

Authors of the Bible

This is a preview of a section from the book

The Bible Untangled

Read the Texts that Were Edited Together
to Form the Early Books of the Bible

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Chapter 1:

The Texts Behind the Bible

The first five books of the Bible—called the five books of Moses, the Pentateuch or the Torah—are hard to read because some of their stories are long-winded, and they contain long lists of ritualistic commandments. These books are even harder to understand because many stories are self-contradictory, and different passages seem to have very different views of God and of our religious duties.

But most of these difficulties disappear when we separate the Torah into its source texts.

The idea that the Torah was edited together from source texts is called the “documentary hypothesis” because it claims that the Torah is made up of several independent documents. The documentary hypothesis has been important to Biblical scholarship for over a century, but this edition is the first to arrange the three parallel texts of the Torah in parallel columns. You can read across the columns to compare the different versions of the same story in the different documents. You can read down the columns to read the documents from beginning to end.

This book is an experiment to test the documentary hypothesis. When you read down the columns, you can see whether each text is a cohesive whole with a consistent view of God and our religious duties. When you read across the columns, you can see the contradictions among the texts.

There are still disputes among scholars about which source text many passages of the Bible should be assigned to. As part of its test of the documentary hypothesis, this edition assigns disputed passages in the way that makes the source texts as continuous and cohesive as possible. Some critics of the documentary hypothesis say that we cannot divide the Torah into cohesive source texts, and in this edition, you can read down each column to judge for yourself whether each text could be taken from a single, cohesive document.

The Source Documents

The traditional view is that the entire Torah was revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai or Mt. Horeb.

Many people questioned this view over the centuries, including the

philosophers Thomas Hobbes and Baruch Spinoza.¹ The modern approach to Bible criticism began in the eighteenth century, when scholars identified what they called “doublets,” places in the Bible where the same story is told twice with differences between the two versions. Scholars also noticed that, within these doublets, one version referred to God using the word *Elohim* (Hebrew for God) while the other referred to God using the four-letter name YHWH, which is translated as “the Lord” in most English versions of the Bible.

For example, the Bible begins in Genesis 1 with the well-known story of the creation in six days, but then it repeats the story of the creation briefly in Genesis 2 before going on with the story of Adam and Eve. The order of creation is different in these two versions. In Genesis 1, which uses the word “God,” God creates the birds (Gen. 1:20), then creates the animals (Gen. 1:24), and then creates both man and woman (Gen. 1:27). In Genesis 2, which uses the name “Lord God,” God creates man (Gen. 2:7), then creates the trees (Gen. 2:9), then creates the animals and birds (Gen. 2:19), and then creates woman (Gen. 2:22). These two versions of the creation story are easy to identify because they are presented one after another.

A bit later, in the story of Noah and the flood, the two versions are intertwined, with fragments of one version alternating with fragments of the other. If you separate the two different versions, you see that they both give complete accounts of Noah and the flood but that they contradict each other in many ways. The version that uses the word “God” says that Noah took one pair of each kind of animal (Gen. 6:19), that the flood lasted about ten and a half months (Gen. 7:11, 8:13) and that Noah sent a raven to see if the flood had ended (Gen. 8:7). The version that uses the word “Lord” says that Noah took seven pairs of clean animals and one pair of unclean animals (Gen. 7:2), that the flood lasted during 40 days of rain (Gen. 8:6) plus another seven days before the water receded (Gen. 8:10), and that Noah sent doves to see if the flood had ended (Gen. 7:6).

In 1711, Henning Bernhard Witter was the first to discuss doublets, but his work had little influence. In 1753, Jean Astruc, a French physician, anonymously published a book defending Moses’ authorship against the criticisms of Hobbes and Spinoza by saying that Moses wrote the books of Genesis and Exodus in four columns, which used these different names for God and which scribes later combined,² but he also had little influence. In 1780, Johann Gottfried Eichhorn said that the Bible was compiled after the death of Moses from two sources; he called one source E because it used the word *Elohim* (God), and he called the other J because it used the four-letter name of God, which is written as JHWH in German.³ Eichhorn could not be ignored because he was a well known scholar and a professor in the Faculty of Theology at Jena University, and his work was the beginning of the modern documentary hypothesis.

Shortly afterward, scholars realized that there were also doublets within

the texts that used the word *Elohim* and that these doublets had different concerns and used different language. They concluded that there is a third source, and because this source was often concerned with the rituals that priests performed, they called it P, the priestly source.

To make things even more complicated, scholars later found that E and P use the word *Elohim* in the early parts of the Torah, but both of these texts say that God revealed His four-letter name to Moses, and after this revelation, both texts use His name, translated as “the Lord,” as well as using the word “God.”

