

Deuteronomy and the Question of Authorship

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[0 : 00] Good morning. Our topic this morning is Deuteronomy and authorship. I'm sure many of you lost sleep last night on this very question. It probably keeps you up night after night wondering, did Moses write Deuteronomy?

I'm sure that that is a major life crisis question. But in all seriousness, I think this is an important question. I'm not going to try to bring us to a clear answer this morning, but I do hope to take us down a path that helps us think about these kind of questions.

Questions where what critical scholarship says and what biblical faiths say seem to be completely at odds. And what do we do about those kind of things?

So two reasons maybe to break this down of why I think this is a really important topic. One is because it's really hard to find careful scholars who enthusiastically affirm that Moses wrote the entirety of Deuteronomy.

It's tough to do. Whereas many would contend that Deuteronomy was something of a deliberate or pious fraud. So the second reason is because, and I was saying this before, is that if we go along with the skeptical position that puts Deuteronomy as a pious fraud, late, kind of not at all written by Moses or connected to Moses, then it directly puts us at odds with not just the Christian tradition, but what Jesus says and what much of the New Testament says as well.

[1 : 34] And so I think in a lot of these things that we see that whether it's the intended goal or not, the effect of some of these critical positions is that there's a wedge driven between the historical person of Moses and the book of Deuteronomy.

And that scholars can claim that that severs any bond that Christians might have to meaningfully refer to the book as Mosaic. And so it seems, again, as I was saying, that we're left with a choice either to embrace kind of thoroughgoing skepticism or to hold to Christian faith without any look to history and without any look to scholarship and critical findings.

So it seems like this is a dilemma that I hope that we can at least begin to think of a middle way to engage in these kind of things. I know if some of you were here a little bit over a month ago that I think Harvey told me that he gave a lecture on authorship of John.

And so I guess that at some level that you're kind of primed for these type of questions. So my hope this morning is to bring a general awareness to the issue at hand and also to chart a way forward that can affirm both the value of historical study and historical research as well as the trustworthiness of the Bible.

So I want to be able to try to navigate a middle way that both affirms historical study and shows its value in place but also adheres to the total trustworthiness of Scripture.

[3 : 09] For me, as I've looked into this question and done study, I spent a lot of last semester trying to research this that even as different people were pressing the Bible in different ways and trying to press it to say, no, it's wrong, it's incorrect, it's not factual, that this didn't destabilize my faith but even made it stronger in what the Bible is and what God's given us.

So I hope that even though we're not coming to kind of rock-solid conclusions this morning, so spoiler alert, there are no rock-solid conclusions, that my process in this has affirmed my faith rather than destabilized it.

So here's a little bit about how I got interested in the topic. Last semester I was in an Old Testament history seminar with Phil Long and we read a lot of different perspectives on the Old Testament history.

And it really opened my eyes to the fact that the basic contours of the Old Testament story were hotly contested. I knew going in, oh yeah, there are plenty of people that don't believe in miracles and may not believe in divine inspiration, but certainly the basic contours of the Old Testament

history are assumed.

And the more and more reading I did, seeing that that's completely rejected, that even there are people saying now that they doubt whether there ever was a united kingdom under David and Solomon.

[4 : 35] And so these are major questions, and this is like a very different milieu than what, as a Christian, one might expect in reading the Old Testament and kind of owning this as history, as not just the story of our faith but true stories of what God has done.

So as I was reading, and one of the things that came out consistently is that the books of the Bible were often seen as works that were fabricated in order to undergird a political or religious motivation.

And so they weren't necessarily telling the true story, but they were there in order to prop up a regime or a power group or something as a way to push their agenda forward.

And this was much the same in the book of Deuteronomy. Many held that the book not only was significant in the reforms made under King Josiah in the 8th century, but that actually the book was written for that purpose, that it was written so that Josiah could discover something in order to base his major reforms on.

So, you know, which is much different than how I believed and how kind of probably what most of us have grown up believing, that Moses wrote it, Joshua cherished it, David meditated on it, and this had been a book that had been significant for the people of God throughout the ages.

[6 : 03] But that simply wasn't the case for many, many scholars. So kind of to illustrate this, that there were kind of the two different positions on the left being kind of a typical Christian position that was substantially written by Moses, maybe around 1200 BC, versus a more critical position that it was a pious fraud.

And here are some of the reasons why people would say that it was a pious fraud. One is that they see the clear, and most of the text will be bigger than this. This text is going to be a little bit smaller. But people would say, well, it's clearly connected to Josiah's reforms, so it must have been that he was the one or his party was the one that created it. Also is that, and this is an interesting argument, that people would say that sophisticated writing wasn't really possible until the creation of an urban elite.

So comparative cultures indicate that often writing didn't take place until there was a sophisticated urban center where scribes could begin writing. And so, by these scholars would say, well, if Israel wasn't really centralized into cities until maybe the David-Solomon time period or after that, then that's the earliest that any kind of substantive writing could have happened.

At least that's how the argument goes. And then the last thing would be that there are some laws that reflect late concerns. So some people would read it and say, there's no way that Moses, before the people went to the Promised Land, could have written this.

[7 : 42] I mean, there's talk of kingship. Really? Were they already expecting a king? There is seemingly that there are fingerprints of the exile put in there. Like, how would he know about the exile?

And other things like that. And so people who would read it and say, oh, well, clearly it must be a late document. It must be Josiah's reign or after that, or maybe even into exile.

