

WHO WROTE THE TORAH?

By Ariel Berkowitz

Introduction: What Does it Matter?

Some people might say that it really does not matter who wrote the Torah, as long as we believe it and follow it. Why, they say, should we get involved into such intellectual pursuits when all that really counts is that we be “careful to observe all the words of this Torah which are written in this book, to fear this honored and awesome name, the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 28:58)?

The issue of the authorship of the Torah is important for at least this one reason: since the book claims to have been written by a certain writer, it is simply a matter of integrity that that claim is verified. If this claim to authorship is not substantiated, then why should we trust what that book says? In other words, if the Torah claims to be written by Moshe, and we find that it is, in fact, not written by him, then we have very little reason to trust whatever else the Torah may say — perhaps it is also deceiving us on other issues as well.

Before we proceed with examining the identity of the writer of the Torah, we need to make one important distinction. The real Author of the Torah is God. Because of this, we say that the Torah is the Word of God and, therefore, divinely inspired. However, God used human agents to inscribe His Word. In this study, we are using as our presupposition the fact that God is the Author — that the Torah is from His very mouth. Our purpose, therefore, is not to debate the Divine inspiration of the Torah, but merely to examine who it was that God used to inscribe His precious Words.

I. Soundly Defeated

Up to about 150 years ago, few reputable scholars doubted that Moshe inscribed the Torah. One notable exception is Barukh Spinoza, the famous Dutch Jewish philosopher. In a paper he published in 1670, he boldly asserted that Moshe could not have written the Torah. During the late 1700’s this note began to be sounded more and more. Finally, the view that Moshe was not the inscriber of the Torah found its most popular expression in the writing of Julius Wellhausen, a German Biblical scholar of the 19th century. The theory that he popularized became known by three names: The Documentary Hypothesis, the JEDP Theory, and the Graf-Wellhausen Theory (because it also contained many of the ideas of Karl Heinrich Graf).

Essentially, the JEDP theory asserts that the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) is an edition comprised of the careful and skillful blending of at least four different kinds of documents. The first kind of document is what Wellhausen referred to as “J” document. “J” was written about 850 BCE by an unknown writer from Judah. The main feature of this unknown Judean writer is that he frequently referred to God by His personal name, YHVH (יהוה), commonly rendered as Adonai or the Lord. The second document blended in to make the Torah is what is referred to as “E” document. “E”, say the adherents of the Documentary Hypothesis was written about 750 BCE by an unknown author from the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The distinguishing feature of this unknown author was his use of Elohim (אלוהים) for the name of God. Third, many of the followers of JEDP say that the “D” document was most likely composed by Hilkiyah, the High Priest under King Josiah of Judah in 621 BCE. “D” stands for Deuteronomy. Finally, “P”, referring to the sections of the Torah dealing with the Priests, was written in various stages from Ezekial to Ezra, “ ‘the ready scribe in the Law of Moses’ under whose guidance the latest priestly sections were added to the Torah.”¹

One cannot imagine how entrenched this JEDP or Documentary Hypothesis is among biblical scholars the world over. It is the unquestioned presupposition of many of the biblical departments not only among the universities in Israel, but in most of the well-known institutions of higher learning in most countries. Anyone who reads commentaries, listens to lectures on the Bible, or attends classes on the Bible in places from Harvard, to Hebrew University is confronted with this theory of the composition of the Torah.

We do not have the time or space to refute all of the assumptions that JEDP asserts as truth. Nor it is necessary to re-invent the wheel, so to speak. Rather, The most thoroughgoing refutation of the Wellhausen hypothesis to appear at the end of the nineteenth century in America was furnished by William Henry Green of Princeton, in his *Unity of the Book of Genesis* (1895) and *Higher Criticism of the Pentateuch* (1896). With great erudition and skill he showed how inadequately the hypothesis explained the actual data of the Biblical text, and upon what illogical and self-contradictory basis the critical criteria rested.²

Indeed, Green’s refutation should have been devastating for the Documentary Hypothesis. However, as already indicated above, it still remains the accepted theory (with some variations) of the composition of the Torah in most scholarly circles. Fortunately, we do not have to search very far for Green’s work. It is continually being republished. Moreover, almost every evangelical Old Testament Introduction book and scholarly Orthodox Jewish books on the Torah will provide sufficient information on how to refute

¹. Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*. Archer quotes an unspecified author, 81.

