

MTP/HB Introduction to the Hebrew Bible Introduction to the Torah

What is Torah?

The word "torah" comes from the root word meaning "to shoot" but has the basic meaning of "teaching or instruction" and the more limited meaning of "law". In the first 5 books of the Hebrew Bible, the word "torah" (in some grammatical form) is used 52x. Given the Hebrew root, one might say that torah is shooting toward the way of God. Another name for these five books in Hebrew is *humash*, from the word for five (*hamesh*). It is in this vein that we get the word, Pentateuch, which is from the Greek word for the number 5.

With the exception of a few words, these five books are written entirely in Hebrew. They do contain a large number of legal texts, and were traditionally attributed to Moses. Thus, the Torah gained a central place in Judaism. The Torah has a special relationship to the other books of the Hebrew Bible in that the events that it narrates are central to, and assumed by, most of the other books, and many of the other biblical books make reference to it (e.g., Ezra 8:1-3) or allude to passages within it (e.g., Jon 4:2).

Contents & Structure

The Torah is basically a narrative that moves from the creation of the world to the creation of Israel as a free people to the edge of the promise land. Within the narrative, there are some decisive events: the flood, call of Abraham/Sarah, changing of Jacob's name to Israel; call of Moses/Miriam & Aaron; Exodus; the establishment of the covenant between Israel and YHWH. It begins with a broad view of the relationship between God and all humanity. Then, it focuses in upon a relationship between God and the family of Sarah and Abraham. Again, it broadens its view, as the family grows into a whole people, who are called to be a blessing for the world.

Torah can be divided into six major parts:

Primeval History: Gen 1-11

Ancestral Period: Gen 12-50

Liberation from Egypt: Ex 1:1-18

Stay at Sinai/Horeb: Exod 19 - Num 10:10, Leviticus

Journey to the Promised Land: Numbers 10:11 - 36:13

Moses' Farewell: Deuteronomy

There are some overarching themes that run throughout the Torah. They are:

- Broken Relationships: between God & Humans; among Humans; & between Humans & the rest of Creation
- God initiates, makes, and keeps covenants.
- God's choices are not human choices. God chooses the least likely people to help move humans closer to healthy relationships with God, neighbor, and self.
- God hears and responds to the cries of the oppressed/powerless.
- As the only part of creation that is created in the Divine likeness, humans have free will, and their choices have consequences.

The Torah is Ancient Israel's distinctive record of their understandings of, and experiences with, the God of Creation and of their ancestors. God did not write the words nor did God have final editorial rights; but the text often reflects the Divine presence in the midst of human words, bound by culture and ideologies.

Who Wrote the Torah?

If God did not write the Torah, then who did? As was mentioned above, traditionally Moses was associated with the Torah, as the one who "taught" Israel the commandments from God. However, it's important to remember that the Torah, as a whole, never claims that Moses wrote it. In fact, the description of Moses' death at the end of Deuteronomy would seem to argue against Mosaic authorship of this material. What might it mean if Moses did not write the Torah?

One of the earliest persons to doubt Mosaic authorship was a medieval Jewish rabbi, Ibn Ezra, in the 12th century; his doubts were based primarily on the fact that the Torah covers Moses' death. Ibn Ezra made cryptic references to this doubt within his commentary on Deut. By the 17th century, Hobbes & Spinoza openly rejected Mosaic authorship. And in the 18th century (1711), a Lutheran pastor, Witter, distinguished between different names used for the divine as evidence of more than one author of the Torah. 42 years later, Jean Astruc published a book identifying 3 sources in the Torah, but he still saw Moses as the ultimate author/editor.

What led to these questions, doubts and rejections of Mosaic authorship? These readers of the Torah identified certain features that seemed to argue against the idea that one person sat down and wrote Gen-Deut as one continuous narrative. Here are some of them:

- Doublets: 2 variations of the same story:
 - Creation — Gen 1:1-2:3 and 2:4b-25
 - Genealogy from 1st Humans — Gen 4:17-26 and 5:1-28, 30-32
 - Flood — two stories intertwined
 - Wife/Sister Stories — Gen 12:10-20; 20:1-18 (Abe & Sarah).
 - Actually a triplet: Gen 26:6-14 (Isaac & Rebekah)
 - Abrahamic Covenant — Gen 15 & 17
- Different terminology for names of people, places and other terms or expressions. Example: "Gathered unto his people" as a euphemism for dying is only used in certain stories, and the mountain upon which God gave the commandments is identified as both Sinai and Horeb, depending on the source.
- Contradictions: order of creation, number of animals taken into the ark, Abraham's homeland, Sale of Joseph, Moses' father-in-law (Ex 2 & 3), the Decalogue (Exod 20 and Deut).
- Redactive elements: reconciling phrases, framing devices, and additions.
- Uneven tempo of the narratives. According to the internal chronology, all the

events took place over a period of 2,706 years. Yet, the sojourn at Sinai, which lasted only about a year, accounts for 1/5 of the narrative. Also, the last day of Moses' life is another 1/5 of the narrative.

