

Authorship and Composition of the Torah

I. Introduction: What is the difference between authorship and composition?

The question of *authorship* is a question about *who* wrote the text. The question of *compositions* is a question about *how* the text was written. We will first examine the traditional view of who wrote the Torah, then explore a few things that faithful readers of the text have noticed which create problems for the traditional view. Then we will examine what contemporary scholars are saying about how the text came to be in the form that we now have.

II. Authorship

A. The Traditional View

The Torah is often called the “Law of Moses” and readers readily assume that its author was Moses. The designation “Law of Moses”, however, does not necessarily imply this view. The main human character in the Torah is Moses, and the Covenant at Sinai/Horeb is given through him. The phrase *of Moses* can be taken as a reference to this role.

Still it *is* the case that Moses was assumed to be the author by many in ancient Israel and in the early Christian communities. Jesus’ challengers assumed this (Mark 12:19; Luke 20:28). The authors of the gospels clearly present Jesus as believing that Moses gave certain commandments which are now included in the Torah, though they do not claim that Jesus believed Moses wrote the entire Torah (see Matthew 8:4, for example).

B. Difficulties with the Traditional View

Even a superficial reading of the Torah calls the traditional view of its authorship into question. Here are several things that have caused committed Christians and Jews to think that someone other than Moses may have written these books.

1. **The Torah does not claim to be written by Moses.** There is no statement in the Torah that claims that Moses wrote the entire five-book collection. There are statements in Deuteronomy which claim

that Moses wrote some specific things included there, but not that he wrote the whole book. For example, in Deuteronomy 31:23 we find “That very day Moses wrote *this song* and taught it to the Israelites,” and in 31:24–25 we read, “When Moses had finished writing down in a book the words of *this law* to the very end, Moses commanded the Levites....”

Readers who take the text seriously and read the entire context often consider it clear that *this song* and *this law* in these examples are references to specific things being discussed in the book of Deuteronomy, not references to Deuteronomy as a whole or the Torah as a whole.

2. Throughout the narrative **Moses is referred to in the third person**, not the first person (*Moses said*, not *I said*; *Moses went*, not *I went*). In **Deuteronomy 1:5**, for example, a speech of Moses is introduced with the phrase, “these are *his* words,” not “these are *my* words.”

Examine the text for yourself

Read the story of Moses’ birth in Exodus 2:1–10 and notice the third person references to Moses. Which seems most reasonable to you, to see this story as written by Moses himself, or by a later person writing about Moses?

3. There are **statements which it seems very unlikely that Moses could make about himself**, such as “Now the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the Earth” (**Numbers 12:3**). Could this statement be true if Moses himself wrote it?

4. Phrases such as “**until this day**” or “**to this day**” are used many times, suggesting that the author was writing well after the time of the events being described—in many case well after the time of Moses. **Deuteronomy 3:14**, for example, says, “Jair the Manassite acquired the whole region of Argob as far as the border of the Geshurites and the Maacathites, and he named them . . . after himself, Havvoth-jair, *as it is to this day*.” And the story of Moses’ burial says, “He [Moses] was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no

one knows his burial place *to this day*” (**Deuteronomy 34:6**). Such statements imply that *this day*—the day of writing—is not the day of Moses.

5. This last example raises another issue which has caused many committed Jews and Christians to question whether Moses could have written the Torah: **the Torah narrates the story of Moses’ death (Deuteronomy 34:5–12)**. This account also gives a summary of his importance that seems to have been written at a later time looking back on Moses’ life. Although it is sometimes claimed that this material is a postscript by a later author added onto a Torah written by Moses, the supposed postscript is written in the same style as the rest of Deuteronomy. This unity of language and style causes many readers to believe that the same person who wrote the story of Moses’ death also wrote most, if not all, of the rest of the book of Deuteronomy.

<p>This unity of language and style is noticeable in the Hebrew text. English translations usually smooth over stylistic variations, so the uniformity of style in the English text is irrelevant.</p>
--

6. Like the phrase “to this day,” comments with the phrase “**at that time**” sometimes reflect a time of writing later than Moses. In **Genesis 12:6** and **13:7** for example, we find the comment, “**at that time the Canaanites were in the Land.**” Take a moment to reflect carefully on the wording of this statement as it appears in Genesis 12:6.

Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land.
“At *that time* [the time of Abram] the Canaanites *were* [past tense] in the land.” This wording assumes that the Canaanites are no longer present when the text is being written. Since the Canaanites were in the land throughout the lifetime of Moses, many readers conclude that the text was written after he died.

7. **Deuteronomy 2:12** refers even more clearly to Israel's conquest of Canaan as a *past* event:

Moreover, the Horim had formerly inhabited Seir, but the descendants of Esau dispossessed them, destroying them and settling in their place, as Israel *has done* in the land that the LORD *gave* them as a possession.

This text is written from the perspective of a person who has seen the fulfillment of God's promise of a land to Israel. The Torah states clearly that Moses died before that fulfillment (Numbers 20:12 and 27:12–13; Deuteronomy 34:1–5).

8. **Genesis 36:31–39** reflects an even later time of writing. It gives a list of “the kings who reigned in the land of Edom, **before any king reigned over the Israelites.**” This statement reflects the perspective of a writer living after Israel has already had its first king. If the author were writing before this point, the phrase “before any king reigned over the Israelites” would have made no sense to the first readers of the text. Israel's first king came to power around 1020 BCE, long after Moses died.

9. The Torah cites “**the Book of the Wars of Yahweh**” (Numbers 21:14–15) as a book already in existence. Is it reasonable to think that such a book had already been written at the time of Moses? No discussion of wars of Yahweh before the time of Moses is included in the Bible, though some limited military conflicts (such as those of Abraham) are mentioned.

10. The **geographical perspective** of the narrative also often reflects a time after Moses' death. The author frequently refers to locations on the *eastern* side of the Jordan River as lying ***beyond the Jordan***. (See for example **Genesis 50:10**, **Numbers 34:14** and **35:14**.) During Moses' lifetime it is the territories to the *west* of the Jordan that would have been ***beyond the Jordan*** since Moses (according to the Torah itself) never entered the land to the west of the Jordan. (He is said to

have entered the southernmost region of Canaan—the *Negeb* or *Negev*—but that is southwest of the Dead Sea, not west of the Jordan.)

C. A Critical View of Moses' Involvement in the Origins of the Torah

Even if we conclude that Moses did not write the Torah as we now have it, it is still reasonable to assume that a core of legal material did originate with him, but that this core, perhaps transmitted at least partially in oral form, was expanded over time by other authors. The most widely held view of the authorship of the Torah sees four separate documents or strands of tradition serving as sources for the Torah's final editor. Admitting this possibility does not in any way undermine the value or authority of the text.

III. The Documentary Hypothesis

(Graf-Wellhausen Hypothesis; J,E,D,P Theory)

Students who spend a great deal of time with the Torah, reading it carefully, often notice places that seem to be retellings of a story already narrated earlier in the text. They also notice rather sharp shifts in style (especially if reading the Hebrew text or a translation which reflects its shifts in tone). These are part of the evidence cited by scholars who have proposed that the present text was composed by combining elements from several earlier documents or strands of oral tradition.

Because the original version of this theory considered the sources to be written documents, the theory is often called the *Documentary Hypothesis*. The same theory is sometimes called the *Graf-Wellhausen Hypothesis* after two German scholars who helped popularize this way of viewing the origins of the Torah. Students often call the theory the *JEDP Theory*, since the letters J, E, D, and P are used as abbreviations for the four documents or strands of oral tradition generally assumed to be the sources behind the Torah.

The table below lists the sources in the chronological order assigned to them in the classic form of the Documentary Hypothesis and gives some very basic information about each one.

<p>J (Yahwist) Graf and Wellhausen wrote in German, where “Yahwist” is spelled with a <i>J</i>.</p>	<p>The Yahwist source is thought to have been written at the time of Solomon or shortly thereafter (c. 950 BCE) in Judah. The author typically uses the name <i>Yahweh</i> for God and calls the mountain at which the Mosaic Covenant was established <i>Sinai</i>. J sets many of the ancestral stories in the region occupied by Judah (the southern region). It calls the residents of Canaan “Canaanites.”</p>
<p>E (Elohist)</p>	<p>The Elohist source was composed about a century after J (c. 850 BCE) in the Northern Kingdom. The author typically calls God <i>Elohim</i> and calls the mountain at which the Mosaic Covenant was established <i>Horeb</i>. E shows a preference for settings in the north, especially in the territory of Ephraim, the largest of the northern tribes. It calls the residents of Canaan “Amorites” (Westerners).</p>
<p>D (Deuteronomist)</p>	<p>The Deuteronomist source was composed at the time of Hezekiah (but before 621 BCE). Much of this material (at least Deuteronomy 12—28) appears to have been found during renovations of the temple in 621 BCE (see 2 Kings 22:3—23:25). The D source is best represented in Deuteronomy, and perhaps not at all in Genesis. It is closely related to Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings.</p>