². Archer, *Introduction*, 82.

the JEDP Theory. Thus, in addition to Green, we have, in the Jewish world, the writings of Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888), Umberto Cassuto (1883–1951) and Yechezkel Kaufmann (1889–1963), all of which “demolished the theory, showing that Wellhausen’s observations contradicted his conclusion.”³

Unfortunately, the JEDP Theory is not the only theory that asserts Moshe is not the inscriber of the Torah.⁴

II. The Testimony of the Text

If the Documentary Hypothesis is wrong, then how can we show that Moshe was the author of the Torah, as the Torah itself says he is? That is the task that remains before us. In order to accomplish this task, our study will focus in on a) the testimony of the Torah itself, b) the witness of the rest of the Tanakh, c) what Yeshua said about the matter, d) any comments other writers of the Apostolic Scriptures, and finally e) we will look at other important evidence within the Biblical text.

A. What the Torah Says

Who does the Torah say is the inscriber of its words? Without any doubt, the overwhelming evidence points to Moshe. Looking at Exodus, for example, we read in Exodus 17:14, “Then the Lord said to Moses, “*Write this in a book* as a memorial, and recite it to Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven” (emphasis mine). Again, in 24:4, it says, “And Moses *wrote down* all the words of the Lord. Then he arose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel” (emphasis mine). Finally, from the Exodus, 34:27 reads, “Then the Lord said to Moses, “*Write down* these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel” (emphasis mine). In all three incidences, we are told that Moshe either wrote God’s Words or was commanded to do so by the Holy One.

In Numbers we read similar passages. Thus, in Numbers 33:1,2, we are told that Moshe kept a written record of the wilderness journeys of the children of Israel: “These are the journeys of the sons of Israel, by which they came out from the land of Egypt by their armies, under the leadership of Moses and Aaron. And Moses recorded their starting places according to their journeys by the command of the Lord, and these are their journeys according to their starting places.”

The book of Deuteronomy is no less clear about its author, as we see in such

³. Nathan T. Lopes Cardozo, *The Written and Oral Torah: A Comprehensive Introduction*, 212

⁴. Other ideas about the origin of the Torah abound. A good summary of most of these theories is found in Cardozo’s book *The Written and Oral Torah: A Comprehensive Introduction* (See the Bibliography).

passages as Deuteronomy 31:9, where we read, “So Moses *wrote* this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel” (emphasis mine), and again in 31:22 where we find that not only was the teaching in Deuteronomy written by Moshe, but also the song that he taught the children of Israel just before they entered Canaan. Thus, it says, “So Moses *wrote* this song the same day, and taught it to the sons of Israel” (emphasis mine).

The situation in Leviticus and Genesis is slightly different. We will deal with Genesis separately under a different heading. Leviticus is different from the rest of the Torah in that it does not specifically indicate that Moshe wrote the words that God spoke. Nevertheless, we can detect at least three lines of evidence for Mosaic authorship to consider. First, at least 40 times we encounter the phrase, “The Lord spoke to Moshe...” This would indicate, at the very least, that the material found in Leviticus originated during the time of Moshe and was given directly by him to Israel. Thus, while “nowhere does it state that Moses wrote down what he heard, everywhere Leviticus claims to record what God revealed to Moses.”⁵ This is a far cry from the Documentary Hypotheses, which claims that the material in Leviticus originated among the priestly class in a much later period of Israel’s history that the late 1400’s.

