it was written by a myriad of human authors, its primary author is God. I therefore expect each book to reflect something of its human author, but even more so to carry the voice of God.²¹ As a result, I read and understand it in a completely different way to someone who does not believe what I do. I read expecting to hear the voice of God speaking to me through its pages, and to meet with God as I do. I understand it is a single unified whole, in which the disparate human voices come together in harmony to sing a single tune. When I struggle to understand one part of it, I will often turn to another part of it to help me work out what it says (including using the New Testament to understand the Old). And when I read that "these are the words Moses spoke...", I believe it.

I will be honest – my reasons for believing all this are not because I was able to prove it scientifically or historically. As the Bible is deeply rooted in history, if someone were able to disprove it that would challenge my faith deeply – but I am confident that no-one has

²¹ I explore this further in the first film in the series, using the illustration of St. Paul's Cathedral:

"In chapter 1 verse 1 we're told 'these are the words of Moses...'; but just two verses later that's clarified, and we read: "Moses spoke to the people of Israel all that the LORD had given him..." In many ways that's a beautiful little description of how all scripture came about – that preachers and prophets and poets and evangelists shared something – everything – that the LORD had given them. Their words were actually his words – and God speaks through them to us. I love an illustration from Alpha that likens the Bible to this building, St. Paul's Cathedral. I used to live – and work in a church – just a stone's throw away from St. Paul's, and it's a glorious building. All the guide books and articles will tell you that it was built by the genius architect Sir Christopher Wren except that of course, he didn't actually lay the bricks, or paint the frescoes, or whatever an army of artists and builders and craftsmen did all that – but each one was working according to the master plan and vision of Sir Christopher Wren they made all that he had given them to do and in the same way here Moses speaks all that God has given him."

done so (or will), and indeed have found that the more I investigate the more convinced I become.²²

While my studies have strengthened my faith, even so they are just one strand in a thick cord of evidence. I believe all this for all sorts of other reasons too. I believe this because I believe in God. I believe this because I believe in Jesus, and he believed it. I believe this because I have experienced it to be true – I have met with God as I have read his word. I believe this because of the evidence of all the other aspects of my faith. I believe this for a myriad of different reasons. Ultimately though, for me this is not just a question of what the Bible is. That question is just one small part in a far bigger whole – what I believe about God, life, the universe, and everything.

That is a view that is clearly at variance with both the presuppositions and the conclusions of historical critical analysis. The historical-critical method starts by setting aside all claims to divine inspiration and authority, and instead reads each Biblical text from a human perspective.²³ It does not look for a unified whole or expect to hear many voices singing together in a single tune. It does not try to interpret one text in the light of another (unless there is a clear literary relationship), and so on. That does not mean that this method is necessarily wrong.

There are many perfectly logical and rational reasons for using this method, possibly even for concluding that it is the best way to study scripture. But they are the presuppositions of historical-critical study and not its conclusions. Like my beliefs about the Bible, historical-critical views of scripture bear all the hallmarks and assumptions of a particular worldview.

That does not mean that I cannot learn lots from historical-critical scholars (or even vice-versa). Many of their insights and discoveries around the text I have often found very helpful.²⁴ It does not even prevent me from engaging with historical critical scholarship on its own terms – as many wonderful conservative scholars do.²⁵ What it does mean though

²² One piece of evidence that I have not mentioned in the main argument outlined above is that many of the "assured results of modern scholarship" (as they used to be known) have proved to be anything but. The Documentary Hypothesis itself is one example – for a century most leading biblical scholars accepted it as proven, and it took considerable courage and intellectual confidence to demur. How many other established conclusions of critical scholarship will one day turn out to be wrong? It can still take courage to disagree with an academic consensus, but a glance back at past mistakes can make it easier!

It is worth highlighting that this is not just true of the various scholarly hypotheses, but even of our understanding of the historical 'facts' of the Ancient Near East. An example I often use on my tours of the British Museum is the identity of King Belshazzar, the anti-hero of Daniel 5. At one point the identification of Belshazzar as 'king' in the dying days of Babylon seemed to contradict the very strong evidence of history – scholars have long known that the last king of Babylon was actually called Nabonidus, and not Belshazzar. The available historical 'facts' all changed though in 1854 with the chance discovery of an inscribed clay cylinder buried in the foundations of a Babylonian building in southern Iraq. The cylinder was buried by Nabonidus and mentions his son and co-regent – Belshazzar. Not only did this suddenly vindicate the Biblical account, but it also explained some odd features of it – such as why Belshazzar made Daniel the "third highest ruler in the kingdom" (Daniel 5v29), rather than the second highest. He himself was only number two, so third was the best position he could offer! (see Edwards and Anderson *Through the British Museum with the Bible* (Leominster, 2008) p68 for details.

