On to something different! I want to move to a new blog topic for a while. I’ve been talking about my new book – still being written! – about the Christianization of the empire – for a while, and it’s obviously the topic near and dear to me just now. But variety is the spice of life.

Several readers have responded to me about my response to the question of the sources behind the Pentateuch – the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, also called, collectively, the “Torah” or the “Law” of Moses). I thought it might be refreshing to say a few more things about these books and the question of who actually wrote them. I had discussed some of this on the blog three years ago, when I was writing my textbook The Bible: A Historical and Literary Introduction. Here I will lift a few sections from the book dealing with this fascinating and important topic.

The question: Who wrote the Pentateuch? Historically, it was always said (as it is still often said by avid Bible readers today) that they were written by Moses, the great leader of the Israelites in the 13th century BCE, and main figure of all the books of the Pentateuch, except Genesis (the story of his birth is given at the opening of Exodus, and much of the rest of the Pentateuch is about him). But scholars came to doubt it. That’s what these posts will be about. Why doubt such a solid tradition of authorship?

Here’s how I begin answering the question in my textbook.

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Periodically over the course of history, during the Middle Ages, there were readers, students, and scholars of the Torah who raised significant questions about whether Moses did, or could have, written these five books. The questions increased among European scholars during the seventeenth century; the questions came to be raised systematically in the eighteenth century; and they came to a head in the nineteenth century, when an entirely different view of authorship came be expressed and popularized, so much so that it now dominates scholarship. This is the view that ...

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