

Core of the P Text

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The Bible Untangled

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

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Is the P Text Continuous?

The continuity of the P text is a bigger problem. At first sight, it does not seem like a coherent whole. The only lengthy narratives it has in Genesis, for example, are the story of the creation,¹⁰⁴ the story of Noah,¹⁰⁵ the story of the covenant of Abraham,¹⁰⁶ the story Abraham buying the tomb of the patriarchs at Machpelah to bury Sarah there,¹⁰⁷ the story of Isaac and Rebekah sending Jacob to get a wife from their relative Laban,¹⁰⁸ and the story of Jacob legitimizing Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh, making the tribes that descended from them equal to the tribes descended from Jacob's own sons.¹⁰⁹ These stories are linked by genealogies or very brief summary histories; for example, P just provides a list of Jacob's children and says nothing about their birth. It does not seem clear at first why P would tell these particular stories at greater length and just give a few verses summarizing other events that seem equally important.

Yet it is possible to find a coherent structure underlying the P text. The author focused on the four events that he considered the most important in history: the creation, the covenant of Noah, the covenant of Abraham, and the covenant of Moses and Aaron. He wrote lengthy narratives about these four events, and he tied them together with genealogies or with very brief summary narratives of intervening events. The genealogies and summary narratives provide a continuous timeline that extends from the creation of the world to the Israelites' arrival at the Jordan River just before entering the Promised Land, and the four key events are all dated on this timeline. For more details about this timeline, see Appendix 1.

These four key events are critical to history. The creation tells the story of the earliest ancestors of all the animals and all the people who have ever lived. Noah and the animals he saved are the ancestors of all the animals and all the people who have lived since the flood. Abraham is the ancestor of every Israelite. Moses and Aaron are the ancestors of the Mushite and Aaronid priests.

P emphasized that these stories are critical to our ancestry by having God use the word "fruitful" during each one.

In the creation story, after creating fish and birds, ^{GEN 1:22}God blessed them, saying: 'Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let fowl multiply in the earth.'" After creating man and woman ^{GEN 1:28}God blessed them; and God said unto them: 'Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it...'"

In the story of the flood, after the waters receded, ^{GEN 8:15}God spoke unto Noah, saying: ¹⁶'Go forth from the ark, thou, and thy wife, and thy sons, and thy sons' wives with thee. ¹⁷Bring forth with thee every living thing that is with thee of all flesh, both fowl, and cattle, and every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth; that they may swarm in the earth, and be fruitful, and multiply upon the earth'" and in addition, ^{GEN 9:1}God blessed Noah and

his sons, and said unto them: ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth.’”

In the story of Abraham, God told Abraham “^{GEN 17:6}I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee.” And God reaffirmed this blessing when He appeared to Jacob as he returned from Paddan-aram: “^{GEN 35:11}And God said unto him: ‘I am God Almighty. Be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be of thee, and kings shall come out of thy loins; ¹²and the land which I gave unto Abraham and Isaac, to thee I will give it, and to thy seed after thee will I give the land.’”

In the story of Moses and Aaron, there is a long list of blessings that the Israelites will receive if they obey and a long list of curses they will receive if they disobey. One of the blessings is: “^{LEV 26:3}If ye walk in My statutes, and keep My commandments, and do them... ⁹And I will have respect unto you, and make you fruitful, and multiply you; and will establish My covenant with you.”

All of these quotations are from the P text, and as the P text progresses, it becomes progressively harder to get this blessing of being fruitful.

The story of the creation does not mention any requirement. God just tells man and woman to be fruitful and multiply. (The requirement of not eating the apple is from the J text.)

The story of Noah mentions two requirements, not to eat the blood of animals and not to shed human blood, which P seems to think of as one requirement:

^{GEN 9:3}Every moving thing that liveth shall be for food for you; as the green herb have I given you all. ⁴Only flesh with the life thereof, which is the blood thereof, shall ye not eat. ⁵And surely your blood of your lives will I require; at the hand of every beast will I require it; and at the hand of man, even at the hand of every man’s brother, will I require the life of man. ⁶Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed....”

Eating animals’ blood is conflated with shedding human blood because P has a very strict requirement in Leviticus that animals must be brought to the Temple to be butchered and the blood must be sprinkled on the altar to atone for the killing; anyone who slaughters an animal himself or who eats blood incurs blood guilt similar to the guilt of a murderer and is cut off from the people.¹¹⁰

God made a covenant with Noah that He would not destroy all flesh again, which is symbolized by the rainbow,¹¹¹ and a covenant implies that there are obligations on both sides.

God also made a covenant with Abraham that had an additional obligation, circumcision, and an additional promise, that they would be the fathers of a great nation that would possess the land of Canaan.¹¹² Presumably, Abraham

was also bound by the covenant of Noah, since he was Noah's descendent.

