

Composition of the Torah Summary

The document discusses the composition, authorship, and dating of the Torah, exploring various scholarly hypotheses and archaeological evidence related to its origins and development.

Composition and Authorship of the Torah

The Torah, comprising the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, is believed to have been written by multiple authors over an extended period, challenging the traditional view of Mosaic authorship. Modern scholarship suggests various hypotheses regarding its composition, including fragmentary, supplementary, and documentary theories.

- Jewish tradition attributes the Torah to Moses in the 2nd millennium BCE, but this is largely rejected by modern scholars.
- The composition process is debated, with theories including the fragmentary hypothesis (Rolf Rendtorff), supplementary hypothesis (John Van Seters), and revised documentary hypothesis (Richard Elliott Friedman, Joel S. Baden).
- The final form of the Torah is thought to have been completed during the Persian period (539–333 BCE).

Manuscripts and Archaeological Evidence

Archaeological findings, including early manuscript fragments and non-biblical references, provide insights into the dating of the Torah. These findings suggest that the Torah was likely composed in its final form by around 250 BCE.

- The earliest manuscript fragments of the Pentateuch date to the late 3rd or early 2nd centuries BCE.
- The Letter of Aristeas indicates the Torah was translated into Greek in Alexandria under Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285–247 BCE).
- Diodorus Siculus's reference to Jewish law may suggest a composition date before 315 BCE, though attribution to Hecataeus is debated.

Evidence from the Elephantine Papyri

The Elephantine papyri provide evidence of a Jewish colony in Egypt around 400 BCE that lacked knowledge of a written Torah, suggesting the Torah's later establishment.

- The papyri document a polytheistic Jewish community with no reference to the Torah or its narratives.
- A small Jewish temple at Elephantine existed as late as 411 BCE, contradicting Deuteronomic law.
- Some scholars argue that the absence of the Torah in these documents indicates it was likely written in the Hellenistic period (3rd or 4th centuries BCE).

Ketef Hinnom Scrolls Findings

The discovery of the Ketef Hinnom scrolls, containing a variation of the Priestly Blessing, provides evidence of early religious practices but does not confirm the early composition of the entire Pentateuch.

- The scrolls were dated to the late 7th or early 6th century BCE, at the end of the First Temple period.
- They do not reference a written Torah, indicating reliance on earlier oral traditions.

Linguistic Dating of the Pentateuch

Scholars have attempted to date the Pentateuch based on the form of Hebrew used, distinguishing between Classical and Late Biblical Hebrew.

- Classical Hebrew is associated with the pre-Babylonian captivity period (before 597 BCE), while Late Biblical Hebrew is linked to the exilic and post-exilic periods.
- Disagreements exist regarding the classification of various Hebrew strata, with some scholars arguing for an earlier dating of the Priestly source.

Historiographical Approaches to Dating

Many scholars date the Pentateuchal sources by comparing their theological perspectives to historical events in Israelite religion.

- The Deuteronomist source is often linked to King Josiah's reforms in the late 7th century BCE.
- The Priestly source is associated with Ezra's return from exile in 458 BCE, suggesting a 5th-century dating.
- Critics argue that dating based on uncertain historical events is speculative and lacks archaeological support.

Arguments for a Persian Origin of the Torah

The prevailing view among scholars is that the Torah was finalized during the Persian period, influenced by the Achaemenid Empire's policies.

- Philip Davies argues that the Persian Empire's establishment of national law codes likely facilitated the Torah's publication.
- Late Persian period (450–350 BCE) is considered the most likely timeframe for the Torah's final redaction.

Possibility of a Hellenistic Origin

Some scholars propose that the Torah may have been composed during the Hellenistic period, influenced by Greek historical texts.

- Russell Gmirkin argues that the Pentateuch relies on the works of Berossus and Manetho, suggesting a composition date after 278 BCE.
- Gmirkin posits that the Torah was likely written at the Library of Alexandria around 273–272 BCE.

Overview of the Major Sources in the Torah

The Torah is composed of multiple sources, with the Priestly (P), Deuteronomist (D), and Yahwist (J) being the most recognized.

- The Priestly source is characterized by its focus on ritual law and priestly matters, often seen as a later redaction.
- The Deuteronomist source emphasizes a covenant between Yahweh and Israel, likely composed during the late monarchic period.
- The Yahwist source, often viewed as a historian of Israelite origins, is associated with narratives from the Babylonian exile.

Criticism of the Yahwist Source

The existence of the Yahwist source is debated, with some scholars denying its distinct identity.

- Some argue that Genesis was originally composed separately from Exodus and Numbers, later combined by a Priestly redactor.
- Despite criticism, many scholars still defend the integrity of the Yahwist material within the Pentateuch.