The E, J, and P texts were combined by editors to make up the first four books of the Bible, and scholars also found that almost all of the fifth book of the Bible, Deuteronomy, differed from these three sources in language and sometimes contradicted them, so they attributed it to a separate source, which they called D.

Thus, we have four sources, called E (from *Elohim*), J (from JHWH), P (from Priestly) and D (from Deuteronomy).

Redactors (editors) combined all these source texts into the single text that has survived to our time. Scholars found that J and E were combined into the JE text by a redactor whom we call RJE, who often discarded material that was duplicated in both of these texts, leaving gaps in what has survived of the J and E texts. Later, the JE and P text were combined by a redactor whom we call R, who kept almost all the material in his two sources.

This theory explains many of the contradictions in the Bible. To give just one example, the Torah says that Moses received the law both on Mt. Sinai and on Mt. Horeb. Why does the Torah contradict itself? Because the J and P texts say it happened on Mt. Sinai, while the E text implies and the D text says it happened on Mt. Horeb in the wilderness of Sinai.

Julius Wellhausen was the great scholar who synthesized the earlier work and created a definitive version of the documentary hypothesis. However, Wellhausen was influenced by the ideas of the philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who believed that history was the story of the inevitable progress of ideas, so he characterized these sources by saying that J and E represented the earliest phase of the Israelite religion, which was family-based and polytheistic, D represented an intermediate phase, when religion began to be centralized under the kings and priests, and only P (the latest text, which he placed after the Babylonian exile) had a monotheistic religion under the control of the priesthood.⁴

As we will see, it was an error to lump together J and E as two examples of the early primitive phase in the inevitable progress of religion. Today’s scholars are not Hegelians, but they have not freed themselves entirely from the error that both J and E represent primitive versions of the Israelite religion. In reality, E is remarkably advanced for his time, while J’s religion is much more primitive—and when we read the E text, we have to wonder how a

people as primitive as the early Israelites developed such an advanced religion.

To understand the four source documents, we have to look briefly at the historical events that shaped Israel when the four authors lived.

The World of E and J

The E and J texts were written when the Israelites lived in two kingdoms, the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, between about 930 BCE and 722 BCE. To understand this era, we have to step back and look at how all of Israel became a unified kingdom and at how that kingdom broke in two.

Archeologists have shown that a group of nomadic herders arrived in Canaan and began farming in the unoccupied hill country around 1200 BCE, about the time of the exodus from Egypt, with an initial population of about 45,000 people at about 250 sites.⁵ These nomads were different from all the surrounding peoples because the bones remaining at their settlements show that they did not raise pigs, implying that they were the Israelites. They peacefully settled unoccupied highlands rather than conquering Canaanite cities as the book of Joshua claims, but they occasionally clashed with Canaanites who lived in parts of the valleys of these highlands.

The book of Judges tells us that the Israelites did not have any centralized government for the first couple of centuries after they arrived in Canaan. Each tribe was independent. When it was necessary to fight other nations, a tribe or alliance of tribes would muster up an army.⁶ The tribes also would fight among themselves occasionally.⁷

A unified kingdom replaced this collection of tribes because disunited tribes could not face the growing threat of the Philistines, who probably settled the coast of Canaan at about the same time that the Israelites settled the highlands. In the book of Judges, the tribes are sometimes conquered by surrounding nations, but they often wage war successfully and avoid being conquered, or they free themselves after being conquered. But the final war in the book of Judges is against the Philistines, and the leader of the Israelites was the judge Samson, who died after being captured by the Philistines.⁸ Behind the mythology of Samson having supernatural strength that he lost because of the treachery of his Philistine wife Delilah, we can see the historical fact that the Israelite tribes had fought and ultimately defeated other enemies but could not defeat the Philistines.

At this point, Israel needed to have a king with a standing army rather than forming impromptu armies when the need arose. Saul was the first king to form a standing army, but he failed to beat back the Philistines. David, a member of the tribe of Judah who had been part of Saul's army, assembled his own army, called the "mighty men," and he unified the twelve tribes into one kingdom through a series of military victories that conquered territory for Israel.

David also conquered Jerusalem, and he made it the religious center of

the unified kingdom. The most important religious object at the time was the Ark of the Covenant, which the Israelites believed their ancestors had carried through the desert to the Promised Land. At first, the Ark was kept at the main religious center of Israel at Shiloh, in the territory of the tribe of Ephraim.⁹ But when the Israelites carried it into battle against the Philistines thinking it would protect them, the Philistines captured it.¹⁰ David brought the Ark to Jerusalem, and the Bible presents a very vivid image of David forgetting his dignity and dancing before the Ark as it was carried to his new capital.¹¹

David worked hard to promote unity among the twelve tribes. During the period of the Judges, the tribes had not conquered Jerusalem, which was called Jebus and occupied by the Jebusites. David made this city his capital after his army conquered it, avoiding jealousy among the tribes by locating his national capital in a city that had never been part of the territory of any tribe.