Anyway, those are the arguments. So we're not going to deal with them head on, but I think we're going to look at them in a different way. But why would we say as Christians or as people who want to uphold the trustworthiness of Scripture that it was written by Moses?

One is that Jesus refers to the law of Moses several times, and so it's seen as kind of when Jesus is referring to the law, to the Pentateuch, that it's of Moses, that it's not of Josiah or someone after that.

It's of Moses. So obviously that's important. There are other New Testament witnesses that affirm this. Hebrews 3, for example, talks about Moses a great deal, affirming Moses as a true historical character and who is ostensibly responsible for the book or the books.

[8 : 52] And then also, and this is a really important one, and this is part of what got me interested in the topic, is that Deuteronomy as a book has a lot of self-attestation that it was written by Moses. And so we're going to cover some of these more.

That it doesn't just purport to be, oh, of course, Moses probably wrote it. Like, for example, Genesis doesn't have any claims of authorship in it. But we might say, oh, well, it was probably written by

Moses because he would have been the one who was passing on the traditions and other things. So unlike Genesis, Deuteronomy has lots of self-attestation that Moses was the one responsible for it. Okay, so let's get into that. So what is Deuteronomy exactly?

Probably most of us don't have Deuteronomy memorized. Maybe it's not a book that we read on a regular basis. But so if we're going to talk about Deuteronomy, what is it?

Like, what kind of literature, what kind of text is it? As you'll see in this chart, the vast majority of Deuteronomy is speeches from Moses. And so, again, it's somewhat arbitrary in how you would maybe divide some of the speeches, but you can see that he gives a speech in the beginning that's a historical background to the covenant.

[10:03] Oh, sorry, let me say this. The book is set up as speeches before people are going to the promised land. So they're on the edge of the Jordan. They're about to inherit. It's been 40 years in the wilderness.

And then Moses is giving one last final exhortation to the people. So there's historical background. There's stipulations for the covenant. There are covenant blessings and curses.

There's a call for covenant renewal. There's a song, final exhortation, a blessing. And so if you kind of think about it's 34 chapters and you look at that, the vast, vast majority are speeches by Moses that he's giving to the people.

But there's also more to it. There's also, oh, and then, sorry, there's also bits where we talk about Moses' writing. And so not just that Moses was the speaker, but Moses was the writer.

So in 31, then Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi. And then in 31, 24, when Moses had finished writing the words of this law in a book to the very end, Moses commanded the Levites who carried the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord and on and on.

[11:11] So there are claims to not just Moses speaking, but Moses writing in the book. But what else? There's also an omniscient narrator who's behind everything.

So it's not, if you're familiar with the book of Hebrews, that some people say that Hebrews is a sermon, but there's no narrator to it. It's just speaking. It's just as if it was a transcript of a sermon. Deuteronomy is a lot different. Deuteronomy has a narrator who is often setting up Moses' speeches, giving context to what he's saying, and so it's set up in that way. So there's Moses, but there's also a narrator who's kind of behind what's happening.

So if you look at this in the beginning, these are the words that Moses spoke to all of Israel beyond the Jordan in the wilderness. In the 40th year, on the first day of the 11th month, Moses spoke to the people according to all that the Lord had given him in commandment to them.

And on and on. So the narrator is through all of it. So it's not just Moses. There's a narrator as well. There are also other voices so that God speaks, God is quoted, the people speak, and they're quoted.

[12:21] Anyway, so there are several voices that are going on in Deuteronomy. And then also, interestingly, the book ends with the narration of Moses' death.

And this is interesting. Did Moses prophesy his own death? So I can read some of this. So Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab.

But no one knows the place of his burial to this day. Moses was 120 years old when he died. His eye was undimmed and his vigor unabated. And Joshua, the son of Nun, was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him.

So the people of Israel obeyed him, Joshua, and did as the Lord had commanded Moses. And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face.

So, again, it's certainly possible that God could have inspired Moses to write about his own death in this way.

[13:18] It would seem odd, I think, for that to happen. It's possible, but it just seems odd. So one way maybe to look at what's happening is that there is a – it's almost like a masterpiece painting that's been put in a beautiful frame.

And so Moses, the master artist, kind of made the painting, but then he either commissioned someone or someone came after him, maybe Joshua, maybe someone else, to put the frame around the text.

It might be one way to look at it. So all that to say is that when we're talking about authorship, that we need a more nuanced view probably than just to say Moses wrote everything.

Again, it would be odd to say that Moses was also the narrator who was writing about himself, and I think it might be a little bit odd, more odd for Moses to be the one who is writing his death. Again, these can happen. We're not going to put God in a box, but it just would seem odd if we're kind of thinking about it from a logical perspective. So – but as we're approaching a more nuanced view, it's important that we don't just kind of take this as a jumping-off point and kind of create a creative solution to all this and say, well, I think it could have been this or this is what had happened.

[14 : 37] But I think it's important as we kind of proceed further to say that we want to root ourselves in what we can find about history, what historical research, comparative study might illuminate and show us.

So as we're going to do this, there are two things that I want to do because I think there's a fairly significant cultural gap between us and Deuteronomy.

No matter when we date it, it's a long time ago, and there's very, very different cultures at work. So what I'm hoping to do for the rest of the lecture is to look at two questions that I hope will kind of feed our study and help us think better about this.

One, how did ancient Israel – how did they view writing in general? You know, that ancient Israel, they didn't come, you know, to bring sacrifices and bring a copy of – their own copy of the Bible with them.

And how did they view writing just in general, not just biblical writing, but how did they view writing? And then also, how did they think of authorship and authority? And I think in both these cases, we're going to find that they were quite a bit different than us in how they looked at these things.