Historical Development of Biblical Criticism

The study of the Hebrew Bible has evolved significantly since the 18th century, with scholars proposing various hypotheses regarding its composition. Key developments include the documentary hypothesis, which identifies multiple sources within the Torah, and subsequent challenges to this model in the late 20th century.

- In the mid-18th century, scholars began critical studies of the Torah, focusing on doublets, inconsistencies, and stylistic changes.
- Johann Eichhorn proposed the "older documentary hypothesis" in 1780, identifying two sources: the Jehovist (J) and the Elohist (E).
- Wilhelm de Wette later identified the Deuteronomist (D) as a third source, and the Elohist was split into Elohist and Priestly (P), increasing the count to four sources.
- Competing models included the fragmentary hypothesis, which suggested the Torah was composed of independent fragments, and the supplementary hypothesis, which posited a core document supplemented by various sources.

Wellhausen's Influence on Documentary Hypothesis

Julius Wellhausen's work in the late 19th century solidified the documentary hypothesis as the dominant theory regarding the Torah's origins. His analysis categorized the sources chronologically and linked them to the religious history of Israel.

- Wellhausen published "Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels" in 1883, building on earlier scholarship.
- He accepted Hupfeld's four sources and placed the Priestly source last, dating J to the 10th century BCE and P to the 6th century BCE.
- Wellhausen's framework described the evolution of Israel's religious history, with J and E representing a primitive stage, D reflecting prophetic influence, and P representing a ritualistic post-exilic period.
- His work established the "new documentary hypothesis" as the prevailing explanation for the Pentateuch's origins until the late 20th century.

Decline of the Documentary Hypothesis Consensus

The consensus around the documentary hypothesis began to collapse in the late 20th century due to critical publications that challenged its foundational assumptions. Scholars proposed alternative models, leading to a more nuanced understanding of the Torah's composition.

- Key publications in the 1970s by John Van Seters, Hans Heinrich Schmid, and Rolf Rendtorff questioned the dating and existence of the Yahwist and Elohist sources.
- Van Seters argued for a later dating of the Yahwist source to the Babylonian captivity period, while Schmid criticized the substantiality of the Elohist source.
- Some scholars adopted a fragmentary hypothesis, viewing the Pentateuch as a compilation of independent narratives, while others supported a supplementary hypothesis with two major additions.
- The majority of contemporary scholars recognize Deuteronomy as a source from the 7th century BCE, with a final compilation likely completed during the Persian period.

Contemporary Models of Torah Composition

Current scholarship on the composition of the Torah includes various models that reflect a blend of earlier hypotheses, emphasizing the complexity of its origins. These models highlight the literary and ideological unity of the final text.

- The documentary hypothesis suggests a small number of continuous documents combined to form the final text, explaining both unity and diversity.
- The supplementary hypothesis posits that the Torah was produced by successive additions to a core text, with editors acting as authors.
- The fragmentary hypothesis views the Torah as a compilation of numerous short, independent narratives, with a focus on form criticism.
- A neo-documentary hypothesis has emerged, distinguishing sources by plot and continuity rather than stylistic concerns, although it faces criticism for its revival of the Elohist source.

Summary of the Supplementary Hypothesis

The modern supplementary hypothesis emerged in the 1970s, proposing a different understanding of the sources within the Pentateuch. It emphasizes the role of the Deuteronomist as the earliest author and challenges the existence of a substantial Elohist source.

- John Van Seters identified three main sources: Deuteronomist (D), Yahwist (J), and Priestly Writer (P), ordered chronologically as DJP.
- The Deuteronomist source is dated to around 620 BCE, while the Yahwist is placed in the exilic period (c. 540 BCE) and the Priestly source in the post-exilic period (c. 400 BCE).
- The supplementary hypothesis denies the existence of an extensive Elohist source, suggesting that what was considered J and E are actually a single source, likely written in the 6th century BCE.
- This hypothesis positions the Deuteronomist as the earliest author, writing at the end of the 7th century BCE.

Overview of the Fragmentary Hypothesis

The fragmentary hypothesis presents an alternative view of the Torah's composition, focusing on the integration of numerous independent narratives rather than distinct sources. This approach has evolved over time, reflecting changes in scholarly thought.

- The fragmentary approach sees the Torah as a compilation of many short, originally independent narratives, rejecting broad categories like Yahwist and Priestly.
- Early mid-20th century scholars emphasized oral tradition as the primary means of transmission, while more recent scholars advocate for a model of literary composition.
- The hypothesis utilizes form criticism to trace the origins of various traditions found in the Pentateuch.
- Fragmentarians differ in their views on how these traditions were transmitted, with some emphasizing oral tradition and others focusing on literary composition.