A second argument for Mosaic authorship of Leviticus is found in the fact that “there is nothing in Leviticus that could not date from the Mosaic period.”⁶ In fact, because of archaeological discoveries, scholars have learned that

the priestly nature of the material in Leviticus affords important evidence for its probable date. In antiquity, all forms of education were under the supervision of the priesthood, a tradition that was established by the Sumerians [not Samaritans!] ...[Moreover]...The scribal practices of the ancient Near East point to a custom of preserving at an early age those sources of information or procedure that were of importance to the particular profession.⁷

These arguments do not prove that Moses wrote Leviticus. However, they do point to the antiquity of the book. In addition, we are specifically told in Exodus and throughout Leviticus that it was Moshe who gave the priestly instruction, which presumably he wrote down, as described by the quote above. This fact is best summarized by Leviticus 26:46, when it states, “These are the statutes and ordinances and laws which the Lord established between Himself and the sons of Israel through Moses at Mount Sinai.”

Finally, note the similarity between the material found in Leviticus 26 and

⁵. Wenham, G. J. *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT), 8.

⁶. Wenham, *Genesis*, 9.

⁷. R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 592–593.

Deuteronomy 27–29. Both contain blessings and covenant problems,⁸ the results of covenant faithfulness and unfaithfulness respectfully. In both sections, the blessings appear before the covenant problems. Moreover, many of the blessings and covenant problems are almost identical in nature. Thus, compare 26:4 with 27:12, 26:17 with 27:26 and 26:29 with 29:55, just for a few examples. Again, this does not prove Mosaic authorship. After all, other Scriptures written by different authors are sometimes similar to each other (for instance compare Isaiah 2 with Micah 4). But it strongly suggests that the same writer wrote both passages. Since the text confirms that Moshe wrote Deuteronomy, then consequently, it would also suggest that he wrote Leviticus.

B. The Testimony of the Tanakh

In addition to the evidence found within the text of the Torah itself, we also find that other places in the Tanakh testify to the Mosaic authorship of the Torah.

First, we see that Moshe’s disciple and successor, Joshua, was well aware that the Torah was written down, and that Moshe was the one who inscribed it. Accordingly, we read in Joshua 1:7–8, "Only be strong and very courageous; be careful to do according to all the Torah which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go. *This book of the Torah* shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success" (emphasis ours).

Secondly, we also see that King David understood that Moshe wrote the Torah. When he was approaching the end of his life, David charged his son Solomon to “keep the charge of the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, to keep His statutes, His commandments, His ordinances, and His testimonies, according to what is written in the Torah of Moses, that you may succeed in all that you do and wherever you turn” (1 Kings 2:3). What was *written* by Moshe was to be Solomon’s rule for life.

Furthermore, the writer of 2 Kings, written about shortly after the Babylonian Exile,⁹ also believed that Moshe inscribed the first five books of the Bible. In fact, when he wrote about the evil king, Manasseh, we find that the writer of 2

⁸. Instead of referring to these as “curses”, as is commonly translated, we call them “covenant problems” because in English the word “curse” carries with it connotations which are not characteristic of the word, especially in the context of Torah instruction for God’s people.

⁹. Gleason L. Archer, Jr. asserts, “it is obvious...that prior written sources were relied upon, coming from as early a period as the reign of Solomon. Final composition is to be dated after the Fall of Jerusalem, probably in the early Exile, yet it is possible that only the final chapter comes from Exilic times...” (Archer Introduction, 277.) R. K. Harrison writes, “2 Kings seems to have been composed by an anonymous author or authors in the exilic period and would be almost certainly later than the time of Jeremiah in any event.” (Harrison, *Introduction*, 720.)

Kings actually quoted a reminder spoken of by God Himself to follow the Torah. Accordingly, the Lord is quoted as saying, "And I will not make the feet of Israel wander anymore from the land which I gave their fathers, if only they will observe to do according to all that I have commanded them, and according to all the Torah that My servant Moses commanded them" (2 Kings 21:8).

About 500 years later, the people of God still believed that Moshe wrote down the Torah of God. This sentiment is expressed in Ezra 6:18–19, Nehemiah 13:1, and the last prophet of the Tanakh, Malachi 4:4. Malachi exhorts God's people to "Remember the Torah of Moses My servant, [even the] statutes and ordinances which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel." The phrase "Torah of Moshe" denotes, in this context, origin. The Torah of which Malachi spoke was the same one that Moshe wrote.