[15 : 49] So, yeah, these are questions we're going to try to answer and think about before we move on to any particular answers. So that's kind of the setup for what we're going.

We've talked about what Deuteronomy is. If there are any questions or things that I could maybe re-clarify before we go into the particular historical element, I would love to do that. Yes?

You mentioned that the idea of having cities and a structure like that would have been very handy for this tribal group of people wandering through the wilderness.

But Moses, in fact, came from exactly that kind of society. They had writing. He was educated in Pharaoh's house. Kings, da-da-da-da, all that went with that.

As a matter of fact, I don't think anybody has told me where Moses learned how to write Hebrew. No? Probably. He knew an Egyptian writing first. So that's part of the argument that they couldn't have done this.

[16 : 52] He couldn't have done this because they hadn't set up a city and so on. It seems to me to be quite unreasonable. Yeah, I think you're seeing that maybe it's not based on as solid rock as they would want us to believe.

So, yeah, that's a great comment. Yeah, any other questions? I thought it was obvious who wrote the book of Deuteronomy. So this is kind of a new thing. So you're saying there's a bit of people are unsure who wrote the book.

And you're getting to the bottom of it, it seems like. I don't know if I'm getting to the bottom. I'm trying to at least get below the surface, though. But, yeah, it is a question.

I think it's any time that we kind of face things like, wait, I've always thought it was this way, and there wasn't any reason for me to think differently. And then kind of you have all these other people who, most of whom don't hold to a kind of a, certainly not evangelical, but usually not a Christian point of view, that are saying completely opposite things.

What do we do with that? And it's not the calling of everyone, but I think it's the calling for all of us, maybe not calling, but it's the responsibility for all of us, to know enough so that we can engage well apologetically in questions about things, and for such issues not to be barriers to other people's faith.

[18 : 10] I think that's at the baseline. Not that we have to know the answers, but that if someone is like, you know what, I can't trust any of this, we can say, well, here's a resource, or here's a way to think about that differently.

But, yeah, but it also, that's why it's kind of getting a little bit contentious, because it says, well, if it says Moses wrote it, why are we asking whether he did?

And I think that's part of our, even at least at this point in my life, as trying to be a student, trying to dig into those things and say, what is going on? How can I think better about this?

You know, I've thought in the Central Library of the Anchor Study Bibles, it's like an encyclopedia, so sometimes I'll take up the oil when I say, you're wrong, and after the time I'm down, all the commentary, like with Joan and the Whale, the Anchor Bible commentaries are very helpful. If someone wants to dig right out of it, I'd like to figure out a little bit more, and no one to talk to, those are very good to turn to, the Anchor Bibles commentaries.

[19 : 13] Yeah, yeah, and I'll give a couple of resources that have been helpful to me at the end. So, yeah, any other questions before we push on? This may be too big for you to get into.

Oh, I'll just ignore it then. The Deuteronomy is the fifth book and last book of the Torah, and I guess traditionally Moses is seen as the author of the whole Torah.

Would it be appropriate for you to say anything about Deuteronomy as a book in relation to the other four books?

How it differs? It is quite different. Yeah, I don't know if I have much more to say than I've already said, other than kind of name Deuteronomos, second law.

So it's not a repetition verbatim of all the law, but it's going back over things for a new generation. So it's certainly not repetitive, or it's certainly not unnecessary.

[20 : 18] And actually, compared to some of the other books, it may have the ways that the rest of the Old Testament alludes to it and plays off different themes might be stronger than some of the other books.

So it plays a really significant role in the whole Old Testament. But as particularly connection to the other books and questions of authorship, I don't know enough to really say much.

I think the stuff we're going to get into has application. I was actually thinking more in terms of genre, what it does as a book. Yeah, I think one of the things that's interesting about Deuteronomy, and there's debate about all these things, but something I found particularly interesting is that Deuteronomy kind of functions as a sort of a constitutional document for the people of Israel.

And so it sounds like this is who we are, this is what we're about, in maybe a clearer way than some other document. So I think that's kind of a, to me, that's an interesting angle, especially as we think about our own constitutional documents and how those things play in.

Were you thinking of anything in particular? Well, I suspect that most people will feel most familiar with Genesis and the early part of Exodus, and the rest will be a great, great mass.

[21 : 38] Yeah, where did the story go? I was tracking along, and all of a sudden the story just stopped. It did. Yeah, yeah. Great. Okay, I had put in a break here, but let's press on, and then we'll find a break at some other point.

Is that okay? Yeah. Okay. So, let's see, where are we? Okay, we're trying to bridge the cultural gap. How did ancients view writing in general?

How did they think of authorship and authority? And I may have said this, and I might say it again, but there's a lot of this stuff that we just don't know. And there's a lot of questions out there. I mean, the farther back you go, kind of the harder it is to get any clear data on some of these things.

And so, while I wouldn't call what I'm trying to engage in speculation, that I would say a lot of it is based in comparative cultures. And so trying to say, well, kind of the Assyrians or the Greeks or the kind of Philistines did this, how does that maybe map on to what Israel was doing?

Knowing that, at least from our perspective, is that Israel was totally different. God appeared to them on a mountain in fire and gave them commandments. And, I mean, that certainly has to play or make them different than the cultures around them.

[22 : 57] Okay, so we're trying to think well about this, to think well about issues of authorship. And we said that Deuteronomy, that even though the bulk of the book is speeches Moses gave to the Israelites, that there's a narrator who gives context.