David also promoted unity in the religion by having two sets of Levites (priests) control the religious center in Jerusalem. One high priest was Zadok, the leader of the Levites of Jerusalem, who are called the Aaronid priests because they traced their ancestry to Aaron. The other was Ahimelech, the leader of the priests of Shiloh, who are called the Mushite priests because they traced their ancestry to Moses.¹² Though David moved the ark from Shiloh to Jerusalem, he maintained unity by bringing Mushite priests from Shiloh to join the Aaronid priests in Jerusalem.

Solomon was more firmly entrenched in power than David, so he made less of an effort to unite the people. His divisiveness began at the beginning of his reign. Because Zadok, leader of the Aaronid priests, supported Solomon's bid to become king after David died,¹³ while Abiathar, leader of the Mushite priests supported David's son Adonijah's,¹⁴ Solomon gave Zadok and the Aaronid priests exclusive control over Jerusalem's religious rituals, and he banished Abiathar to Anathoth,¹⁵ one of the cities of refuge where people who killed others by accident could go to avoid revenge. This division between the Aaronid priests and the Mushite priests, the two most influential groups of priests in ancient Israel, is crucial to understanding the Bible, much of which was written by these two groups of priests.

In another divisive move, Solomon hired King Hiram of Tyre to build the temple in Jerusalem and to build a royal palace that was much larger than the temple. He forced large number of Israelites to work on these building projects¹⁶—and when both projects were finished, Solomon gave Hiram twenty cities in the Galilee,¹⁷ on the northern edge of Israel's territory. David had been careful to locate his capital in the newly conquered city of Jerusalem, so as not to put it in one tribe's territory and offend the other tribes. Solomon came from the southern tribe of Judah, like his father David, but did not care whether he offended northern tribes by giving their land away in order to build a temple and a palace for himself.

When Solomon died, his son Rehoboam became king. The Bible says that, when people from the northern tribes asked him whether he would continue Solomon's oppressive policies, Rehoboam answered, "My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke; my father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions."¹⁸ Rehoboam planned to be even crueler than his father, Solomon.

(In fairness to Solomon, we should mention that this history of his reign comes from I Kings, part of the Deuteronomistic history that was compiled by a descendent of the Mushite priests, who disliked him because he took away their authority over the Temple. The book of *Chronicles*, written later by an Aaronid priest, does not say that Solomon gave northern cities to Hiram; instead, it says that Solomon paid Hiram with grain, wine, and oil.¹⁹ But *Chronicles* does give away the fact that Solomon was cruel and oppressive when it tells the story of the people complaining to Rehoboam and has him reply with the same line: "And now whereas my father did lade you with a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke; my father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions."²⁰)

Though Rehoboam wanted to be crueler than Solomon, he was not as entrenched in power as Solomon had been. Jeroboam, who had led an unsuccessful rebellion against Solomon and had fled to Egypt, returned and led a successful rebellion against Rehoboam.²¹ As a result, the unified kingdom of David and Solomon split into two kingdoms. Rehoboam continued to rule in the kingdom of Judah, the southernmost part of David's kingdom, which was made up of the tribe of Judah and the small tribe of Simeon that had been absorbed by Judah. Jeroboam became ruler of the new kingdom of Israel, which included the rest of the tribes and their territories. In addition, the tribe of Levi had no territory of its own: the Levites were spread through the territories of the rest of the tribes and served as priests for the other tribes. Though the Bible speaks of Israel and Judah as two similar monarchies, archeologists have found that Judah had a very backward and undeveloped economy at the time of the split,²² so it is not surprising that the Judean Rehoboam could not dominate all the other tribes.

In the southern kingdom of Judah, Jerusalem remained the capital and religion centered on Solomon's temple in Jerusalem, which was run by the Aaronid priests. In the northern kingdom of Israel, Jeroboam created two new religious centers: one in Dan at the northern edge of this kingdom, and the other in Bethel at its southern edge. He built a statue of a golden calf at each of these religious centers, and he claimed that God was enthroned on top of these two statues, just as the Aaronid priests claimed that God was enthroned on top of two statues of cherubim in the temple in Jerusalem.

