The lack of any consensus is probably the first thought that comes to mind when one tries to describe the current state of historical and critical Pentateuchal research. A growing number of authors, especially in Europe, have given up the traditional documentary hypothesis, which by the way is still popular in textbooks and publications for larger audiences. The idea that a tenth century Yahwist created the narrative structure of the Pentateuch (or Hexateuch) starting with the creation of the world and ending with Israel’s entrance into the Promised Land, or that he even inherited this structure in an oral form, has become a very difficult and dubious assumption. Archaeological, socio-historical and literary reasons no longer allow one to locate the edition of the first ‘Pentateuchal narrative’ at the beginning of Israelite monarchy.

It is not my concern in this context to provide an overview of every issue in the current debate. We will restrict ourselves to the question of the origin of the Pentateuchal or Hexateuchal narrative. This question may also be formulated in the following way: When were all the so-called major themes of the Pentateuch or Hexateuch (primeval history, the Patriarchal narratives, the epic of the exodus, the lawgiving on mount Sinai, the sojourn of Israel in the wilderness, the conquest of the land) combined for the first time? This debate will open new perspectives on the formation of the book of Numbers.

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1 This paper was given at the SOTS meeting, January 2005, in Birmingham under the presidency of Professor A. G. Auld. It is my pleasure to offer these thoughts to an esteemed colleague and a very good friend.
2. The Question of a Pre-Priestly Pentateuch

Despite the apparent lack of consensus, there is a general agreement that the second half of the Persian period saw the birth of the Torah and of Judaism as a Torah-related religion. But where did the conception of the narrative structure of this Torah originate? A number of scholars still postulate a Yahwistic document as the nucleus of the Pentateuch. Given the fact that von Rad’s idea of a Yahwist writing in the time of a chimeric ‘Solomonic enlightenment’ is no longer tenable, some authors return to Wellhausen’s view of J (or JE) as a work from the monarchical period (thus in particular Nicholson, Seebass).²

Martin Rose follows the intuitions of H. H. Schmid’s book on the ‘so-called Yahwist’, who had emphasised the deuteronomistic influence on the vocabulary and ideology of the texts, which Noth had attributed to J.³ Rose transforms J into a Deuteronomist of the second or third generation, and considers his work in Genesis to Numbers as a prologue and, simultaneously, a ‘theological amendment’ to the Deuteronomistic History.⁴ This approach is quite close to the distinction, in the Pentateuch, between a D-composition prefacing the Deuteronomistic History and a P-composition, as postulated by E. Blum and others.⁵ Quite similarly, John Van Seters considers the Yahwist as a later expansion of the Deuteronomist’s work.⁶ But in

⁶ J. Van Seters, Prologue to History: The Yahwist as Historian in Genesis (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1992); see also idem, The Life of Moses: The Yahwist as Historian in Exodus–Numbers (Kampen: Kok Pharos; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994). For the primeval history, Van Seters suggests that J is directly dependent on the Babylonian version of the Flood, which is conserved in the Epic of Gilgamesh.