²³ This is not to say that there aren't many believers who use the historical-critical method to varying degrees – it is simply an observation of the fact that the method itself does not allow for the supernatural.

²⁴ I am a particular fan, for instance, of Brevards Childs, whose work I find very insightful and helpful in reading scripture.

²⁵ The list would endless, so I won't try! Gordon McConville, who I have already quoted a lot above, would be a good example.

is that on a fundamental level we will read the text in very different ways – and as a result of doing so, we will come to all sorts of different conclusions.

I believe that this question is particularly pertinent when discussing historical 'problems' with the biblical text, such as scepticism about what they claim for themselves about authorship (and therefore date).²⁶ As outlined above, the issue is that there is often so little historical evidence with which to work. That means that our starting points will determine our conclusions to a far greater degree than is commonly acknowledged.

The critical scholar looks at a 'traditional' position (such as the Mosaic origin of Deuteronomy), and asks: "can this be proved?" The answer is a clear 'no', and on that basis the position is set aside, and alternative explanations are explored. By contrast the believer who holds to a traditional view of biblical inspiration will ask the question: "can this be disproved?" Again, the answer is a clear 'no' – and on that basis they will continue to believe the traditional view. Both positions are equally reasonable – but they are radically different.

These divergences become even greater once we realise that the Bible constantly forces us into philosophical judgements that cannot be settled on the basis of critical study. It is full of miracles and prophecies.²⁷ If we believe in the God of the Bible then these are both plausible and likely. If not, we have to reject them as impossible. However much we may try to keep an open mind, those two positions must result in different conclusions about the passages and books in question.

For instance, in Deuteronomy 5 we read an account of God audibly declaring the ten commandments to the whole people of Israel out of the fire and cloud and darkness, and then writing them on tablets of stone.²⁸ I have never had any trouble believing this account – I believe in God, and so have no more reason to doubt this part of the account than any other. If I did not believe in God though, this is simply impossible – I would have to conclude that this story was either mythological or pure fiction.

Not only are these two positions on Deuteronomy 5 opposite, but they have the potential to profoundly influence my views on the dating of the whole book. If I believe that these events did not happen, even if I believed that Moses existed, and that he led the people out of Egypt (which many scholars do not), I would conclude that this account was written down much much later.

The reason is that it would have taken time for such an elaborate and dramatic myth to develop – and even if it had developed and been written down quickly, enough people

²⁶ It's worth noting here that when we are talking about authorship and dating of biblical books we need to be clear and honest about what they do and do not claim for themselves. Many biblical books have traditional attributions of authorship that are not actually given by the text (such as the gospels, or much of the rest of the Pentateuch), and in such cases the question is much less important.

²⁷ We could add historical accuracy to this list, but it is not strictly relevant to Deuteronomy (with the possible exception of chapter 34), as it claims to be contemporaneous with the events that it describes. For Biblical history it is a significant issue though. For instance, how could the writer of Genesis know accurately about events centuries before they wrote? We might assume that they used sources, but how confident could we be that they used accurate sources and correctly judged them? Speaking from a human perspective the answer must be 'not very.' If God was at work through his Holy Spirit though, then things are very different – God could easily guide the human author to the right sources, or even reveal things directly to them.

²⁸ See also chapter 4v36 for further details of what Deuteronomy says happened in this moment – not only did God speak to the people of Israel in a loud voice, but they also "heard his words". This is a supernatural event that cannot be fully explained through natural causes.

would have known it was rubbish to prevent it gaining wide credence. Simply on the basis of this one chapter we can see that it is very difficult to believe in the Mosaic authorship of this part of Deuteronomy if you do not believe in God.

This dynamic is even more obviously present when we move onto the prophetic parts of the Bible. The Old Testament is full of prophetic predictions of events centuries in the future, sometimes with a level of specificity that is just not possible without actual knowledge. If God exists, then there is no problem with any of them – but if he does not exist then they too are impossible. The only plausible explanation is that they were recorded after the events they describe.²⁹

An example from Deuteronomy would be the 'Song of Moses' in chapter 32 (and its explanation in chapter 31v15-22). It is a very explicit prediction of both the exile and return from exile – events that were centuries in the future. It is possible in this instance to believe that Moses might possibly have guessed at this on his own, and then made this prediction, but it seems unlikely. It is easy to imagine why Moses would warn of curses for disobedience, but less likely that on his own he would predict that that is what would happen, and even less likely that he would then predict God's restoration and salvation of the nation.

By far the most plausible explanations for this passage are either that God did instruct Moses as the text records, or that the 'prophecy' was actually made during or after the exile. It is no surprise to discover then that those explanations are exactly what the traditional and critical views on the book espouse.

