The Facts about J, E, D and P

During the past 2000 years many a theory that was not founded on fact has gained wide acceptance, but has later been shown to be without foundation, and has completely disappeared. One instance of a theory that is being widely publicized today, even though it lacks any factual support, is the claim that the first five books of the Bible, instead of being originally written as units in substantially the form in which we have them today, came into existence through a process of interweaving and combining sources that had previously circulated separately.

According to this theory the so-called J document was written many centuries after the events that it describes. A century or so later another document, more or less parallel to the J document, was written. After each had circulated separately for a time, someone combined them, inserting various portions of the newer E document into the J document at appropriate places. More centuries passed, and then the D document was composed, purporting to contain Moses' farewell addresses. Eventually this was inserted into the latter part of the combined JE document. About the time of the exile a group of priests composed still another document, the so-called P document, paralleling much of the ground already covered by the J and E documents. Eventually this was cut into large and small sections, between which similar sections of the other documents were inserted. As a result, it is said that the Pentateuch as we know it today is composed of intertwined parts of all these documents, so that we often read a section of one document, followed by a section of another, then, perhaps, a verse or two of the first, then two or three verses of the second, then perhaps half a verse of the first again, then a portion of the third, then more of the second, and so on in a complicated patchwork arrangement. According to many critics the literary mosaic thus produced included not only the books we know today as Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, but also the Book of Joshua.