And we're trying to give some kind of nuancing about questions of authorship. Okay, let's, I think we can actually glean a lot from Deuteronomy on questions of how ancient people viewed writing. And particularly because they were living in a predominantly oral culture. So unlike our culture that's predominantly written, that they were in a predominantly oral culture.

And that the way they engage with texts is different because of that. So let's look at a couple places in Deuteronomy to see, okay, how do they view text? How do they view writing?

10.2, I will write on, this is God speaking, I will write on the tablets, the words that were on the first tablets. And you, Moses, shall put them in the ark.

[24 : 01] 27. And this is Moses talking to the people. And on the day you cross over the Jordan, you shall set up large stones and plaster them with plaster. And you shall write on them all the words of this law.

The next one. And Moses commanded the Levites, take this book of the law and put it by the side of the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God. That it may be there for a witness against you.

Okay, what do you notice in these passages about how ancient Israelites may have used texts? Texts.

Because they weren't probably beside their bed to read before sleeping. How did they view texts? Inspirational billboard. Okay, and how so? Well, it's public.

It's tablets. Yeah. It has materiality. Yeah, that's great. Yeah, especially with the one in the middle, the plastered stones riding on. Yeah, that's, billboard is a great example.

[25 : 04] Yeah. What else? What do you notice about? Yes. It's, in a sense, accusing. Maybe there for a witness against you. And he didn't, strictly speaking, put it in the ark as the Lord commanded him to put it by the ark.

Yeah, next to the ark. Yeah, and what do you think about the fact that it was kind of removed from their common, ordinary seeing? That's kind of interesting, isn't it?

That it was a billboard in some ways, but also it was kind of removed to be kind of in the holy place. Yes. Any thoughts? How about authority?

I don't know. You could be transmitting everything orally and then there's disagreement about what that oral law or oral tradition might say.

Then you could refer back here to this stone and check it out in here. Yeah, you definitely could.

Yeah, you definitely, definitely could. Yeah, those are good thoughts.

[26 : 12] So thinking, and we'll get more to this, but thinking more about literacy, that literacy was probably only around 10% of the population in that time.

So at least a way to be able to read documents and see them is that probably more people than that could read a grocery list of five bags of wheat or two lambs.

But as far as kind of reading any kind of texts, it would probably be only about 10%. But let's see that. Yeah, that doesn't mean that people didn't read, though.

But maybe there might have been a different kind of reading. I think that the billboard is a good is a good example. Well, I also think that some of the reading would have functioned like what we would do when we go to a war memorial.

And so we go to a war memorial or something like that. And the significance of it isn't by reading each and every name. That that's not how we read it. We read it by taking in the huge amount of names of people who've sacrificed on our behalf for freedom.

[27 : 19] And that's that's how we read it. So we read the overall weight and significance, not by reading each and every name, but by seeing everything there. And that was some ways how reading functioned for ancients is that there even if people weren't literate, they could read monuments or they could read, you know, large plastered stones and take it in almost wholesale rather than kind of in each of the fine points.

So this is important thinking and thinking about the authority that these things would have would have taken, especially that there were that writing was something that people did. But God did as well. And even when you think that they would have even treasured the responsibility of writing more because they would have said, well, this is something God did.

But God is a writer and this is significant for us. How might Deuteronomy have functioned in an oral context? Here is another passage.

And I'm just going to read the bold section, the bold sections. So Deuteronomy, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing every seven years that they may hear and learn to fear the Lord, your God.

They may hear and learn to fear the Lord, your God again, both their children and the ones who come after them. So, again, they didn't learn God's law by having quiet times every day and individually meditating on it, but would have would have learned a lot of it by hearing it read and explained to them.

[28 : 51] We see this happening in Nehemiah 8 is that Ezra and others are reading the law to them and then they're explaining it as they go. But because they were so in this kind of context, because they were being read to a lot, they would have absorbed it and would have the idea would have

been to have it written on their hearts.

Later in Deuteronomy, that God tells Moses, now therefore write this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths, not just that they would kind of hear it once, but that it would be in their mouths.

That this song may be a witness for me against the people of Israel. And a passage that's probably familiar to many of us right after the Shema. Again, there's debate of how literal this should be taken.

But the big idea is that the word was supposed to be in them and around them, on their lips, on their hearts. Everywhere they looked was supposed to remind them of the word. So even if they didn't have a copy of this that they were carrying in their backpack, that they certainly had this kind of written on their hearts and carrying it with them in a different sort of way.

Jews still do that. They do. Oh yeah. Yeah. They bind it on their, I think it's this finger, all the way up.

[30 : 32] And they have the little box in, up here. They put mezuzahs on the door, a limbo of their homes, which a lot of us would miss if we were busy looking for the doorbells.

But they're there, they're still doing that. Yeah, and even the command is similar for us today. Not that I think that we should be walking around with the boxes on our heads, so to speak, but that the word should still be in our hearts, even though we're in a primarily oral or primarily written culture.

And so this is even how this connects to texts in other ways, is that evidence from comparable cultures suggests that when texts were passed down, since they were primarily given orally, that sometimes they'd be passed down in shorthand form, almost like notes for a sermon.

That they might not always be passed down in a full transcript form, but sometimes they might be passed down in a note form, because the people who were reading them knew them by heart.

So they wouldn't necessarily need the full transcript to be able to give them, to read them to other people. But we don't know exactly if Deuteronomy was ever in a short form or long form, or exactly how it got passed down.

