

THE DOCUMENTARY HYPOTHESIS

SOURCE THEORY

Biblical scholars speak of four primary sources for the Pentateuch's stories and traditions. The sources reflect four different schools of thought or traditions about Israel's relationship with God that sprang from different areas and periods in time. Knowing each of these four sources contributed to the final form of the Pentateuch can help us understand that the Pentateuch books are not simply records of events as they occurred, but rather faith accounts about the Israelites' growing relationship with God and told from different perspectives. The four sources are the Yahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomist, and the Priestly.

SUMMARY CHART OF THE FOUR SOURCES

Sources	Date	Place	Divine Name	Religious Features	Literary Features
Yahwist	United Monarchy (~950 BCE)	Jerusalem?	Uses Yahweh throughout the Pentateuch	Sacrifice is not limited to one single place nor is the priesthood limited to one family. Heads of household can make sacrifices.	Lively narrative and anthropomorphic view of God.
Elohist	Divided Monarchy (~850 BCE)	Northern Kingdom (Israel)	<i>Elohim</i> used exclusively until the divine name is introduced in Exodus.	Sacrifice is not limited to one single place nor is the priesthood limited to one family. Heads of household can make sacrifices.	Lively narrative and anthropomorphic view of God.
Deuteronomist	Reign of Josiah (~625 BCE)	Southern Kingdom (Judah)	Not applicable	Only the Levites can make sacrifices in the one place God chooses.	Sermonic, with characteristic phrases.
Priestly	End of the Exile (~500 BCE)	Babylon and/or Jerusalem	<i>Elohim</i> used exclusively until the divine name is introduced in Exodus.	Only the offspring of Aaron can make sacrifices. A single place of sacrifice is presumed.	Preserves traditions, such as genealogies, precise locations, ages, and so on. Regal view of God.

THE YAHWIST TRADITION (J) (circa 950–921 B.C.E.)

The Yahwist used Yahweh as God's name. Has a vivid concrete style. This writer focused on the southern kingdom, Judah, used lots of stories, emphasized God's closeness to humanity, and portrayed God acting as a human person who walks and talks. It is the oldest of the traditions. Responsible for the second creation story.

The Yahwist source originated in the southern kingdom (Judah), perhaps as early as the reigns of King Solomon or even King David. It is the earliest source, dating back to the tenth century BCE. Its theology is focused on God's promises for salvation and the importance of cultic worship.

The textual tradition known as the Yahwist (J) was so named by academics because of its consistent and unequivocal use of the god of Israel's name, Yahweh. Even though the divine name appears approximately 1,800 times in the Pentateuch alone, the other Pentateuchal sources (Elohist, Deuteronomist, and Priestly) restrain from using it prior to its revelation to Moses in Exodus: at 3:14-15 in the Elohist tradition and at 6:2-8 in the Priestly tradition. Only the Yahwist text, in other words, affirms and acknowledges—in contradiction to the claims of the later Priestly source—that the name Yahweh was known to and frequently invoked by the patriarchs prior to its revelation. According to this tradition, it was known right from the first generation of mortals (Gen 4:26).

The Yahwist text itself is most likely a compilation of stories, traditions, and archival material that was shaped into a continuous narrative by a southern Judean scribe or scribes. It is difficult to say when these traditions and stories were shaped into the larger narrative we call the Yahwist, but it could not have been earlier than the 8th century BCE. Many of the Yahwist's stories display knowledge of the geopolitical world as it was in the 9th-8th centuries BCE. The final form of the Yahwist text was probably fixed sometime in the 7th century BCE and continued to be revised into the exilic and post-exilic periods (6th-5th centuries BCE).

Characteristics:

- God is referred to as Yahweh (translated as LORD [small caps] in English).
- The holy mountain is called Sinai.
- God is anthropomorphized—that is, he is given human characteristics and feelings. (He walks in the garden and talks with Adam.)
- The natives of Palestine are called Canaanites.
- Some examples are the story of Adam and Eve (see Genesis 2:4–25) and the account of the Ten Plagues (see Exodus 7:14–10:29).

THE ELOHIST TRADITION (E) (circa 870–840 B.C.E.)

The Elohist referred to God as Elohim or Lord. It has a more abstract and elevated view of God. The Elohist wrote about the northern kingdom, Israel, and was concerned about idolatry and morality. The writings of the Elohist present God's presence as mediated, such as through a burning bush. The Elohist begins the story of Abraham.

