

Who Wrote the Bible?

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Artistry Upon Artistry

The redactor, whom I identify as Ezra, has been the least appreciated of the contributors to the Five Books of Moses. Usually, more credit is given to the authors of the stories and the laws. That may be an error.

The redactor was as much an artist, in his own way, as the authors of J, E, P, and D were in theirs. His contribution was certainly as significant as theirs.

His task was not merely difficult, it was creative. It called for wisdom and literary sensitivity at each step, as well as a skill that is no less an art than storytelling.

In the end, he was the one who created the work that we have read all these years. He assembled the final form of the stories and laws that, in thousands of ways, have influenced millions.

Is that his influence? Or is it the influence of the authors of the sources? Or would it be better to speak of a literary partnership of all these contributors, a partnership that most of them never even knew would take place? How many ironies are contained in this partnership that was spread over centuries? How many new developments and ideas resulted from the combination of all their contributions?

In short, the question for the last chapter of this book is: is the Bible more than the sum of its parts?

[end of quote]

Pentateuch [First five books appearing in the Old Testament]:

Moses is the major figure through most of these books, and early Jewish and Christian tradition held that Moses himself wrote them, though nowhere in the Five Books of Moses themselves does the text say that he was the author.

[Deut. 31:9,24-26 describes Moses as writing a scroll of the torah - but no claim that the scroll included all five books. Only later did torah come to mean the Pentateuch]

But the tradition that one person, Moses, alone wrote these books presented problems. People observed contradictions in the text. It would report events in a particular order, and later it would say that those same events happened in a different order. It would say that there were two of something, and elsewhere it would say that there were fourteen of that same thing. It would say that the Moabites did something, and later it would say that it was the Midianites who did it. It would describe Moses as going to a Tabernacle in a chapter before Moses builds the Tabernacle.

People also noticed that the Five Books of Moses included things that Moses could not have known or was not likely to have said. The text, after all, gave an account of Moses' death. It also said that Moses was the humblest man on earth; and normally one would not expect the humblest man on earth to point out that he is the humblest man on earth. (17f.)

Objections largely met through various forms of explanation (including midrash). But in the medieval period, the objections began to be met with an acknowledgment that Moses may not have been the sole author:

In the eleventh century, Isaac ibn Yashush, a Jewish court physician of a ruler in Muslim Spain, pointed out that a list of Edomite kings that appears in Genesis 36 named kings who lived long after Moses was dead. Ibn Yashush suggested that the list was written by someone who lived after Moses. The response to his conclusion was that he was called "Isaac the blunderer." (19)

But the man who called him this, 12th century Spanish rabbi Ibn Ezra added

...several passages that appeared not to be from Moses' own hand: passages that referred to Moses in the third person, used terms that Moses would not have known, described places where Moses had never been, and used language that reflected another time and locale from those of Moses. (19)

Friedman suggests that Ibn Ezra recognized that these passages confirmed Ibn Yashush's claim - but advised silence.

The silence was broken in the 14th ct. by Bonfils in Damascus. Bonfils wrote

"And this is evidence that this verse was written in the Torah later, and Moses did not write it; rather one of the later prophets wrote it." Bonfils was not denying the revealed character of the text. He still thought that the passages in question were written by "one of the later prophets." He was only concluding that they were not written by Moses. Still, three and a half centuries later, his work was reprinted with the references to the subject deleted. (19)

[contrary to the old tradition that Joshua wrote the account of Moses' death] ...in the sixteenth century, Carlstadt, a contemporary of Luther, commented that the account of Moses' death is written in the same style as texts that precede it. This makes it difficult to claim that Joshua or anyone else merely added a few lines to an otherwise Mosaic manuscript.

In a second stage of the process, investigators suggested that Moses wrote the Five Books but that editors when over them later, adding an occasional word or phrase of their own. In the sixteenth century, Andreas van Maes, who was a Flemish Catholic, and two Jesuit scholars, Benedict Pereira and Jacques Bonfrere, thus pictured an original text from the hand of Moses upon which later writers expanded. Van Maes suggested that a later editor inserted phrases or changed the name of a place to its more current name so that readers would understand it better. Van Maes' book was placed on the Catholic Index of Prohibited Books. (19-20)

In the third stage of the investigation, investigators concluded outright that Moses did not write the majority of the Pentateuch.

Hobbes (17th ct.) - example: the use of the phrase "to this day," which is not a phrase used by someone describing a contemporary situation

Four years later, Isaac de la Peyrère (French Calvinist) - "across the Jordan" (Deut 1:1), which would place Moses in Israel, which otherwise contradicts the claim that Moses never entered Israel. (book was banned and burned; de la Peyrère was arrested, forced to become a Catholic.)