[31 : 44] And the little that we know from other Old Testament books suggests that Deuteronomy was often forgotten rather than remembered. But the main point here is to highlight that the oral dimension of ancient Israel was a different perspective than ours.

I think one thing to say here is that for ancient Israel, that their reference point was the spoken word. Their reference point was what was written on their hearts. The written word in ink served more as a symbolic function that communicated authority, but the written word that was on their hearts was their stable reference point for them.

And so given that how the primacy of oral language and speaking was for them, is that it makes sense that God would send them prophets who would speak to them, who would give his word in a way that communicated to who they were as people.

In a similar way maybe to where us being a written-oriented culture, it makes sense that God has been gracious to give us his word in a written way, that we might know him and even know him in a way that fits with our typical ways of doing things.

So the last thing I want to say, and then we'll take a quick break, would be that we don't have that much background on the oral word in ancient Israel.

[33 : 11] We can look at comparative cultures to see how it might have functioned, but we don't know exactly. And so I think the next question that we can start to get is, how might have it been passed down?

How might have they viewed texts and how might have they wanted to pass them down from generation to generation? If they were oral, if they were oral-oriented, primarily oral in terms of how they would engage with things, how might texts have been passed down?

Does this mean that, well, you know, they're oral people, we can't trust anything they say? Or might there be something else to think about? So why don't we take a break here, because I know that breaks are important for stretching and coffee and whatnot, and then we'll pick back up in five minutes to keep going down this path.

Okay, so where have we been? We talked about what Deuteronomy is, as being a book that's primarily speeches by Moses, but also has a narrator who is both giving context and talking and speaks of his death.

We've talked about the ancient Israel being a predominantly oral culture, which is different than ours, which is a primarily written culture, at least has been. We'll see what social media and videos and such things do to do to that, but that's a question for another day.

[34 : 29] And so now we're talking about, okay, how might transmission have taken place? How might transmission of the text have taken place? And the reason why this element, I think, is really important is because a lot of the critical understanding of things, oh, Deuteronomy had to be late, it's based, or a lot of it is rooted in skepticism of any sort of legitimate transmission actually being possible.

And so there's skepticism that even something that Moses said could actually be passed down 500 years in any meaningful way. And so I don't think that's necessarily a position that we have to hold to, but I think that's what people think.

There's a lot of study being done in a different direction, but that's what people think. A lot of the theory that's dominated the Old Testament, especially Pentateuch scholarship for the last hundred or so years, or at least kind of late 19th century through late 20th century, was that by Julius Wellhausen, who advocated a documentary hypothesis.

Some of you may be familiar, but he speculated that there were several documents, all with letters, J-E-D-P, that were kind of formed and fashioned and combined into the Pentateuch.

So there had been these disparate documents that then some kind of compiler, they combined a little bit of J, a little bit of E, a little bit of P, and off we go. And a lot of scholarship up until the recent past has been dedicated to trying to dissect these layers to see what's J, what's E, because they all have different dates, they all come from different backgrounds, and want to see what's what.

[36 : 13] The scholarship is starting to move a little bit away from that, I think where people are starting to focus more on the whole, both because I think there's more of a concern for the literary arc of things, but also because I think people are seeing that all the documentary hypothesis is just really kind of arbitrary in how you determine what's this or what's this, that maybe that the authors wrote with intentional contradiction, or maybe the contradictions that we see that we think are because of successive layers actually are part of the author's skill in writing.

So it's another conversation. But I think the scholarship is moving in a slightly different direction, or at least there are more people who are open to a reading of the whole rather than just trying to do it piecemeal.

Anyway, so some background on why this is important. But let's try to say, okay, well, if we're not going to stand by Julius Wellhausen and friends and say that, oh, well, there are all these disparate documents that were formed and fashioned together at a late time, maybe in the exile, what might have transmission have looked like?

So the first thing I think we have to acknowledge is that there was an oral and a written element to transmission. So this is just transmission in general. So if they were a predominantly oral culture, it might not have only been that texts were kind of written where someone has one here and they have the other one here and they're just kind of copying, copying, copying.

There are lots of different ways that transmission could have happened. It could have happened mouth to mouth, that someone was speaking it to another person. It could have happened from someone's lips to paper.

[37 : 50] It could have happened from paper to someone's lips or heart. Or that could have happened from a shorthand form to a longhand form or a longhand form to a shorthand form.

And there are lots of other different combinations of how transmission would have happened. And so if we have this picture in our mind of the only way the texts were passed down was person A is making a copy and then they're going to pass to person B who then also makes a written copy, that's probably not exactly how things happen given that they're a predominantly oral culture.

Probably that happened in some ways, but it isn't the ultimate or the dominant image that I think is helpful to have here. Now, we're skeptical of the spoken word.

We don't like verbal contracts. We want to write everything down, make sure it's in ink, signed, dated, with a witness, maybe even a notary if we're really serious about things.

And so I think we kind of assume that, oh, well, oral transmission meant that all these people were just sitting around the campfire at night and one story got exaggerated a little bit and then exaggerated more and then exaggerated a lot.

[39 : 00] The next thing you knew that God was parting the Red Sea. That's obviously a joke and I don't believe that. But I think we can kind of think that that's how transmission would have looked

because we're skeptical of oral transmission.

We don't trust oral words as much as we trust written words. So I won't go into complete detail on this, but I think that that kind of view that oral transmission is grossly inaccurate, that that view is wrong and doesn't take into consideration the value of oral transmission that these cultures would have had and how skillful they would have been at it.