These characteristics, along with a growing suspicion of the historical reliability of the biblical texts (due to archeological findings, extra-biblical sources, etc.), led to the intentional study of the sources used in writing the Torah (as well as other biblical texts).

Source Criticism seeks to identify written sources that lie behind a text and have been used in the final compilation of the biblical materials. The "father" of Source Criticism of the Hebrew Bible is Julius Wellhausen, due to his work with the sources that lie behind the Torah. Specifically, Wellhausen is responsible for the "Documentary Hypothesis" of the Torah. Influenced by his mentor, Graf, Wellhausen built on the ideas of previous biblical interpreters, who challenged the idea that Moses wrote the Torah, and identified what he believed to be 4 written sources that existed independently and were woven together into the materials in Gen-Deut.

The Graf/Wellhausen Documentary Hypothesis was the biblical studies equivalent of Darwin's Theory of Evolution for science. Its revolutionary claim profoundly influenced scholarship and was eventually widely accepted. It identified 4 sources in the Torah: J, E, P, and D. J was the "Yahwist" author, using the name *YHWH* (pronounced '*Adonai* and translated LORD) for God. The name, "J", is the result of the German Christian vocalization of the Divine name with a "J". J was the consummate storyteller. God is described in human terms. Characters are very real, described with emotions, strengths and weaknesses. Stories are people/earth centered. E was the "Elohists", author who used the generic name for God, "Elohim."¹ For the Elohist, God is

¹ It is important to note that '*elohim* is actually a plural form of the Hebrew noun, '*el*'; thus, it would be more accurately translated as "gods". When it is clear, in the Hebrew text, that '*elohim* refers to the

omnipresent, omnipotent, and in control. People are not as flawed as in J. Wellhausen believed that both J & E sources existed before the Assyrian conquest of Israel (c 722/21 BCE). J was composed in Judah (848-722) and E in Israel (922-722). J and E were later combined into one text. P was the "Priestly" writer, who was concerned with the cult, the Tabernacle, sacrifices, and Levitical duties. P was also a genealogist. Wellhausen argued that P was probably an Aaronic priest, living sometime between 722 and 609, perhaps during the reign of Hezekiah. D is for the "Deuteronomist", who Wellhausen proposed was living and writing during the time of Josiah. The D source believed in an act/consequence view of human behavior. There was also a recognition that someone had to edit these sources together, so the term, "Redactor", was used for the material that seemed to function as an "editorial" addition/clarification.

One way of seeing Source Criticism "at work" is to consider some of the chapters of Genesis. The following represent a traditional Source analysis of Gen 1-2. The Priestly Source is highlighted in purple; the Yahwist Source in red; and the Redactor in yellow.

Gen 1:1 In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, **2** the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. **3** Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. **4** And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. **5** God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. **6** And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." **7** So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. **8** God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day. **9** And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. **10** God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. **11** Then God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so. **12** The earth brought forth vegetation: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good. **13** And there was evening and there was morning, the third day. **14** And God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day

deities of other people, it is translated as "gods". However, if it is clear in the text that *'elohim* refers to Israel's deity, then it is translated as "God".

from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, **15** and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth." And it was so. **16** God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars. **17** God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth, **18** to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. **19** And there was evening and there was morning, the fourth day. **20** And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky." **21** So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. **22** God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." **23** And there was evening and there was morning, the fifth day. **24** And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind." And it was so. **25** God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good. **26** Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." **27** So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. **28** God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." **29** God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. **30** And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. **31** God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Gen 2: **1** Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. **2** And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. **3** So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. **4** These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, **5** when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; **6** but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— **7** then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. **8** And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. **9** Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of

good and evil. **10** A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. **11** The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; **12** and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. **13** The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. **14** The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. **15** The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. **16** And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; **17** but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." **18** Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." **19** So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. **20** The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. **21** So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. **22** And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. **23** Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken." **24** Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. **25** And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

Another example can be seen in Gen 7:

Verses by J

Verses by P and by R

1 And the LORD said unto Noah, Come thou and all thy house into the ark; for thee have I seen righteous before me in this generation.