Roughly contemporary, Spinoza published a unified critical analysis demonstrating the problematic passages pervaded the text:

There were the third-person accounts of Moses, the statements that Moses was unlikely to have made (e.g., "humblest man on earth"), the report of Moses' death, the expression "to this day," the references to geographical locales by names that they acquired after Moses' lifetime, the treatment of matters that were subsequent to Moses (e.g., the list of Edomite kings), and various contradictions and problems in the text of the sort that earlier investigators had observed. He also noted that the text says in Deuteronomy 34, "There never arose another prophet in Israel like Moses...." Spinoza remarked that these sound like the words of someone who live a long time after Moses and had the opportunity to see other prophets and thus make the comparison. (They also do not sound like the words of the humblest man on earth.) Spinoza wrote, "It is...clearer than the sun at noon that the Pentateuch was not written by Moses, but by someone who lived long after Moses." Spinoza was excommunicated from Judaism. Now his work was condemned by Catholics and Protestants as well. His book was placed on the Catholic Index, within six years thirty-seven edicts were issued against it, and an attempt was made on his life. (20-21)

(Richard Simon, a Catholic priest who converted from Protestantism, wrote what he intended to be a critique of Spinoza, claimed that

the core of the Pentateuch (the laws) was Mosaic but that there were some additions. The additions, he said, were by scribes who collected, arranged, and elaborated upon the old texts. These scribes, according to Simon, were prophets, guided by the divine spirit, and so he regarded his work as a defense of the sanctity of the biblical text. (21)

- but his contemporaries were not ready - he was attacked by Catholic clergy, expelled from his order, and his books were placed on the Index. Protestants wrote 40 refutations of his work. 1294 copies of his book were burned - 6 survived. An English translation landed the translator in the tower. (21)

Eighteenth ct. - in response to doublets:

A doublet is a case of the same story being told twice. Even in translation it is easy to observe that biblical stories often appear with variations of detail in two different places in the bible. There are two different stories of the creation of the world. There are two stories of the covenant between God and the patriarch Abraham, two stories of the naming of Abraham's son Isaac, two stories of Abraham's claiming to a foreign king that his wife Sarah is his sister, two stories of Isaac's son Jacob making a journey to Mesopotamia, two stories of a revelation to Jacob at Beth-el, two stories of God's changing Jacob's name to Israel, two stories of Moses' getting water from a rock at a place called Meribah, and more. (22)

- three independent investigators (H. B. Witter, a German minister; Jean Astruc, a French medical doctor, and J. G. Eichhorn, a German professor) arrived at the same conclusion: two different sources for these stories, from writers who lived after Moses. (23)

The sources:

J -- Yahweh/Jehovah as the name of God

E -- Elohim as the name of God

P -- the largest: includes most of the legal sections, priestly matters

D -- only found in the book of Deuteronomy

opposition to the Documentary hypothesis in the 19th ct. - but in the 20th ct., major turning point with the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, Pope Pius XII, 1943, "the Magna Carta for biblical progress."

The Pope encouraged scholars to pursue knowledge about the biblical writers, for those writers were "the living and reasonable instrument of the Holy Spirit..." He concluded:

Let the interpreter then, with all care and without neglecting any light derived from recent research endeavor to determine the peculiar character and circumstances of the sacred writer, the age in which he lived, the sources written or oral to which he had recourse and the forms of expression he employed. (27)

Eventually accepted by Protestant and Jewish scholars as well. In the current generation of Biblical scholars, the Documentary Hypothesis "continues to be the starting point of research, no serious student of the Bible can fail to study it, and no other explanation of the evidence has come close to challenging it." (28)

It is, in my terms, the equivalent of quantum mechanics in physics.

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The World that Produced the Bible: 1200-722 B.C.E.

little historical information about the patriarchs, their experiences as slaves in Egypt, the wandering in the Sinai. Evidence for accurate picture of life of biblical only from about 12th ct. B.C.E., as the Israelites become established in this region.

Tribal - thirteen, "with considerable differences in size and population from the smallest to the largest. Twelve of the tribes each had a distinct geographical territory. The thirteenth, the tribe of Levi, was identified as a priestly group. Its members lived in cities in the other tribes' territories. Each tribe had its own chosen leaders."

Judges, priests: judges both heard disputes and provided military leadership. Priests served at religious ceremonies - first of all, sacrifices (receiving a portion of the sacrificed animal, produce).

Prophets - from any occupation: Ezekiel was a priest; Amos was a cowboy. "The word in Hebrew for prophet is nabi, which is understood to mean 'called.'" (36)

Who is Richard Elliott Friedman?

"Friedman, one of our brightest young biblical scholars, adroitly combines the history of scholarship with an autobiographical account of his own search and findings. A fascinating and brilliant book, full of new insights and fresh discoveries. Reads like a detective story." -- Frank Moore Cross, Hancock Professor of Hebrew and Other Oriental Languages, Harvard University

"Achieves that rare combination of serious scholarship and an eminently readable, even racy style. The finest book of its kind that I have read in years." -- David Noel Freedman, Arthur F. Thurnau Professor of Biblical Studies, University of Michigan, and Editor, Anchor Bible Series

"A new paradigm for understanding the composition of the Bible. Novel, stimulating, a breath of fresh air, and a desideratum for Hebrew Bible research." -- Abraham Malamat, Professor of the Bible, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

"Fascinating, full of suspense and surprises, a well written detective story," -- Richard J. Clifford, S. J., Dean and Professor of Old Testament, Weston School of Theology

"I ran through the manuscript in the space of a day, much as one might pick compulsively at a box of chocolates. It was simply too provocative to put down. Has the potential of being highly influential inside the field and among an informed public." -- Baruch Halpern, Professor of Bible, York University, Toronto

"Not just another book about the Bible. One is amazed how much new data and how many intriguing ideas emerge from this newly published research." -- Yigal Shiloh, Professor of Biblical Archeology, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

"Conveys a freshness and excitement of discovery that the old discipline has lacked for many decades. I find Friedman's account especially sympathetic, as will any other Bible reader who has ever stopped to wonder just whose text they are reading." -- Alan Cooper, Professor of Bible, Hebrew Union College