Even if we think from later times, we think about the Pharisees and the teachers of the law and whatnot, that they would have memorized the whole Pentateuch before most of us were driving. And so they're much better at this than we are.

And I think that some of what comes why we would question oral transmission is because of our own hubris and pride, thinking that, well, we are superior and those ancients, well, they, you know, pity them.

They were dumb. But I think, but if we take seriously the fact, especially that if God revealed himself, and this was God's word, they were passing along. This is a significant authoritative word, that there would have been structures in place to ensure faithful passing down.

[40 : 21] Even if we look at the way that, from what we can tell, that how the Old Testament has been passed down, it's been incredibly meticulous in its written form.

And I think that it's not a stretch to assume that that didn't just happen at Qumran or happened kind of around Jesus' time, but that had been in the history of God's people long before that.

But I think that we're actually better at oral transmission than we think. So here's an illustration.

Let's say you're in church, singing a well-known song, and then all of a sudden, the words diverge from what you know them to be true.

Whether the words have been changed for modern adaptation, or for gender inclusion, is that you're singing the song, you know what it is, and all of a sudden, the words depart. And it's kind of this really jarring kind of thing, right?

That you're used to singing this, and then they're singing this, and they're wrong, obviously. That we know it's wrong, and maybe we have to go back a step or two to think, okay, what are the actual words?

[41 : 19] But we know it. We know that here's what the words were supposed to be, and this is where they went different. Like, we know that. Because, or you're doing the liturgy, and you know it by heart, even if you can't, someone's going to say, hey, what's the fifth word in stanza three?

You may not know it, but you've been doing it so much that you know it in your heart, and if someone was to say it wrong, you would catch it like that. And I think, so in a culture where people did transmit things orally, I think we can imagine that a similar thing might happen.

That if someone kind of tried to do an aberrant version of Deuteronomy, or whatever, I think that people would know that wait a second, that's not right. There's something wrong.

There's something divergent there. Again, we don't know, but just trying to think about how this might have looked. And especially if it was a sacred text.

So, but how else were texts transmitted? The other way that they, or one of the ways they were is by official scribes. And so I'd kind of alluded to this before, is that people think that texts wouldn't have been in place until there was an urban elite who could have created a sophisticated scribal class to then pass things down.

[42 : 33] But that's the way it worked in comparative cultures, is that there were, there's a scribal class who was responsible for passing things down. I mean, even we see this, I think, in ancient Egypt, like maybe 800 years or more before Moses was purported to write Deuteronomy.

And so these things happened. It wasn't necessarily that this is a new thing that only happened in 500 BC, that these things have been happening. It's just a question of whether Israel had the infrastructure to be able to do it themselves.

And they worked in different ways. And so they worked on a lot of different kind of documents. So that there might have been some that were commercial documents.

It might be some that were archival documents. It might have been some that were religious documents. And there were probably different ways of transmitting the text depending on what it was.

Like you can imagine if a king is dictating to a scribe saying, go tell such and such that they need to do this and then come see me and then go do this. Then the scribe might have had more fluidity in kind of writing it in a way that they would have wanted to versus if there might be a treaty that was

being written or something very specific that was being written that might have needed to be passed and kind of transmitted verbatim kind of word for word exactly as it was intended.

[43 : 50] So all this to say, I don't want to paint the picture that scribes are always these completely faithful people who only did what they were told to do but nor do I want to paint the picture that scribes are these freewheeling artists who would kind of take something and then devise something to their liking and change the whole course of human history by what they were doing.

I think a better middle way is to say that that scribes are more like instead of being artists kind of these freewheeling people over here and instead of being kind of slaves they were artisans who then would take for the large part take what had been given to them and try to transmit it in a mostly faithful way.

But there would have been freedom in different cases to shift things to shape them to adapt them for a different audience. Again, we don't know exactly but again, this is what we think the best of our knowledge can know.

There's debate on this but I think it's I don't so all of the study I did seems that it's a legitimate thing to say that scribes in general were faithful for passing things down and trusted that if things had an authority that they were given to whether the king or whoever that they needed to be responsible to that authority or else they would lose their job or maybe their head.

And so there's a sense that they were faithful in passing things down. The third thing this is kind of where we're going to kind of begin to bring things to a conclusion is and this is maybe one of the things that might be more not necessarily debated but more contentious because this kind of gets into the okay what might Deuteronomy have been.

[45 : 28] So in the ancient world for textual transmission the authority of the text did not require precise knowledge of who the author was. I'll say that again.

The authority of the text did not require precise knowledge of who the author was. And again when I'm saying this we're looking at comparative ancient Near East culture as a whole.

I'm not saying in Israel they didn't care who the author was. That's not what I'm saying. I'm saying that in the ancient Near East as a whole when we look across it that the authority of the text did not require precise knowledge of who the author was.

Again this is different than us right that we don't tolerate plagiarism we put the author's name in big letters on every book and we detest movies like the Hobbit trilogy that think they can just change the glorious story just to make a dollar.

Right who's seen the Hobbit trilogy? Maybe you don't want to admit that. Yeah I mean what they just brutalized it didn't they? They took Tolkien's glorious work and they brutalized it for the sake of money which is completely ironic given the whole purpose of the book but that's a whole another topic.

