Understanding the formation process of the biblical texts in their historical context remains a key for a decent interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. Since the emergence of pentateuchal criticism, the book of Genesis has been the sample composition upon which a variety of literary-historical hypotheses have been developed and redirected. However, in the past three decades scholarship has radically retreated from the classical “documentary” pattern, which has served for almost two centuries to offer valuable but definitely inadequate explanations of the origins of the Pentateuch. Nowadays Pentateuch studies increasingly rely on encompassing redaction/composition-critical models instead of splitting the ancient texts into what has often been conceived to be originally self-contained “documents.” A consensus has grown that the corpus Genesis–Kings patently reveals two main competing written traditions: the Deuteronomic (D) tradition and the Priestly (P) tradition. Scholars agree that both literary layers are intertwined with each other but also contain non-D and non-P materials. However, they are divided on the following issues: (1) the scope of P, (2) the identification of material that is seemingly neither P nor D, (3) the original sequence of the various traditions and their chronological settings, (4) the intra-textual stratification of D and P, and (5) the definition of the nature of the P “story” as either an independent source text or a redaction in relation to an existing composition.
The question about the nature of the P tradition is the central topic in this study by Jakob Wöhrle. The author is Privatdozent at the Protestant Faculty of Theology of the Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität in Münster and also Heisenberg Fellow of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. His book has resulted from a research project within the framework of the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” at WWU, directed by Wöhrle and Rainer Albertz.

The introductory chapter (11–24) starts from the position that the Priestly sections and elements in the Pentateuch are the only remaining benchmarks for sound literary-historical research. However, the consensus stops here. Wöhrle then clearly outlines four main problems on which scholars currently debate with respect to P: the literary character of the P texts (either source or redaction); the delimitation of the P version of the Pentateuch and, more particularly, its end (either the Sinai, Moses’ death, or the settlement traditions); the historical setting of P (either preexilic, exilic, or postexilic); and the intention of P (either the cult at Mount Sinai or the promise of the land). According to Wöhrle, these fundamental problems can be thoroughly studied only on the basis of coherent tradition units in which Priestly textual portions are embedded. To that end, instead of selecting a small pericope he opts for a larger complex: the “Patriarchal History” in Gen 11–50. He argues that until today the P portions of this literary complex have not been studied in detail from the perspective of the questions mentioned above.

Following on the methodological introduction, Wöhrle successively deals with the origin (ch. 2) and the intention (ch. 3) of the Priestly passages in the patriarchal narrative. Chapter 2 (25–164) contains a detailed analysis of twenty textual units that scholars by and large characterize as reflecting in whole or in part the P tradition: (Abraham narratives) Gen 11:27–32; 12–13; 16; 17; 19; 21:1–7; 23; 25:1–18; (Jacob narratives) Gen 25:19–26; 26:34–28:9; 29–33; 35; 36; (history of Joseph) Gen 37; 38–45; 46; 47; 48; 49; 50:1–Exod 1:7. Each passage is systematically studied according to an established pattern: description of the contents, succinct presentation of the classical literary-characterization of the text, identification of problems relating to this characterization, and resolving the problems by means of the redaction-historical method, focusing on the literary nature of the P passage under concern.

