

# Introduction to the Pentateuch

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## Modern Source Theories

SLOWLY, WITH THE RISE OF RATIONALISM, particularly as associated with figures such as Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and Benedict (Baruch) Spinoza (1632–1677), the view that the Torah was a unified whole, written by Moses, began to be questioned. (For additional information on this development, see “Modern Jewish Interpretation,” pp. 1908–19, and “Modern Study of the Bible,” pp. 2084–96.) This culminated in the development of the model of the Documentary Hypothesis in the 19th century, according to which the Torah (or Hexateuch) is comprised of four main sources or documents which were edited or redacted together: J, E, P, and D. Each of these sources or documents is embedded in a (relatively) complete form in the current Torah, and is typified by vocabulary, literary style, and theological perspective.

J and E are so called after the names for God that each of them uses in Genesis: J uses the name “Yahveh” (German “Jahwe,” hence “J”), translated in NJPS as “LORD,” though it is really a personal name whose exact meaning is unknown; E prefers to call the deity “Elohim” (translated “God”), an epithet which also serves as the generic term for God or gods in the Bible. P, which also uses “Elohim,” is an abbreviation for the Priestly material, and D refers to the Deuteronomist, primarily in Deuteronomy.

The difference in divine names, however, is not the main criterion used by scholars for suggesting that the Torah is not a unified composition. Much more significant are doublets and contradictions, in both narrative and legal material. For example, it has long been noted that Gen. chs 1–3 twice narrate the creation of the world. People are created first in 1.27 —“And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them”—and then again in 2.7 —“The LORD God formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.” Furthermore, the second creation account does not simply mirror or repeat the first, but differs from the first in both outline and detail. Gen. 1.1–2.3, the first account, narrates the creation of a highly symmetrical world by a very powerful deity who creates through the word. In this story, for example, man and woman are created together (1.27) after the creation of the land animals (1.25). In contrast, the second story, in 2.4–3.24, suggests that man was created (2.7), then the animals (2.19), and then woman (2.21–22). Its focus is on the creation of humanity, not of the entire physical world, and God anthropomorphically “forms” various beings, rather than creating them through the spoken word. Thus, these are two separate stories, written by two authors, representing different worldviews about the nature of creation, humanity, and God.

The two creation stories appear as two totally separate blocks of material in 1.1–2.3 and 2.4–3.24. In several cases, however, the sources do not appear in distinct, long blocks but are intertwined. This is the case in the flood story, a combination of J and P. According to P, two of each type of animal shall come into the ark (Gen. 6.19–20), but J says that of the clean animals, seven pairs shall come in, and of the unclean, one pair (Gen. 7.2). Similarly, the story of the plague of blood (Exod. 7.14–24) contains two accounts which are intertwined; in one (J), Moses is the protagonist, and the blood only affects the Nile (e.g., vv. 17–18), while in the other (P), Aaron appears as well, and the flood affects all Egyptian water sources (e.g., vv. 19, 24). In such cases, the narratives are combined with great skill, though careful attention to plot and vocabulary help to discern the original building blocks or sources of the story in its final form.

In addition to narrative, the legal material in the Torah is also the product of several sources. For example, slave laws concerning the Hebrew or Israelite slave are found in the Torah in Exod. 21.1–6, Lev. 25.39–46, and Deut. 15.12–18. These laws cannot be reconciled in a straightforward fashion since they represent three different notions of slavery. Most significant is the way in which Exodus differentiates between the treatment of a male and female slave, whereas Deuteronomy insists that they should both be treated similarly. While Exodus and Deuteronomy agree that a slave who loves his master may opt to remain a slave “for life” (Exod. 21.6) or “in perpetuity” (Deut. 15.17), Lev. ch25 insists that slavery of Israelites does not really exist, since slaves must be treated “as a hired or bound laborer,” and they may only serve “until the jubilee year” (v. 40). Such legal differences are not surprising once we are open to the hypotheses that the Bible is composite, and the different legal collections reflect norms or ideals of different groups living in different time periods. Traditional Jewish interpretation, on the other hand, reconciles these various traditions through a process of harmonization, by assuming, for example, that “for life” or “in perpetuity” should in these cases be interpreted as “until the jubilee year.”