(Note that "calf" is a bit of a misleading translation that gives the impression that these were statues of weak young calves; actually, they were calves who had almost grown to be mature bulls and were symbols of potency. Likewise, "cherubim" is a bit misleading to modern readers

because we think of cherubs as infants with wings; these cherubim were more like winged sphinxes and were much more intimidating than the cute cherubs of Rafael.)

In both kingdoms, there was an ongoing struggle between the worship of God and the worship of the Canaanite god Baal. A series of prophets denounced Baal worship and called for a return to exclusive worship of God, but they were ignored by most of the rulers of both kingdoms. This struggle against pagan worship may have begun during the united monarchy: the book of Kings, compiled by Mushite priests, tells us that Solomon introduced the worship of pagan gods in Jerusalem late in his reign.²³

In the centuries that followed, there was a series of ruling dynasties in the northern kingdom of Israel, as rebellious pretenders toppled kings and took their places. But there was only one ruling dynasty in Judah: descendants of David remained on the throne throughout Judah's history, leading the people of Judah to believe that God had loved David so much that he promised him that his descendants would always remain on the throne in Jerusalem, though God punished them for worshiping other gods by taking away most of David's territory and leaving them with only the territory of Judah.

Who Wrote the E and J Texts?

Now we have enough background in the history of the time to understand the people who wrote the E text and J text.

The E Text

Most scholars who accept the documentary hypothesis believe that the E text was written by a Mushite priest, one of the priests who believed they were descended from Moses, who had controlled the early Israelite religious center in Shiloh, and who were exiled to Anathoth by Solomon. E's stories of the exodus emphasize the exclusive importance of their supposed ancestor, Moses, and downplay the importance of Aaron, the supposed ancestor of their rivals the Aaronid priests. E's stories focus on the northern kingdom and particularly on the territory of Ephraim, where Shiloh was located.

Solomon expelled the Mushite priests from Jerusalem. With the division of the kingdom, these priests might have expected Jeroboam to restore their religious center in Shiloh, which was in the northern kingdom, but instead Jeroboam created the new centers in Dan and Bethel. Solomon had taken away the Mushite priests' religious authority when he removed them from the temple in Jerusalem, and they were still dispossessed under Jeroboam. Though some scholars have suggested that Jeroboam installed Aaronid priests at Bethel and Mushite priests at Dan,²⁴ this is uncertain. It does seem clear that an important group of Mushite priests remained in

Anathoth, where Solomon had banished them, since the Bible tells us that Jeremiah, writing hundreds of years after Solomon, was identified as one of “the priests that were in Anathoth.”²⁵

The Mushite priests were resentful about their loss of authority, and the best sign of this resentment is the story of the golden calf in the E text of the Bible. This is a familiar story: when Moses went up to Mt. Sinai or Mt. Horeb to receive the law, the people complained to Aaron that they wanted a new god to worship, and Aaron built a golden calf and officiated at the sacrifices to it. When Moses came down from the mountain, he was so angry to see this pagan worship that he threw down and smashed the two tablets of the Ten Commandments and killed about three thousand Israelites as punishment.²⁶ This story was meant to criticize two groups we would expect the displaced Mushite priests to resent. It criticized the Aaronid priests who controlled Judah’s religious center in Jerusalem by showing that their ancestor Aaron promoted pagan worship. It criticized Israel’s religious centers in Dan and Bethel by showing that the golden calves, which were so prominent at these centers, were pagan symbols that Moses himself had condemned.

The story of the Israelites worshipping the golden calf in the desert is well known today, but it obviously was not well known at the time. If the golden calf had been a well-known symbol of heresy, Jeroboam would have used some other symbol at his new religious centers. Perhaps there was a little-known tradition about the golden calf in the desert, which the Mushite priests made much more prominent after Jeroboam built his golden calves, but there certainly was not a well-known tradition.

As we will see later, it is possible that the story of the golden calf was written later than most of the E text, but it is the most striking example of the attitude of the Mushite priests who wrote the E text toward the Aaronid priests in Jerusalem and toward the religious centers of the northern kingdom of Israel.

The J Text

Most scholars who accept the documentary hypothesis believe that the J text was written by a member of the royal court of Judah. This text focuses largely on events in the south, in the territory of Judah, and even gives origin myths for subtribes of Judah. It has Jacob give a blessing that raises Judah above his older brothers.²⁷ It makes Judah sympathetic and even heroic in the story of Joseph and his brothers.²⁸ It does not focus on the sort of legal matters that priests were interested in: the E and P texts both include extensive legal codes, but the J text has no legal code at all apart from its version of the Ten Commandments.

The authors of the other texts were priests, which means they must have been men, but as a member of the Judean court, J could have been a man or