Finally, God made a covenant with the children of Israel at the time of Moses and Aaron that imposed many more obligations on them if they were to keep the land—obligations that fill up the book of Leviticus—and He threatened them with curses if they break the covenant as well as promising them prosperity if they keep the covenant. This final covenant also incorporates the covenants of Noah and Abraham: today's orthodox Jews are still forbidden to eat blood and must be circumcised.

All of these covenants are from the P text, and there is a clear progression from no obligations at the time of the creation, through increasing obligations for Noah and the patriarchs, to an exhausting set of obligations for the Israelites—obligations that made them dependent on the priests.

These four narratives form a coherent whole. P did not choose these events at random. He chose them because they are key events in the history of all living animals, of humanity and of Israel, and because they are key points in the history of God's covenant with Israel.

P was probably familiar with the JE text, and he created a new synthesis of pagan myth with Israelite religion by modifying two of J's myths to make them key events in religious history. We can see how he modified the earlier myth in the creation story. God seems anthropomorphic in J's creation myth, creating Adam by molding the soil and breathing life into him.¹¹³ P responds to JE by rewriting this myth to make God more powerful and more remote: God created the world purely by speaking.¹¹⁴

P's synthesis represents a change in the Israelite priests' view of God. The E text sees Him as the source of revelations to the patriarchs and to Moses. The P text also sees Him as the Creator, and the idea that God is Creator has been central to the religion ever since, though it was not important to the Mushite priests' earlier version of the religion, so it was left out of the E text.

Thus, there does seem to be a unified core to the P text, centering on these four key events, which are connected with genealogies and brief summary histories, but there are also other lengthy narratives that interrupt this core narrative. It is easy to imagine reasons why people would want to add these other narratives.

The first extraneous story is P's long account of Abraham's purchase of a burial site for Sarah at Machpelah, which became the tomb of all the patriarchs, emphasizing that Abraham paid full price with all the Hittites gathered around as witnesses;¹¹⁵ and it is easy to imagine why people would want to include this to establish the Israelites' legal right to this religious site.

The second extraneous story says that Isaac and Rebekah were saddened when Esau married Hittite women, so they sent Jacob to Laban to find a wife among their relatives,¹¹⁶ and it is easy to imagine why they would want to include this at a time when the priests were trying to end marriages with non-Israelites.

The third extraneous story, the final one in Genesis, shows Jacob legitimizing Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh, making the tribes that descended from them equal to the tribes descended from Jacob's own sons, and then shows Jacob being carried back to Canaan to be buried in the cave of Machpelah,¹¹⁷ and it is easy to imagine why people would want to include this story to legitimize all of the twelve tribes and to show that all the patriarchs are buried at Machpelah, even Jacob who died in Egypt.

These extraneous stories in Genesis are easy to identify. It is harder to identify which passages in P are extraneous in the books that follow, because these books are all about the covenant of Moses and Aaron, but presumably some of its stories were not part of the original core of the P text.

There are clues that the final extraneous story in Genesis, the story of Jacob legitimizing Ephraim and Manasseh, was a later addition to the P text. A bit earlier, the P text implies that Jacob died, using the typical summary style that we expect P to use in everything except the four key events: ^{GEN 47:28} "And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years; so the days of Jacob, the years of his life, were a hundred forty and seven years." But immediately afterwards in P, beginning with Genesis 48:3, Jacob is still alive to bless Ephraim and Manasseh. This story is out of place coming after the summary of how many years Jacob lived, making us suspect that it was added later. There is another piece of evidence that this final P passage about Jacob was added later: before this passage, in Genesis 46, P lists the sons of Israel who came to Egypt and gives many details about them; then after this passage, in Exodus 1:1, P repeats the list of the sons of Israel without the added details. This sort of repetition is often used before and after an inserted passage, to reestablish the continuity of the original text.

Thus, there are two telltale signs that this passage was added later, raising the possibility that other extraneous passages were also added later.

One possible explanation of these extraneous passages is that the P text might have been a book written by a bureaucracy. The priest who was the lead writer had a clear idea of the unified structure of the book he wanted to write, with four key events tied together by genealogies and brief summary histories, but other priests insisted that it was very important to add the story of Abraham's purchase of Sarah's tomb before many witnesses in order to solidify Israel's claim to the cave of Machpelah, and others insisted that it was very important to add the story of Isaac and Rebekah sending Jacob to marry a relative in order to reinforce their campaign against intermarriage with Canaanites, and others insisted that it was very important that he add the story legitimizing Ephraim and Manasseh.

Another possible explanation is that the P text might have been revised by a later writer or writers who were Aaronid priests and so shared the point of view of the original author. The initial writer might have written a book that was the unified core of the P text. Then other priests might have added other stories to the P text that they considered too important to leave out.

Thus, the P text is not as unified as the E or J text, but it does seem plausible that it began as a single document by one writer with a unified plan, and it became less unified as others added passages to it or demanded additions.