2 Of every clean beast thou shalt take to thee by sevens, the male and his female: and of beasts that are not clean by two, the male and his female.

3 Of fowls also of the air by sevens, the male and the female; to keep seed alive upon the face of all the earth.

4 For yet seven days, and I will cause it to rain upon the earth forty days and forty nights; and every living substance that I have made will I destroy from off the face of the earth.

5 And Noah did according unto all that the LORD commanded him.

6 (R) And Noah was six hundred years old when the flood of waters was upon the earth.

7 And Noah went in, and his sons, and his wife, and his sons' wives with him, into the ark, because of the waters of the flood.

8 (P) Of clean beasts, and of beasts that are not clean, and of fowls, and of every thing that creepeth upon the earth,
9 There went in two and two unto Noah into the ark, the male and the female, as God had commanded Noah.

10 And it came to pass after seven days, that the waters of the flood were upon the earth.

11 (P) In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, the seventeenth day of the month, the same day were all the fountains of the great deep broken up,

12 And the rain was upon the earth forty days and forty nights.

16 (Cont'd) and the LORD shut him in.
17 And the flood was forty days upon the earth; and the waters increased, and bare up the ark, and it was lift up above the earth.
18 And the waters prevailed, and were increased greatly upon the earth; and the ark went upon the face of the waters.
19 And the waters prevailed exceedingly upon the earth; and all the high hills, that were under the whole heaven, were covered.
20 Fifteen cubits upward did the waters prevail; and the mountains were covered.

22 All in whose nostrils was the breath of life, of all that was in the dry land, died.
23 And every living substance was destroyed which was upon the face of the ground, both man, and cattle, and the creeping things, and the fowl of the

and the windows of heaven were opened.

13 (P) In the selfsame day entered Noah, and Shem, and Ham, and Japheth, the sons of Noah, and Noah's wife, and the three wives of his sons with them, into the ark;

14 They, and every beast after his kind, and all the cattle after their kind, and every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth after his kind, and every fowl after his kind, every bird of every sort.

15 And they went in unto Noah into the ark, two and two of all flesh, wherein is the breath of life.

16 And they that went in, went in male and female of all flesh, as God had commanded him:

21 (P) And all flesh died that moved upon the earth, both of fowl, and of cattle, and of beast, and of every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth, and every man:

heaven; and they were destroyed from the earth: and Noah only remained alive, and they that were with him in the ark.

24 (P) And the waters prevailed upon the earth an hundred and fifty days.

Evaluation of JEPD – It was applied too strictly, and it made too many assumptions about what we could know with any certainty. 21st century scholars no longer assume that these early sources were continuous written materials; they were probably more like fragments/traditions. According to many scholars, P & D are the only sources we can talk about with any assurance, and these are seen as being most important to the finished product of the Torah. In relation to the “Priestly” source, some scholars date it to the pre-exilic period, but the majority put it in the 6th & 5th centuries BCE. An allowance is made for some of the legal and cultic information dating to an earlier time period. Still debatable is whether P was basically a commentary on older traditions or was an independent source. In arguing for the former, scholars point to the orderly and structured 7 days of creation that could correspond to the 7 days of the liturgical week; thus, the role of creation is to praise/worship God. There is no reference in P to the covenant God made with Israel at Sinai. It does contain two covenants: the one with all humanity after the flood (Gen 9:8-17) and the one with Abraham (Gen 17:1-21). Both are unilateral and unconditional, everlasting covenants with no need for renewal; only God must remember the covenant, when Israel is in Egypt.

The Deuteronomistic Source is found most prominently in the Book of Deuteronomy and is related to the Deuteronomistic History (Josh-2 Kgs), with some strands found in the prophets. Deuteronomy presents a program/polity for the future Israelite community. It grounds the existence of the people in the covenant made on the eve of the entry into the Promise Land. This covenant is bilateral and is conditioned upon the maintenance of a faithful and trustful keeping of “torah” by the Israelites. This covenant is more like Assyrian vassal treaties. Emphasis is on Israel as a moral community, which forms the basis for their special status as God’s chosen people.

While it is important to recognize that the stories within the Torah do not come from a single source, nor do they present a cohesive, consistent narrative, we must also recognize that interpreting the received version of these stories is important as well. We will do both, as we consider the stories of the Torah, beginning this week with Gen 1-11, the "Primeval Stories".