The Elohist source developed in the northern kingdom (Israel). It is thought to have developed a little later than the J source, in the ninth century BCE. Its theology focuses less on Temple worship (that happened in the southern kingdom) and more on morality and Israel's proper response to God: faith and fear of the Lord. Some think that the Elohist tradition reworked the Yahwist writing, altering the perspective from J's pro-monarchy perspective to a more pro-covenant perspective.

The Elohist source (E) clearly orients itself around the traditions, cultic sites, and patriarchs of the northern kingdom, and is thus accredited with the north as its place of composition. E's date of composition has variously been assigned to the 9th century BC reign of Jeroboam, as a counter narrative to the pro-Solomonic Judean narrative of J, to any time prior to the northern kingdom's fall in 722 BCE.

It is the shortest in length of the Pentateuchal sources making its first appearance midway through the book of Genesis (20:1)—presenting itself as a doublet to J—and extending itself into the book of Exodus where it has its strongest showing. Both in the book of Genesis and in the book of Exodus, E is often presented as narrating the same story as J, however, with contrasting narrative details and theological emphases to those of J. These differences might be accounted for by similar traditions being absorbed and modified in different geographical and political contexts, and the varying historical circumstances of its audiences. Or, as a growing number of recent scholars contend, E was added to J in a manner to supplement the J narrative, in an attempt to reinterpret and moralize the J narrative, especially with respect to J's characterization of Jacob as a trickster and usurper. Of course, there are passages where E does not double J at all. These include E's stories about the origins of northern cultic centers such as Bethel and Shechem, E's plague and Passover narratives, which will receive contradictory interpretive insertions by the later Priestly writer, and E's covenant ceremony and the giving of the law at mount Horeb—although here the Yahwist tradition does record a variant and contradictory covenant ceremony, but at Sinai and with a completely different set of Ten Commandments! Contrary to the Yahwist, the climatic event in the narrative of the Elohist is the Moses story. In fact, the Elohist's primary hero is Moses, and this may account for the fact that the Elohist was most likely written by Levites or at least scribes sympathetic to Levite concerns. This is brought out in episodes like the golden calf narrative.

The north had particular cultic practices that, although strongly condemned by the southern writers, particularly the Deuteronomist, were most likely more ancient than the Yahweh-centered cult at Jerusalem in the late 8th century BCE. In the north, Yahweh was strongly identified with El and his cultic symbol, the bull. Additionally, a number of E texts speak of El and/or Yahweh at Shechem, Beth-El, or with Jacob in general. In all likelihood the body of literature known as the Elohist is rather a collection of traditions from the north which had a preference for non-anthropomorphic depictions of God, prophecy and divine revelation, and a penchant for moralizing tales. Additional features of the Elohist include its emphasis on the figures Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Joshua, on prophetic traditions of the north and prophecy in general, on divine providence and dreams as the mode of divine communication, and moral propriety often portrayed through the fear-of-god motive.

Characteristics:

- It emphasizes prophecy.
- God is referred to as Elohim ("Lord God" in English translation).
- The holy mountain is Horeb.

- The natives of Palestine are called Amorites.
- God speaks in dreams.
- Some examples are the sacrifice of Isaac (see Genesis 22) and the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 20:1–17).

THE DEUTERONOMIST TRADITION (D) (620–520 B.C.E.)

The Deuteronomist emerged toward the end of the monarchy (the time of the Israelite kings), when the covenant law seemed to have been forgotten. The Deuteronomist reflects the style and attitudes of Josiah's reforms (about 621). It emphasized the law as the foundation of the kingdom of Judah and expresses the idea of one central sanctuary.

The Deuteronomist source is the clearest independent source. The author is responsible for most if not all of the Book of Deuteronomy and most likely the historical books of Joshua through Second Kings (not including Ruth). This collection of books, Deuteronomy through Second Kings, is called the Deuteronomistic history and was most likely written in the seventh and sixth centuries BC. But the person(s) responsible for creating this collection remains a mystery (although the Book of Deuteronomy is often associated with the book found by King Josiah around 622 BC [see 2 Kings, chapter 22]). The Deuteronomist theology teaches that all the bad things that happened to the Israelites were God's punishment for the grave sins of the leaders and the people.