C. Messiah's Witness

Yeshua ministered on the earth over 1400 years after Moshe inscribed the Torah. We can readily observe from His teaching that not only He, but also His contemporaries thought that the Torah was written down by Moshe. For example, on at least nine separate occasions, as recorded by the gospel writers, Yeshua attributed the first five books of the Bible, the Torah, to Moshe. Among these instances, Yeshua cited four specific teachings of the Torah, which He said originated from Moshe. For instance, Matthew 19:7ff records what Moshe taught about divorce. Again, Mark 1:44ff discusses what Moshe said about ritual cleansing. In addition, Mark 7:10ff records what the Torah (Moshe) teaches about honoring our fathers and mothers. Finally, we read in Mark 12:26 that Yeshua based one of his arguments for a resurrection on a teaching written by Moshe.

In addition to Yeshua citing specific quotations from the Moshe, the Gospels record other instances when He merely cited Moshe as the author of the Torah. Two similar passages, for example, that show this are Luke 16:29–31 and Luke 24:44–45. In both of these passages, Yeshua alluded to the traditional three-fold division of the Hebrew Scriptures: the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. The point here is that in both passages (Luke 16:29–31 and Luke 24:44–45) Yeshua attributes the writing of the first division of Scripture to Moshe.

It has been said that when Yeshua cited Moshe as the inscriber of the Torah, He was merely alluding to the *tradition* of Torah authorship prevalent in His day and not necessarily stating it as a fact. We can respond to this argument in several ways. For one thing, it is important to know that Mosaic authorship was common knowledge in Yeshua's day, having been passed down from generation to generation in both written and oral form. It was so well attested to that few, if any, questioned its validity.

Second, that assertion might be true if Yeshua only said once or twice that

Moshe was the author. However, the Gospels have several passages in which He indicated the Torah was of Moshe. Moreover, if Mosaic authorship was only a tradition, Yeshua would have indicated such—as He did on other occasions. For instance, in Matthew 15 and Mark 7, Yeshua contrasted the traditions of some of the religious leaders with the truth of the written Scripture. That a *tradition* is contrasted with *Scripture* was intended by Yeshua is clearly brought out in the Greek used in both passages. The phrase in question is *paradosin ton presbuteron* (τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν πρεσβυτέρων). The word *paradosin* (παράδοσιν) is a reference to something passed down from generation to generation as opposed to Scripture, which by the very nature of the word, is something *written*. We suggest that, based on what we know of the historical and religious background of both passages, this phrase is most likely a reference to the Oral Law rather than the written Torah.¹⁰

In summary, it seems evident from the pages of the Gospels that Yeshua considered Moshe to be the inscriber of the Torah. In the words of Gleason L. Archer, Jr., “It is hard to see how anyone can embrace the Deuteronomy Theory (that Moses wrote not a word of the Law) without attributing either falsehood or error to [Messiah]...”¹¹

D. Yeshua’s Students

Following their Mentor, the followers of Yeshua (and their students) all attributed the writing of the Torah to Moshe. The evidence is too voluminous to cite it all. A few examples will suffice. First, we see in Acts 3:22ff that Peter, while preaching his famous sermon before his countrymen in Jerusalem, attributes the Torah to Moshe. Second, amidst his stirring message delivered just before he was put to death, Stephen also affirmed that Moshe wrote the Torah (Acts 7:20ff). In addition, from the very earliest moments of his ministry and scattered all throughout his writings, Paul of Tarsus said that Moshe wrote the Torah (beginning with Acts 13:16, then in Romans 9:15; Romans 10:19; 1 Corinthians 9:9; and 2 Corinthians 3:15). Furthermore, the writer to the Hebrews also asserted that Moshe wrote the Torah (see Hebrews 7:14 and 10:28). Finally, John, refers to the *Song of Moshe* in the book of Revelation. This *Song* is most likely a reference to the song recorded in Deuteronomy 32.