P (Priestly)	The Priestly source is usually thought to have been composed by priests living during and after the exile to Babylon (c. 587—400 BCE). These priests faced the challenge of preserving a large body of legal material related to proper worship. Since the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed, it was necessary to preserve in written form what could have been passed on orally in that earlier context. In putting this material in written form, they undoubtedly adapted it to the needs of the community living after the destruction of the old temple, and later to those of the community that rebuilt the temple after the exile.
---------------------	--

While the documentary hypothesis is still the dominant view, scholars speak increasingly of *strands of oral tradition* rather than written sources as the components that were incorporated into the final version of the Torah.

Whether we think of the sources as documents or modify the theory to speak of strands of oral tradition, the Documentary Hypothesis suggests a particular sequence in which the sources were combined. According to this view, when the northern nation (Israel) was destroyed by the Assyrians (**721 BCE**) many Israelite refugees fled south to Judah. They brought with them the E narrative. The E material was later combined with the J narrative already known in the south. In this combined form the J narrative is clearly dominant. Many recent scholars still accept this basic idea, but do not think that J and E were both written documents before this time. Some see E (and perhaps J as well) as oral tradition put into writing only after the two stories were combined into what is sometimes called the **JE Epic**.

The editor of these two traditions sometimes found that the same story appeared to be represented in both J and E. In such cases the editor seems to have held both traditions to be worthy of highest respect, and did not eliminate either. For this reason the present Torah contains multiple renditions of some stories.

The documentary hypothesis proposes that the writers of the P source were also the ones who wove the four sources together to form the Torah as we now have it. Combining the “book of the law” (from the D source) with the JE narrative

and including the priestly material, they were able to produce a relatively unified document out of diverse traditions, thereby preserving sacred traditions from both Israel and Judah for the later community that would rebuild after the exile. In the process they also guided and reshaped the religious orientation of that community, moving it in a direction that they saw as more faithful to the true nature and will of Israel's God.

IV. What does all this mean for people of faith?

Students sometimes respond defensively to the Documentary Hypothesis. Some see it as a threat to the validity of the Torah as a foundational document for the faith community. While this response is easy to understand, it is not necessary. The Documentary Hypothesis is widely taught and accepted at the most respected Christian and Jewish seminaries around the world. It is not generally seen as a threat to authentic faith.

Many proponents of the Documentary Hypothesis assume that the people who composed the four main sources were people of profound faith. They were not engaged in writing entertaining fiction, but in passing on to the generations after them the story of their relationship to God. And those who combined the traditions into a single narrative did so in order to allow the ancient traditions to find a hearing in the radically new situation after the exile as well as to guide their people in building a more faithful nation than the one that existed before.

Just as some students find the Documentary Hypothesis threatening, others find in it a renewed source of excitement about the text. The text comes to be viewed as a living document that sprung from the real-world experience of the community of faith. In the history of its composition the Torah reflects the struggles of a nation growing in its knowledge and experience of God.

Accepting the Documentary Hypothesis or something like it to be an accurate view of the text's origins does not need to do violence to the text's authority for the community of faith. It may, in fact, allow the contemporary community to move a little closer to understanding the mystery of the text's power.

For further thought

What does the Documentary Hypothesis do for *your* view of the significance of the Torah?

What is contributed, in your view, by the traditional assumption that Moses wrote the Torah? Did people in the ancient world (especially Jews and Christians) gain anything significant by attributing these works to Moses?
If you find the Documentary Hypothesis troubling, can you express clearly and in a non-polemical fashion *why* it seems troubling?
Do you see any positive benefit of accepting some version of the Documentary Hypothesis? If so, what is that benefit?

How to cite this document in your research paper

If you use any part of this document in a research paper, you should include the following information in your citation:

Author: Micheal W. Palmer

Title: Authorship and Composition of the Torah

Date of this copy: September 11, 2003

Location on the internet:

<http://greek-language.com/bible/palmer/05torahauthorship.pdf>