Characteristics:

- The book of Deuteronomy is a retelling of the stories of Exodus through Numbers (Deuteronomy means "second law").
- Deuteronomy interprets Israel's history as a cycle of God's forgiveness and renewal of the Covenant, followed by the people's failure to live the Covenant, followed by the bad things that happen to them as punishment.
- It emphasizes the Israelites' covenantal obligation.
- The holy mountain is Horeb.
- It emphasizes law and morals.
- An example is the Book of Deuteronomy.

THE PRIESTLY TRADITION (P) (550–520 B.C.E.)

The Priestly writer emphasized religious rituals and the role of the priesthood. It lists genealogies. This writer portrayed God as more distant and used a more formal style. This source was written after the destruction of the temple and the Babylonian exile. Responsible for the first creation story.

The priestly source is thought to have developed during and after the Exile (587–538 BCE), thus it dates around the sixth century BCE. Some think it never existed as an independent source but is the work of the final person or group revising and adding to the JED sources after they had been joined (see below). The theology of this source is that the Jewish people's religious identity is found in proper worship and special laws that set them apart from other people. It represents the priestly class's rejecting the idea of religious identity being found in a divinely appointed king (an approach which had failed them). Rather, this source focused on cult and ritual.

The Priestly literature, which most likely once existed as an individual scroll, now makes up the largest portion of the Pentateuch and is by far the most represented of the four Pentateuchal sources. It is the Priestly source that provides the main voice and interpretive framework for the first four books of the Torah. Its creation account not only opens the book of Genesis, but its formulaic inserts of genealogies, dates, land settlements, and marriage records provide a chronological framework to the JE material throughout Genesis and into the book of Exodus. It is in Exodus, however, that we first encounter large blocks of Priestly material. Exodus chapters 25-31 and 35-40 are entirely from the Priestly writer. All of the book of Leviticus is likewise from the Priestly pen,¹ and approximately 75% of the book of Numbers as well. In fact, excluding Exodus 32-34, which is a compilation of JE material, the literature spanning Exodus 25:1 to Numbers 10:28, including the entire book of Leviticus, is all from P. In other words, a total of 50 consecutive chapters of Priestly material now occupy the central position of the Pentateuch, and the following texts make up an additional 70% of Priestly material. Excluding the book of Deuteronomy which was amended to the PJE text at a later period, the Priestly source makes up 55% of the first four books of the Pentateuch!

Characteristics:

- emphasis on Temple cult and worship
- emphasis on the southern kingdom of Judah (because that is the location of Jerusalem and the Temple where cultic worship occurs)

- emphasis on the role of the Levites, the priestly class or tribe
- emphasis on genealogies and tribal lists, which established the different groups in Israelite society, including the priestly class
- emphasis on order and the majesty of God and creation
- examples: first Creation story (see Genesis 1:1—2:4), the Book of Leviticus

HOW THE SOURCES WERE COMBINED

Here is the most commonly accepted understanding of how these four sources were combined into the five books of the Pentateuch we have today:

1. During the relatively stable years of King David and King Solomon (1000–922 BCE), scribes in the royal court and Temple (the two were intimately connected) began to capture the Israelites' oral histories and religious stories in writing, the beginning of the J source.
2. After the brief civil war following Solomon's death (922 BCE), there were two kingdoms. Judah (the southern kingdom) kept or continued the written tradition (J), and the northern kingdom developed an alternative written tradition (E).
3. After the northern kingdom was conquered and destroyed by the Assyrians (721 BCE), Israelite refugees fled to Jerusalem, bringing their written tradition (E) with them. Seeking to capture the truths of both the J and E sources, a new tradition was created by combining the two. Appropriately, this theoretical source is called the JE source.
4. At some point, another written tradition was created—essentially the Book of Deuteronomy and perhaps also Joshua and Samuel. This source implied that the bad things happening to the Israelites were God's punishment for their failure to be faithful to the Covenant. This source was lost, but was found by King Josiah during his renovation of the Temple (622 BCE). This tradition was expanded to become the Books of Deuteronomy through Second Kings.
5. After the southern kingdom was conquered by the Babylonians (587 BCE), many of the Israelite religious leaders were taken to Babylon in captivity. While in Exile (and perhaps after their return from Exile), they began to rewrite their history to emphasize that their religious identity—their right relationship with God—should be found through proper worship and a strict code of law. They did this by revising and adding to the JE source to create the Books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. They added these books to the Deuteronomistic collection (Deuteronomy through Second Kings) and the writings of the prophets to form the first canon of the Hebrew Scriptures.