

The Closing Words of the Pentateuchal Books: A Clue for the Historical Status of the Book of Genesis within the Pentateuch.

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1. Introduction

It has been claimed that the individual books of the Pentateuch show to some extent a distinctive character, "that the division between them is by no means arbitrary", and that the Book of Genesis is "a self-contained unit"¹.

A comparative analysis of the last verse of each of the five books of the Pentateuch suggests the editors who wrote these verses--or at very least the one who wrote the last verse of Genesis--were aware of the individual character of Genesis, and perhaps wished to emphasize the separate character of Genesis vis à vis the other four pentateuchal books.

2. The Four-Book Series (Exodus-Deuteronomy)

Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy all conclude with a reference to the entire people of Israel. The first and the last book of this four-book series formulate this reference in a very similar way:

לעני כל בית ישראל Before the eyes of all the House of Israel (Exod 40:38)²

לעני כל ישראל Before the eyes of all Israel (Deut 34:12)

Although the expression closing the Book of Deuteronomy occurs elsewhere in the MT (Deut 31:7; 2Sam 16:22; 1Chr 28:8, 29:25; cf. Num 33:3), the fact that it occurs in the last verse of the first and the last book of the series is more reasonably explained as the result of some kind of editorial design rather than of blind coincidence³.

1 See R. RENDTORFF, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 131-32. It is worth noting that according to RENDTORFF, the patriarchal stories--i.e. the bulk of Genesis--have been edited independently of other pentateuchal traditions, before their final, priestly redaction (R. RENDTORFF, "The 'Yahwist' as Theologian? The Dilemma of Pentateuchal Criticism", JSOT 3 (1977) 2-9).

2. According to LXX Exod 40:38, "Before the eyes of all Israel".

3 It is worth noting that the expression in Exod 40:38 (i.e.,

לעני כל בית ישראל) occurs nowhere else in the MT.

The conclusions of the books in the central positions in the four-book series (i.e., Leviticus and Numbers) share not only a common reference to Israel but a general structure and a common language. In fact, these two verses consist of very similar subscriptions:

אלה המצות אשר צוה ה' את משה אל בני ישראל בהר סיני

These are the commandments that YHWH commanded Moses for the Children of Israel on Mount Sinai (Lev 27:34).

**אלה המצות והמשפטים אשר צוה ה' ביד משה אל בני ישראל
בערכת מואב על ירדן ירחו**

These are the commandments and the regulations that YHWH commanded by the hand of Moses for the Children of Israel in the plains of Moab, by the Jordan, near Jericho (Num 36:13).

The similarities between the subscriptions of Numbers and Leviticus can be explained as a case of dependence of one on the other⁴, or as the work of "one hand". In any case, an editorial design is assumed.

To sum up, (a) the text of the last verse of the two books at the edge of the series suggests an editorial design, and (b) the similarities between the last verse of the two books in the medial position demonstrate the existence of an editorial design linking the two books. Thus, one may conclude that the presented evidence points to the existence of an editorial pattern unifying the four books-series. Is Genesis the fifth book of the series?

3. Genesis

The concluding verse of Genesis (Gen 50:26) reads:

וימת יוסף בכבודו ועשר שנים ויחנמו אתו וישם בארון במצרים

Joseph died being one hundred and ten years old; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.

This verse is a veiled introduction to the theme of the Exodus from Egypt⁵, but it certainly stands apart from the system of end-verses that characterizes the four-book series.

4 See, for instance, G. B. GRAY, Numbers (ICC, Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1965) 478. Significantly, the expression occurring in both subscriptions, i.e., **אלה המצות... אשר צוה ה'**, is attested nowhere else in the MT.

5 Cf. H. GUNKEL, Genesis (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966) 491. No one doubts that there is a thematic linkage between the present books of Genesis and Exodus, both in the general thread and in specific issues (compare Gen 50:25 with Exod 13:19).

4. Conclusion

Though the Book of Genesis is an integral part of a story beginning at creation and continuing through the exodus, and there are clear links between the Book of Genesis and the Book of Exodus, one cannot but notice that the system of end-verses that links the series of four-books does not include the Book of Genesis. It is very unlikely that the exclusion of Genesis from this system is the result of an unintentional "mistake" of the editors of the material, who by chance "overlooked" Genesis⁶.

This being the case, one has to conclude that the last verse in Genesis points to an editorial awareness of its separate character⁷. Moreover, since editorial designs are meaningless unless there is an audience that is able to understand them, one should conclude that the text as it stands conveyed a clear message to the community of readers of the pentateuchal material: there is a difference between Genesis and the four-book series (i.e., Exodus-Deuteronomy)⁸.

6 Note that editors could have easily used the key-term "Children of Israel" in Gen 50:26? see Gen 50:25.

7 Since Genesis differs in many aspects from the other pentateuchal books, a very interesting and, perhaps, very significant question concerns the kind of differences that those responsible for the editorial end-verse system perceived as the most important, and that led them to underscore the distinctive character of Genesis. Admittedly, the closing words of the pentateuchal books do not --and cannot-- provide the necessary information to deal with the matter. But they may hint at a possible answer. The explicit claim of the subscriptions of the books in the central position in the series (i.e., Leviticus and Numbers) characterize them as the commandments that YHWH commanded Moses for the Children of Israel. This claim is to be understood in terms of a the theological discourse of a post-monarchic society in which "laws attributed to Moses were deemed authoritative, and conversely authoritative laws were attributed to Moses" (B. S. CHILDS, Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 134)). Significantly, the end-verses of Deuteronomy and Exodus, which also contain Mosaic laws, explicitly refer to the corroborative testimony of all Israel concerning Moses' actions (Deut 34:16; Exod 40:37 (cf. Exod 40:34)), and therefore, further legitimize the Mosaic Torah. If the main, or one of the main concerns, of the editors of the end-verses system were Moses and the Mosaic, divine and authoritative law, then, it would be self-evident why they considered, and asked the community to consider, Exodus-Deuteronomy and Genesis as two distinct theological-literary units, for Moses and the Mosaic law are central to the former, but play no role in the latter. A full discussion of this issue stands, however, well beyond the scope of a short note dealing with the testimony of the closing words of the pentateuchal books as clue for the historical status of the Book of Genesis within the Pentateuch; it deserves a separate, full-blown study.

One final observation, although the issue dealt with in the present article is rather narrow, it leads quite naturally to much wider and fundamental questions, such as the genesis, structure, date and message of the five-book arrangement, the editorial procedures involved in setting out the narrative continuum in this way, and the relations between the individual books. An adequate examination of these issues, however, calls for a separate extended discussion, which I hope to undertake on another occasion.

8 Of course, later on Genesis and the four-book series were considered one single "book", i.e., the Torah. The distinctive character of the spelling of the Pentateuch seems to suggest that the five books already were considered to be a separate work in the Persian period. On the date of the spelling of the Pentateuch, see F. I. ANDERSEN and A. D. FORBES, *Spelling in the Hebrew Bible* (BibOr 41, Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1986).