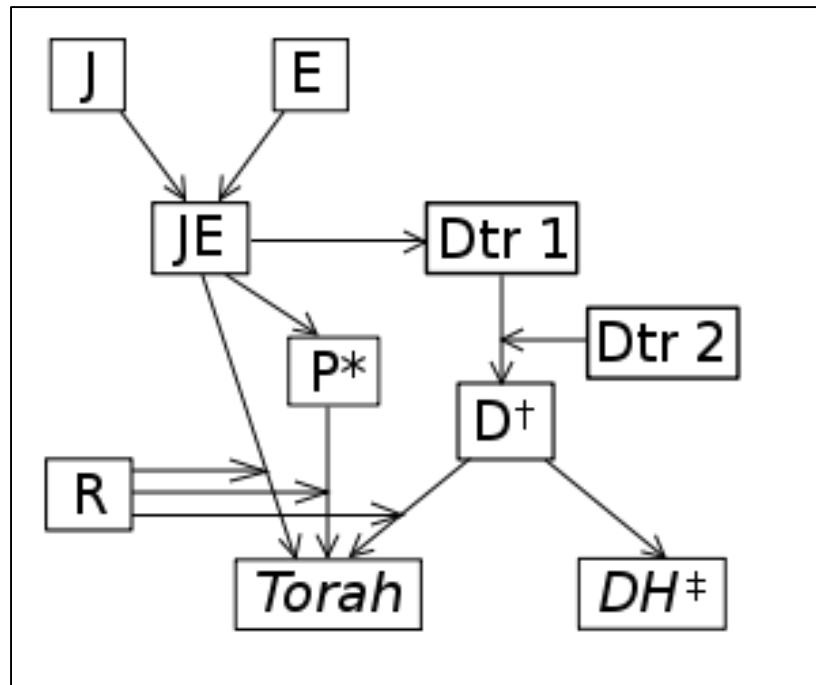
It is possible to trace distinctive styles and theological notions that typify individual Torah sources. For example, the J source is well known for its highly anthropomorphic God, who has a close relationship with humans, as seen in Gen. 2.4–3.24, which includes, for example, a description of God “moving about [or walking] in the garden” (3.8) and says that God “made garments of skins for Adam and his wife, and clothed them” (3.21). On the other hand, in E, the Elohist source, God is more distant from people, typically communicating with them by dreams or via intermediaries, such as heavenly messengers (NJPS “angels”) and prophets. The P or Priestly source is characterized by a strong interest in order and boundaries (see Gen. ch 1), as well as an overriding concern with the priestly family of Aaron and the Temple-based religious system. D, or Deuteronomy, is characterized by a unique hortatory or preaching style, and insists strongly that God cannot be seen, as in this source's description of revelation: “The LORD spoke to you out of the fire; you heard the sound of words but perceived no shape—nothing but a voice” (Deut. 4.12). This explains why this source, uniquely, insists that God does not physically dwell in the Temple or Tabernacle; rather, the Temple is “the site where the LORD your God will choose to establish His name” (Deut. 12.11 and elsewhere). D also emphasizes that this one God must be worshipped in one place only (see esp. Deut. ch 12); this place is understood to be Jerusalem.

The narrative sources J, E, P, and D also have legal collections associated with them. The Covenant Collection (see Exod. 24.7) in Exod. 20.19–23.33 is associated with J or E. The Holiness Collection of Lev. chs 17–26 is so named because of its central injunction (Lev. 19.2), “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.” Though not composed by the Priestly author (P), it represents Priestly theology. The Deuteronomic law collection appears in Deut. chs 12–26. These blocks of material were called “codes” by earlier scholars; since the blocks are neither complete nor organized for the law court, however, as a “code” might be, the term “collection” is more suitable.