E. Other Important Evidence

The following lines of evidence do not prove that Moshe is the author of the Torah. But, taken together with the specific claims of Scripture as cited above, they can provide good corroborating evidence. Consider the following:¹²

¹⁰ We refer the reader to the discussion of John Lightfoot in his *Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica: Matthew—1 Corinthians*, vol. 2, Matthew —Mark, 222–223.

¹¹ Archer, *Survey*, 101.

¹². Most of these arguments are taken from Gleason Archer in his *Old Testament Introduction*, 101f.

1. Eyewitness details appear in the account of the Exodus which suggest an actual *participant* in the event. For instance, in Exodus 16:27, the writer remembers the exact number of fountains and palm trees at Elim. Again, in Numbers 11:7–8, the writer tells us the specific taste of the manna. Details like these would not be known by someone writing centuries later than the actual events. They, however, would have been well-known by Moshe.

2. The writer of Genesis and Exodus exhibits an eyewitness acquaintance with Egypt, such as what Moshe would have had. For example, we see a thorough familiarity with Egyptian names such as Heliopolis, Pithom, Potipohera, Asenath, and others. Second, the writer of the Torah uses a greater percentage of Egyptian words than anywhere else in the Tanakh. This would have been very consistent with someone like Moshe who was raised and educated in Egypt.

3. Similar to the previous argument, we can see that the writer of the Torah writes as if he is a foreigner to Canaan. For instance, the seasons and weather are Egyptian oriented (cf. Exodus 9:31, 32). In addition, the plants and animals that are mentioned are Egyptian or Sinaitic rather than those found in Canaan (such as the lists of animals in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 include some animals peculiar to the Sinai, but none that are peculiar to Canaan.) This, again, points to an author who was more Egyptian than other.

4. The writer of the Torah shows a geographical orientation and familiarity with the Sinai and Egypt rather than Canaan.

5. The book of Genesis refers to ancient customs which were common to the second millennium BCE but which did not continue a 1000 years later.

Time and space do not permit us to cite more evidence. Since these observations were made by Gleason L. Archer, Jr. Let us call upon him to summarize their significance to us. He writes, “All of these features are easily reconcilable with Mosaic authorship; they are virtually impossible to harmonize with the Wellhausen theory of stage-by- stage composition from the ninth to the fifth centuries.”¹³

IV. “The Toledot Theory”

It is apparent that there is more than enough evidence that Moshe inscribed the books of the Torah, at least from *Exodus* through *Deuteronomy*. But, who wrote Genesis? The events in Genesis transpired before Moshe was born. How could he have been the author of such a book?

First, let us say that history books have been written for centuries by those who live, sometimes millennia, after the history took place. Indeed, with thorough research and evidence, that is how most history books have been written. So, it

¹³. Archer, *Introduction*, 108.

should not be such a strange or outlandish assertion to claim that Moshe was also the author of *Genesis*, even though he lived centuries after those events took place. Moreover, for those of us who believe in divine inspiration, it is not problem to believe that the Holy One Himself could have revealed all of the information that He wished to pass on to us to Moshe who then inscribed it all perfectly.

However, all of this aside, we would like to propose an interesting and plausible theory about the composition of *Genesis* suggested by biblical scholar R. K. Harrison. We will call this theory the “Toledot Theory.”¹⁴ That title is our invention. But the theory is Harrison’s. Let us explain.

At the core of this theory is the assumption that *Genesis* was, indeed, an edition of various documents as suggested by Wellhausen. However, the documents were not historical fabrications, divided according to the names of God such as Elohim or Jehovah, or documents composed centuries after the historical events, like the Documentary Hypothesis asserts. Rather (in contrary to JEDP theorists) the documents are clearly revealed within the text of the book itself and are historical documents composed at the time or close to the time of the events about which they speak.