Wöhrle writes perspicuously, building up a solid line of reasoning. His analysis results in a number of conclusions. First, the P portions in the so-called Patriarchal History comprise the following passages, or textual elements: Gen 11:27–32; 12:4b, 5; 13:6, 11b, 12aba; 16:3, 16; 17:1–8, 15–22; 19:29; 21:5; 23:1–2; 25:7–8, 9*, 11–17, 18a, 19–20, 26b; 26:34–35; 27:46–28:9; 31:18*; 33:18*; 35:6*, 9–13, 22b, 23–29; 36:1–8; 37:1, 2aa; 41:46a; 46:6–7; 47:7–11, 27b, 28; 48:3–7; 49:1a, 29a, 33aab; 50:22; Exod 1:6a, 7 (163). Second, besides some extensive compositional units, the P strand in the Patriarchal History...
mostly consists of small narrative notes such as dates, short references to the belongings of the patriarchs, their dwelling places, deaths, and burials. Wöhrle is of the opinion that the P portions that have been identified do not shape a continuous story in this tradition complex. On the contrary, these passages, or elements, are apparently written with a view to the non-P context in which they are embedded. In sum, the P portions in the Patriarchal History are not part of an originally independent source but rather redactional texts and fragments that have been composed as if it were in dialogue with an existing non-P patriarchal tradition. Moreover, the P redactors have put together independently transmitted non-P narrative compositions in order to shape for the first time a coherent and comprehensive tradition complex, running from the Primeval History up to and including the narrative of the exodus out of Egypt. However, contrary to the complex Gen 11–Exod 1, which according to Wöhrle clearly is a redactional layer (Bearbeitungsschicht) that was consciously shaped to be integrated in the non-P context, the P portions in Gen 1:1–11:26 and Exod 6ff. are to be considered as self-contained source texts in which existing non-P traditions have been inserted. Finally, Wöhrle argues that this comprehensive P tradition came into being in the land of Israel at the beginning of the Persian era, shortly after 520 BCE, when the first groups of exiles returned to the land.

Departing from the preceding redaction-historical study, Wöhrle finally aims at defining the intention of the P re-editing of the Patriarchal History. In this respect, chapter 3 (165–222) offers a synthetic description of the “theology” of the P narrative in Gen 11:27–Exod 1:7 within the broader context of the comprehensive P tradition, in which the Patriarchal History is sandwiched between the “universally oriented” Primeval History and the “particularly oriented” exodus narrative (168). Wöhrle distinguishes the intention of the P redaction of the Patriarchal History into four main themes. First, the patriarchal tradition is conceived from the perspective of the exilic community that considers itself the true people of God. The patriarchs are pictured as exemplary exiles moving from Mesopotamian regions into the land. In addition, P emphasizes that the people of Israel was constituted outside the land, since the patriarchs were born abroad, where YHWH revealed himself to them. According to Wöhrle, it is obvious that the Patriarchal History in its P form reflects the late exilic discussion about the conditions to belong to the people of Israel. The second them concerns life in the land. This land is consequently described as “the land of Canaan,” which means that its inhabitants are seen as foreigners, whereas the patriarchs are strangers in their new country. Moreover, the land is considered a gift that must be acquired by each generation. This view matches well with the Priestly conviction that the land can be acquired again by the returning exiles. The third thematic intention affects the relationship between the patriarchs and their relatives in the neighboring countries. P makes clear that the land is meant exclusively for the patriarchs
and their offspring and that the relationship with surrounding peoples is of a peaceful and coexisting nature. A fourth and last thematic line regards the relationship with the people of Canaan who live in the land. The P redaction clarifies that the patriarchs and their descendants cannot commit themselves to the Canaanites. On the other hand, their living together in the land is also characterized by peaceful cohabitation.

In the concluding chapter (223–26) Wöhrle summarizes the results of his study according to his typical clear style, which repeats the key issues that have been investigated. The book ends with a list of scholarly literature in different languages.

This book is a challenging study that is most welcome for present-day research into the Hebrew Bible. Today a majority of biblical scholars are rather indifferent to the issue of the literary history of the Pentateuch, although they may appreciate that some continue to be involved in this area of research. However, as already stated, the redaction-historical study of the biblical texts remains of vital importance. There is still a lot of work to do. Wöhrle’s thesis of a mixed literary origin of the P tradition as redaction and source is debatable. By way of example, I am not convinced that the compositional unit Gen 1:1–2:4 was shaped as an originally self-contained narrative. In-depth study reveals that this composition might have come into existence by a theological “opposition” of P against the non-P Eden story (Gen 2:5–3:24). The same phenomenon occurs in the sea narrative in Exod 13:17–14:31, where a P redactor seems to have reworked an existing non-P story that bears close resemblance to the D-tradition, or at least might marks the beginnings of D.