[46 : 42] Anyway that we that and why we might again that's a silly example but why we might say that's wrong is that this was Tolkien wrote this you can't just go change it that this was Tolkien Tolkien maybe that's how you say it I don't know but this is how this is what it was you can't change it this is his authority that the authority the goodness the value of the book rests in the fact that he wrote it and we do that with other things as well so on the other hand it seems that ancients cared little for these things one scholar puts it this way that the Bible shows a distressing disinterest in who wrote it and that it doesn't play to modern to modern questions how we want it to we want to say where were you when you wrote this who are you what were your sources that you got but the Bible's not interested in answering those questions for us in every case there are obviously a lot of cases where it does say who wrote it one of the places for that is prophecy in the prophets it's very clear they want to say who wrote this whose prophecy is this and that would be similar in other ancient contexts as well because the prophets this experience was part of what validated the authority of what they were saying but again you look at books like Genesis

Joshua Judges Ruth Samuel Kings Chronicles Ezra Nehemiah Ezra Job and there's a distressing disinterest in who wrote the book you don't see kind of authors names kind of in there but for some of those we can maybe get closer to others but we don't necessarily see a statement of I wrote this book that in some ways there's a distressing disinterest in who the author of that and I think it's distressing for us because we want the author not necessarily distressing because it invalidates the Bible's authority so again that's where our culture their culture there's differences and I think we need to acknowledge those things so other reasons and I think that there were then so also that the fact that they were anonymous in a lot of cases doesn't mean that ancients were like oh we don't

know who wrote this we can't trust it that for them that they were they understood the conventions of how things were written and didn't necessarily need a prescribed author to be able to trust it as authoritative they they presupposed in a lot of cases that these books accurately reflected the words and deeds of their forbearers because of the conventions of how they would have been transmitted and passed down so but other reasons they might have remained anonymous is that sometimes they were the creations of a group of people whether they were the creations of people collectively writing as a community or they were the process of successive generations of people adding to and developing things they might have remained anonymous because of how the text would work so anyway coming back full circle that for ancients the authority of the text did not require precise knowledge of who the author was okay so what does this mean for Deuteronomy so how where does kind of this land kind of giving background like what does this mean for Deuteronomy in again in comparative literature in the ancient

Near East the authority of the text when it was named often resided in the person who is considered the fountainhead of that tradition so if this if kind of it was like David for example I mean we see this a little bit in the Psalms in the sense like that David is kind of seen as the one who's the fountainhead of the Psalms and like that it might be called yeah this is an example but maybe an example closer to home is thinking about Webster's dictionary so when you look up a word in Webster's dictionary that you aren't concerned whether Webster himself wrote it right that's not the point because you trust that what's important is that it comes from the authority of Webster's dictionary and so Webster would have been kind of the fountainhead of it and he would be the one who initiated it but the authority comes from the fact that it's in this collection that has been modernized and updated for the modern day and so we don't have to have direct connection to the author for it to have authority and obviously this analogy breaks down that Webster's dictionary in no way shape or form claims divine inspiration and nor does it kind of try to identify the author of each particular element or word or definition so it's different the analogy breaks down but I'm trying to get us to think that we think about these things like that we have a convention for understanding that we don't say

Webster's dictionary take Webster's name off put the new editor on we don't say that because we acknowledge that there's a fountainhead to this tradition that we're then kind of understanding that we're under the authority of so here's the million dollar question and I don't know so I'm proposing the question I'm not leading up to and then bam here's the million dollar question could a similar pattern have been at place in Deuteronomy is it conceivable that someone not only added a section about Moses' death but that also the legal material was expanded and developed over time could that be part of the transmission of Deuteronomy that a similar principle was a place where the legal material for example was developed and added to over time such that someone could still say yeah this was written by Moses because Moses is the fountainhead of this legal tradition that's the million dollar question and I don't know for me it's not a question of whether that would fit within the ancient literary context

I think that that would be fine and that people would have understood these conventions and would have appreciated them and that wouldn't have been an issue for them and it's also for me not a question of whether God could inspire a plurality of individuals or inspire different people to develop things at different times that again like we see in the Psalms that God's inspired lots of different people or in the Proverbs that God inspired lots of different people to write that we don't say that these things have to have one single author or else get rid of them so it's not a question for me of whether God could inspire a plurality of people but it is a question of whether that we're free to interpret Deuteronomy's statement Moses wrote this law in a book to the very end whether we can interpret that in a way that allows for textual development and I don't know I don't know exactly where I land on that it's a question I think that we should wrestle with and think about because we want to try to say what does the Bible actually say we're not concerned with our own pet positions but we're concerned with what does the

[54 : 01] Bible actually say I know this isn't a matter of salvation but it isn't important for the defense of our faith who would claim for example that Moses is just a mythical figure let's see so here's kind of going back to this is that so if on one end it's kind of Moses wrote it unquestionably 1200 BC he wrote it all Joshua added a little bit which is a position you could take or on the other end this is a pious fraud it came much later the question is there might be a middle way there might be a room for development over time so for example that might some of the laws reflect concerns because people were saying if Moses was here this is what he would have written about these

things I'm standing in Moses tradition in terms of how I'm developing these ideas I don't know but the question is is there room for development over time at the end of the day

I think that it's perfectly valid to say look if God could deliver people from Egypt provide for them for 40 years in the desert and on top of that appear in fire on Mount Sinai and write his law on stone tablets why would it be challenging to communicate the rest of his law to Moses why couldn't he inspire prophetic forward looking discourses and ensure that they be written down and passed on out of all those things Deuteronomy seems the easiest that liberating people from Egypt providing for them for 40 years appear on Mount Sinai those all seem much harder than God inspiring a book and ensuring that it gets faithfully passed down so I think from a Christian perspective this is a safe place to fall back on and what we could rest in at the same time though I think it's dangerous to wall ourselves off to historical considerations and ambiguities and say well these contradict my faith so I'm going to ignore them and just press on my own way but and also at the end of the day for us Christians what we say is with 2 Timothy 3.16 all scripture is written by man and we know who the men are right no all scripture is God breathed we rest in the fact that the Lord of the universe breathed his word to us and we have it today and it's useful for everything that we might be fully equipped for every good work and that's what we rest in the end I've been appointed by our leader to guide us into a gentle landing so thanks very much it was wonderful we still have a few minutes for questions just formulate them short I know I'm probably as close to Moses age as anybody in this room I just want to comment and question boldly you know