Critical biblical scholarship, through the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, was quite confident in dating each of these Torah sources along with the legal collections that they incorporated. Thus, J was seen as the earliest collection, often dated to the period of David and Solomon in the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE, followed by E, which was often associated with the Northern Kingdom. D was connected to the reform of King Josiah in the late 7<sup>th</sup> Century, and P was seen as deriving from the 6<sup>th</sup> Century. The arguments for these specific dates were in some cases tinged with anti-Semitism, because they tended to devalue rabbinic Judaism, seeing it as a degeneration of the more ideal, early Hebrew religion. There was also an element of Christian supersessionism among some source critics: Biblical Israel is held in high esteem; early Judaism (in the late biblical and postbiblical periods) is not, for it was to be superseded by Christianity. For this reason, many Jewish scholars have until recently shied away from source-critical models.

Scholars now agree that the reasons usually given for assigning these dates to the individual sources are problematic, and a lively debate has developed concerning such fundamental issues as the relative order of these sources and the extent to which any of them areas early as previous scholars had suggested. The existence of E as a complete source has been questioned as well, especially since E first appears well after the beginning of the Torah and is very difficult to disentangle from J after the beginning of Exodus. Thus, many scholars now talk of JE together as an early narrative source, incorporating diverse traditions. Additionally, most scholars no longer see each source as representative of a single author writing at one particular time but recognize that each may reflect a long historical period within a single group or “school.” Thus, it is best to speak of streams or strands of tradition and to contrast their basic underpinnings, rather than to speak of sources reflecting a single author, period, and locale. For example, despite the unraveling of a consensus on the exact date of the sources, it is still valid to contrast the Deuteronomic view of Israel's fundamental, intrinsic holiness—as seen, for example, in Deut. 7.6, “For you are a people consecrated [holy] to the LORD your God”—with the Priestly view, articulated most clearly in the Holiness Collection (H), which suggests that Israel must aspire to holiness—as in Lev. 19.2, “You shall be holy.” These fundamental differences cannot easily be reconciled, suggesting that despite certain problems with the classical source-critical method, certain elements of source criticism remain useful alongside other methods of analyzing biblical texts.

## Compilation and Redaction of the Torah



WE DO NOT KNOW HOW THESE VARIOUS SOURCES and legal collections, which now comprise the Torah, came together to form a single book. Scholars have posited an editor or series of editors or redactors, conveniently called R, who combined the various sources, perhaps in several stages, over a long time. Certainly not all ancient Israelite traditions were preserved in the Torah. Much was probably lost. Without knowing what was lost, we cannot suggest how and why the redactor(s), R, made their selection and by what principles they ordered their materials. It must suffice to note that in contrast to modern editing, which works toward articulating a single viewpoint, the redaction of the Torah, like the editing of other ancient works, did not create a purely consistent, singular perspective but incorporated a variety of voices and perspectives.

The ultimate result of this redaction, most likely completed during the Babylonian exile (586–538 BCE) or soon thereafter in the early Persian period, was the creation of a very long book, narrating what must have been felt to be the formative period of Israel, from the period of the creation of the world through the death of Moses. The events narrated in Gen. chs 1–11 describing the creation of the world and its population by many nations serve as an introduction to the singling out of one nation, Israel. The stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the ancestors of Israel, form the national prehistory. Israel comes into existence as a nation in Exodus, and the foremost events of its national history are the exodus from Egypt, the revelation at Sinai, and the coming to the Promised Land. These events are central to Exodus-Deuteronomy.

The ancient Near Eastern world produced no other work of comparable length in the span of time its narrative covers or in the inclusiveness of the literary genres and sources incorporated into it. This extensive and inclusive nature of the Torah creates a fundamental and interesting problem for biblical interpreters. Should we concentrate on interpreting the individual sources, on hearing the voices of the component parts of the text before they were redacted together? Or should we follow the traditional way in which the Bible was read for many centuries before the rise of modern source criticism, and focus on the final product, an approach that has been called holistic reading? In the annotations of the biblical books that follow we will aim for a balance, maintaining our critical stance toward the sources but never forgetting that it is their combination into a whole that has preserved them and given them meaning. We will show how meaning may be uncovered by looking both at the early building blocks of the text, and at the text in its final, redacted form.