According to Harrison, the various “documents” that comprise Genesis are distinguished by the repeated use of the phrase “these are the generations of,” a translation of the Hebrew phrase, *v’eleh toledot* (ואלה תולדות). Harrison notes that the key to understanding the use of this phrase in Genesis lies in understanding the composition of many ancient cuneiform tablets. On such tablets, the title for the contents often consisted of the first few words of the tablet. At the end of the tablet was what is referred to as a colophon. This was a conclusion that contained the name of the scribe or owner of the tablet and some hint of its date, as well as a repetition of the title of the tablet.

The phrase “these are the generations of” (toledot), says Harrison (and others) forms such a colophon in the book of Genesis. However, in contrast to many other scholars, who say that the phrase is used to introduce a *new* section of Genesis, Harrison suggests that it is used as somewhat of a colophon. As such it serves to *conclude* a previous section, to contain the title of the material in that section, and to provide a hint of the author of that material or owner of the tablet that contains the material. “Accordingly, it is eminently possible to regard its incidence as indicating the presence of a genuine Biblical source in the text.”¹⁵

Simply stated, here is what Harrison (and we) are suggesting. When we see the oft-repeated phrase in Genesis, “these are the generations of,” we are not to

¹⁴. Harrison, *Introduction*, 543–553.

¹⁵. Harrison, *Introduction*, 547.

understand these phrases as introducing a new section of the story. Rather, just like the composition of ancient clay tablets, we are to understand toledot as a summary of what just has previous been said with a hint of its authorship. Moreover, the best rendering of the Hebrew toledot is not necessarily “generation,” but “family history”. Thus, for example, in Genesis 6:9 we have, “These are the family histories of Noah.” Noah’s family was chronicled between 5:3–6:9. Then after 6:9 a new episode in Noah’s family follows, which was recorded by Noah’s sons as indicated in 10:1 (“These are the generations of the sons of Noah.”)

Harrison cites 11 such uses of toledot in *Genesis*. According to this theory, this could be an indication of the presence of 11 tablets used as references in the composition of *Genesis* by Moshe. The tablets could possibly have been written by Adam? (2:4 and 5:2), Noah, the sons of Noah, Shem (11:10), Terah (11:27), Ishmael (25:12), Isaac (25:19), Esau (36:1), and Jacob (37:2). These tablets form somewhat of a family collection of the history of the people of Israel and were passed on through the centuries from generation to generation. Harrison provides the conclusion and application of this theory by stating,

If it is correct to assume that the major part of Genesis was transmitted by means of cuneiform tablets, it is comparatively easy to imagine the process by which it was ultimately compiled...A person such as Moses would have been eminently suited to the task of assembling ancient records and transcribing them in edited form as a continuous record on a leather or papyrus roll.¹⁶

This “Toledot Theory” then provides a genuinely plausible explanation about how Genesis may have been written. It recognizes the antiquity of the material in the book, it utilizes the knowledge we have of ancient writing, and it leaves plenty of room for Mosaic authorship of the book. Divine inspiration comes into play when we recognize that Moshe recorded only what God wanted recorded into the Sacred Book and he did so with 100% accuracy.

Conclusion

Who recorded God’s Word into what is now the first five books of the Bible, the Torah? It is clear from this treatment that we believe that the overwhelming evidence points to Moshe. Mosaic authorship is assumed by the text of the Torah itself, reiterated by the rest of the Tanakh, and affirmed by Yeshua and His followers. Moreover, we have seen that the internal evidence of the pages of the Torah clearly point at least to someone who was reared in Egypt and familiar with its geography, its language, and its customs. Indeed, there is nothing within the entire Torah—from *Genesis* to *Deuteronomy*—to detract against Mosaic

¹⁶. Harrison, *Introduction*, 552.

authorship.

It was the Holy One Himself who testified that “Since then [the time of Moshe] no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face” (Deuteronomy 34:10). It is comforting to know that since the Torah is the basis upon which all of the rest of Scripture was built, the writer, Moshe, knew the Author of the Torah face to face—more than any other one until Messiah. What an assurance to realize that He who knew the Lord face to face, was used by God to perfectly and accurately reflect His Holy face onto a scroll that we call the Torah.

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