

The Origins of the Tanach

One of the most controversial topics for us surrounding the Tanach is "Where did it come from?" Or more precisely "Who wrote the Bible". Since so much of Jewish life is based on peoples' understanding of the Tanach, the question of its authorship has monumental significance. The different responses to this question will lead to very different views of its weight and authority, influencing our relationship to the ancient text. Centuries ago just asking this question would probably be grounds for excommunication from the Jewish community. According to the tradition, the Torah was 'written' by God and given to the Jewish People at Mount Sinai. Any challenge to this view constituted heresy. In the last few centuries we have witnessed major revolutions in all areas of human life, including the way we view sacred literature and now the question exists, is legitimate, and must be addressed.

We can divide the responses to this question into three views:

1 God 'wrote' the entire Torah and transmitted it somehow to the Jewish People at Mount Sinai. Every letter and every word is holy. Any apparent contradictions or mistakes are due to our faulty readings and understanding. We must continue to pore over the text - ultimately, the inner logic and meaning will be discovered.

2 People wrote the entire Torah. Initial oral traditions were eventually written down and edited by different people at different times. In this scenerio it is easy to understand how words or phrases could have been lost along the way. This is why we can find contradictions or mistakes within the text. Different needs and different beliefs might have been more important to different generations - hence the changes within the books throughout their development.

3 God and People wrote the Torah. It was people who actually took pen (ink, stone, whatever) in hand and wrote the Torah, but while under Divine inspiration. 'Divine inspiration' is an open-ended term, meant to allow for a variety of meanings. In all of them, both God and humans were partners in producing the Torah. Sometimes God is perceived as having actively 'inspired' the revelation, such as in an extremely creative or insightful moment when one feels oneself to be a vessel for what one is doing or understanding. Sometimes the focus is more on people, on their search for God, on their attempt to develop their spiritual sensitivity. According to this view contradictions or mistakes can exist in the text because human perspectives (valuable yet ultimately imperfect) can penetrate its writing. According to this view, it is our role to try to distinguish between the parts of the Torah which present eternal truths and those which reflect the historical context of the people writing the work - which may well be relevant for a particular historical setting but not for all people at all times.

The second and third perspectives are tied to a method of study called **Biblical Criticism** which really started to develop in the 17th century. Biblical Criticism can be defined as the process of studying the Bible as one studies any other literature, using the same tools used to analyse other texts. Although various scholars contributed to the development of this approach, the individual who really put it together and presented it in a clear and comprehensive manner, was a man named Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918). It is important to note that most of these scholars were not Jewish but the influence of their research quickly spread to Jewish scholars and began influencing their scholarship as well. One Jewish philosopher and scholar who was deeply involved in this field was Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), who because of this extremely controversial approach to the Torah as well as his generally radical beliefs was excommunicated from the Jewish community. Through literary analysis, Wellhausen (and others like him) tried to decode the different layers which, according to him, make up the Biblical text. Doing some literary detective work, he tried through these layers to understand how the Torah came to be: in what circumstances the different parts were written and when it was finally put together. The approach he suggested is known as the **documentary hypothesis**.

Wellhausen talked about four major sources which make up the biblical text. According to him, these sources were written in four different periods by four different authors (or groups of authors) and were ultimately fused by an editor to compose the Bible we know today. One of the clues that aided Wellhausen was the fact that certain sections of the Torah seemed to use different names when referring to God. Moreover, different sections seemed to be distinguished from others by differing uses of language as well as differing thematic foci. Wellhausen defined these sources as Jehovah, Elohist, Deuteronomic, and Priestly, J,E,D,P for short.

According to the documentary hypothesis, the different sources are intertwined. One chapter may start off with ten verses of J, continue with two verses of E and conclude with five more verses of J.

Wellhausen was just one of the many scholars who advocated the documentary hypothesis. Since then countless scholars have adopted his approach, while adapting and changing it. The details of the approach are not crucial for us now; what is important to understand is its general orientation: that the Bible is composed of different sources which were written during different periods of time².

Now we return to the three approaches outlined above to examine how they relate to the documentary hypothesis. Those who fall into the first perspective (God wrote the Torah) completely reject the documentary hypothesis and explain any discrepencies away. For example they explain that the different names of God are used to present the different characteristics of God: Jehovah suggests one aspect of God and Elohim another. The different names are there on purpose; they prove the ingenuity of the text, and the importance of understanding the smallest nuances in every word. Those who fall into the second perspective (people wrote the Torah) support some form of the documentary hypothesis. They will often see the Tanach as a composite of different parts which are not intrinsically connected.

² A good introductory book on the subject is H.Hahn's "The Old Testament in Modern Research". See Also "Who Wrote the Bible?" by Richard Friedman.