In reality these divergences are often compounded, as no question about the Bible is ever capable of being examined completely in isolation. For instance, in my survey of the critical understanding of Deuteronomy, I mentioned the influence that Wellhausen's views on the evolution of Israelite religion had on his conclusions about Deuteronomy. Those views were the product of his studies not just of this book, but the whole Old Testament and the evidence that every part of it brought to bear on the question. The conclusions that we draw in one area and about one part of the Old Testament will necessarily impact how we look at other areas – how can they not?³⁰

Ironically this is something that conservatives who take a traditional view on these questions are sometimes criticised for. We are often asked to approach each individual historical question with an 'open mind' – and yet, to do so would actually be illogical. First

²⁹ I have been told in the past that this is not the case, and that actually the scriptures do not include prophecies of the distant future – an assertion I uncritically absorbed for a while, until it was flagged up to me that actually there are lots of examples of such prophecies. The reason why the assertion is made is because they are all either in history books that were written down after both the prophecy and its fulfilment (see e.g. 1 Kings 13v1-2 and 2 Kings 23v15-19), or in books which critical scholarship has re-dated to after the events prophesied were fulfilled (e.g. Daniel 11). I think that it is important to recognise that actually this is a common feature of biblical prophecy though, and so have made a quick list of some examples: Genesis 15v12-16; Genesis 49v10; Deuteronomy 31v16-22 and 32; Joshua 6v26; 1 Kings 13v1-2; 2 Kings 20v16-18; Isaiah 6v11-13; Isaiah 13v17-19; Isaiah 41v21-29; Isaiah 44v24-28; Jeremiah 29v10-14; Ezekiel 27-28; Daniel 8; Daniel 11; Nahum 2v6; Habakkuk 2v3, Habakkuk 3.

³⁰ As an aside, I think that it is worth flagging up that this means that those of us who believe in the divine inspiration of scripture need to be wary when learning from critical scholarship and engaging with it. We may not realise that a seemingly neutral point or conclusion may actually be resting on an explicitly anti-supernatural assumption. This is also obviously true vice-versa too – but in my experience critical scholars are much quicker to spot the impact of our beliefs on our conclusions.

of all, it denies this impossibility of disentangling our conclusions about various bits of the Bible from one another.³¹

More fundamentally though, it asks us to ignore what we believe is the most important fact about any piece of scripture – that it is God's word. If what I am reading comes from God, then that is a very very good reason for accepting what it says. It might theoretically be possible to prove that it is wrong, but the evidentiary standard required to do so would need to be extraordinarily high.

Let me use an illustration. When my father died *The Telegraph* ran a short obituary of him.³² As a family, we immediately spotted that the obituary included a (very) small mistake. As a young man he had served as an officer in the army, but *The Telegraph* put him in the wrong regiment.³³ *The Telegraph* is a well-respected and well-researched newspaper. Therefore, the most logical conclusion for most people reading the article would be to trust that it had got this right. However, I know that the obituary was wrong. My knowledge is based on numerous conversations over the years with my father, and it would be completely illogical for me to set them all aside and instead trust *The Telegraph* obituary. It might theoretically be possible to prove that what my father had told me was wrong, but the evidentiary standard required to do so would need to be extraordinarily high. Not only would there need to be compelling positive evidence, but that evidence would now also need to be sufficient to overcome the contrary evidence both of his testimony and general truthfulness.

I believe that the same is true of the Bible. For Christians who have encountered God speaking through the Bible, those encounters are themselves powerful evidence that the Bible truly is God's word – as are the many other aspects of our experience of God and what we know about him. Much of that evidence may not be objective and independently verifiable, and so it falls outside the scope of current understandings of biblical scholarship – much like my knowledge of my father, and of our many conversations over the years, is not something that is independently verifiable. However, that does not make it any less true, or my experience of it any less valid. These are things that I cannot prove to you, but it would be illogical for me to ignore them when answering this question.

This all brings us back to where we started this section, and the question 'what do I believe the Bible is?' Does the Bible come from God or not? That is a question that takes us far beyond the scope or possibilities of biblical scholarship. The evidence that we bring to bear on it will not only include objective facts and arguments, but also subjective experiences and evidence from our own lives.

I have strong and powerful reasons for believing that the Bible is God's word, and that therefore what it says about the origins of Deuteronomy is true. Those reasons do include my own assessment of the available historical and scholarly evidence, but they make up only a small part of it.

My conclusions are also based on lots of other evidence, and what I know about God and about his word. Taken together, I believe that they provide overwhelming evidence that

³¹ Which of course means that there is often an unintentional double standard at work here – we are asked to leave our 'bias' at the door, but those coming from a sceptical perspective are not, even though their conclusions will be equally influenced by their a priori assumptions.

³² The obituary ran in *The Telegraph* in March 2009.

³³ He was an officer in The Rifle Brigade, but the obituary put him in The Honourable Artillery Company.

when Deuteronomy 1v1+3 says that "these are the words of Moses...that the LORD commanded him," it is correct.