Moses if Moses walked in today I'd say thanks very much for talking so much about my proposed writings evidence now you often use the word evidence since the enlightenment we have become the reformed epistemologists say it's good to know your own culture when you look at another we're obsessed that's a bit too strong word evidentialism is our big thing give me evidence for any proposition you believe in we believe in all sorts of propositions all of us without evidence they're called properly basic propositions so Moses would say the evidence for the divinity of the first five books is the fact that my community flourishes in the world and we witness to Yahweh that's the evidence you know that's enough evidence for them the church is the evidence that Jesus rose from the dead in a sense there's a community around the world saying he is Lord there's the first evidence

I think these books are self evidencing these scholars could never write the Pentateuch they're poking along in the presence of a great text they could never produce whoever wrote it was a or them the committee they were geniuses they were spiritual geniuses who I mean you've got to keep perspective here and I know I'm not ending what you're saying but that's that was some of my ponderings our evidentialism is if there was a huge Plato community throughout the world we could say well who wrote Plato what proof do you have that Plato wrote Plato and was there really a Socrates prove it to me what evidence would you come up with how do you prove it I got a film I got some photos I heard it wasn't written by Plato but by another man of the same exactly just like [59 : 33] Shakespeare anyway there's my babble if I'm asked to close it I take I'm presumptuous but please questions Sheila Bill I'd like your opinion about what's going through my mind we think of Moses as the law giver I do too but there's a great deal of narrative information in those books that has nothing to do with law so when they look at Addy historians or whoever something about the death of Moses Moses predicted his own death I mean he knew he was going to die that he was not going to see the holy land so if a historian came along and said well we should say what they did with the body that wouldn't be unreasonable to me at all it seems that focusing on Moses as law giver legitimizes those parts of those books that relate to law and the rest of it could very well have been added by somebody else and I would be quite comfortable with that what would you be

I think I would be fine as well one of the things I think that when you even look at this I'm coming back to the question but kind of deviating a bit that's tricky about Deuteronomy is in thinking about what it might be that okay you get to the end and we looked at some of these it's fine we get to the end and we say oh well Moses Moses wrote the whole law but Moses also says a few chapters earlier to write the whole law to write all of it on big plastered stones I'm thinking did was he really saying kind of to write all 27 or however many chapters on that would be an immense undertaking and so it's possible but sorry yeah and so it it it makes it makes me wonder did like was he referring to something different than the whole 27 chapters like at least there's room for wondering about that yeah so yeah I think

I'm fine with I think I'm fine with speculation about things but it's still like how do you interpret this bit about Moses wrote the whole thing I don't I'm not sure written the whole of the law books are about more than the law yeah any other well is it necessary that Moses started the whole thing off by physically writing everything down Moses could have recited his understanding of things and that could have been picked up and repeated it's been observed that that oral traditions can be transmitted for centuries very accurately because they are recited in public and the public is hanging on the words of the bard who's reciting the stuff and in fact will pounce on any errors even a small grammatical error will be pounced upon and in fact as a gruesome aside there are some cultural traditions where if a formula was mispronounced the person was killed and so this was an inducement to sharpen their memories so I didn't have any problem with the idea that oral tradition could be quite accurate over many centuries or that some things could have been added on in explanation along the way it strikes me in some ways as kind of one of these controversies that misses the point dr davidson just an interesting aside perhaps relevant to what you said the discovery two years ago the wreck of the arabus franklin's ship the site of it was actually they look there related to the oral tradition of the india and that was over 200 years ago that's interesting are there many cultures roughly parallel with

Hebrew culture that are as self critical as Hebrew culture is the fact that Moses isn't allowed into the promised land there's a kind of judgment on him Israel's sins are remembered do many cultures remember their failure as much as Hebrew culture does I guess it's probably a bit unique I guess I don't know from the reading I've done it's interesting reading Egyptian chronicles of them conquering peoples or Assyrian ones versus the book of Judges which is clearly much less than confirming of their strength I don't know I think that's one of the questions of when we were thinking about cultures how similar were they and how different are they and I guess it's a question we still ask today for us and it's also tough because we don't know how much literature has survived we know what we have but we don't know is that 2% is that 89% exactly well that was not a fascinating look into what's going on out in the region college can I recommend a few resources before the end so commentaries

I found helpful were by John Walton who actually was lecturing on Deuteronomy last summer at region and Gordon McConville who's the Apollos commentary a book that I found really interesting and that I think is a really interesting read it's called The Lost World of Scripture Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority by John Walton and Brent Sandy so I've only read the Old Testament bits of it it's a very very interesting read John Walton is actually coming this summer to region and talking about Genesis which he's done a lot of work on so Lost World of Scripture I'm sure you could talk to Bill and he could get some copies in I think that's where I got it from anyway but I think this is kind of dives into what were ancient literary cultural expectations for texts and how do we think well about what the Bible is saying or not saying so again I don't know if I agree with everything that they say but it's really fascinating and you