

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Torah

Up to the 18th century it was assumed that Moses wrote the Torah. People assumed that the text, therefore, gives direct insights into the communications received by Moses in prayer, as well as an accurate contemporary description of what actually happened during the escape from Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, the revelations at Sinai, and the journey from Sinai to the Promised Land. Genesis, of course, was different. It was assumed that Moses was relying on privileged information given him by God about events that happened at creation, and up to the flood, followed by historically reliable data from the time of the patriarchs – information that, were it not for God’s intervention, would have been lost in the mists of time.

People’s basic underlying assumption was that they were reading history, based on facts guaranteed as true because Moses knew what he was talking about, and moreover that he was inspired to write by God. Whenever the conclusion was unavoidable that the texts were not presenting historically reliable data, it was assumed that God was inspiring Moses to give us a deeper truth presented in an allegorical form (see our treatment of Origen in Chapter Two). The problem here was, as we will see, that without the help of the tools of modern scientific method there were no reliable controls guiding allegorical interpretation.

Scholarly research brought us to a new place, and we had to adjust our thinking. Freed from the assumption that Moses was the author and that he was giving us a first hand account of what happened on the journey from Egypt to Canaan, as well as an accurate report of what God told him about the creation of the world and the experiences of the patriarchs, and freed from thinking that we must read the Torah as though we were reading history written as we would expect history to be written today, we can read the texts as stories that were written to offer insight into the truth (we will develop this point in Chapter Seven). We also have much better controls to guide us in interpreting the stories in a way that is faithful to the insights that the inspired authors were conveying. Read this way the texts can communicate their beauty and their truth more clearly, and open for us new depths of meaning that can enrich and enlighten us, and guide us in ways that we never thought possible. Here as in all matters we need have no fear of the truth, for it will set us free.

What can modern scholarship tell us about the authors of the Torah? We will describe first the scholarly consensus that lasted up to the 1970’s. We will then attempt to describe what scholars are saying, now that the consensus has collapsed. We cannot hope to achieve complete success here. Scholars still differ among themselves, even on significant details. However there does seem to be a converging of probabilities happening, and I offer the following in an attempt to cover the main ideas that are circulating among scholars today. The attempt itself to seek answers liberates us from the worst excesses and distortions that happen when we impose our mistaken assumptions onto the text. Furthermore, as I hope the reader will find for him/herself, the journey will help us be surprised by the amazing wealth of wisdom that the inspired texts have to offer.

Questions about the authorship of the Torah began in the eighteenth century when scholars observed the presence in the Book of Genesis of a number of duplicate and quite different accounts (for example, of creation, of the Flood, of Jacob at Bethel, of patriarchal sacrifices). They also observed that in some parts of Genesis, God was called ‘God’ (‘Elohim’), while in other parts God was called ‘YHWH*’, in spite of the explicit statement in Exodus 6:3 that God first revealed the name YHWH to Moses. They proposed that the texts that call God YHWH came from Judah (the source was given the symbol **J**, from the German **JHWH**), and the texts that call God ‘Elohim’ came from the northern kingdom (the source was given the symbol **E**). Further observations led to the development of a general consensus among scholars that there were four major sources of the Torah: to **J** and **E** were added **P** (the **P**riestly source) and **D** (the **D**euteronomists).

The consensus went something like this. Stories about the patriarchs and about Moses were handed down orally from generation to generation. As well as this, there would have been small pieces of writing – mostly legal and cultic texts – etched on stone, on metal, or on papyrus, even on plaster. However, the earliest substantial document of the beginnings of the human race, of the story of the patriarchs, and of Moses (Source **J**) was composed during the reign of King Solomon (10th century BC). Solomon, according to this hypothesis, saw to it that the stories circulating in the various sanctuaries of Israel and Judah were committed to writing. It was his way of consolidating the union achieved by his father, David. The author responsible for this document was called the Yahwist. This seemed an attractive hypothesis forty years ago, but closer scrutiny of the texts by scholars has made it untenable. The economic and social conditions necessary to support a project of writing in any substantial way first occurred not in Judah, but in Israel, and not in the tenth century but in the latter part of the eighth century.

After the northern tribes broke away from Judah a second document – so many scholars agreed – was composed in the northern kingdom, Israel (Source **E**). It also covered the story of creation, the patriarchs and Moses. A list of criteria were proposed that enabled us to discern which parts of the text came from **J** and which parts came from **E**. For example, **E** calls the mountain of revelation ‘Horeb’ (not ‘Sinai’); it speaks of ‘Jacob’ (not ‘Israel’); it calls the inhabitants of Canaan ‘Amorites’ (not ‘Canaanites’); Moses’ father-in-law is called ‘Jethro’ (not ‘Hobab’ or ‘Reuel’); **E** also tends to gloss over the faults of the patriarchs. However, once again, scholarship has brought us to a new place. When the refugees poured into Jerusalem after the fall of Samaria in 721BC, they would have brought with them stories about Jacob, Joseph and Moses. Some of these stories may have already passed from oral to written form. They also would have brought their stories about Joshua, the tribal heroes (the ‘Judges’), the prophets Elijah and Elisha, and various court records. Some of these, too, may have been in written form. However, the idea that they may have brought south a substantial unified document, from creation to the patriarchs to Moses has been abandoned.

*spelt thus throughout to highlight the fact that it is a proper name, and in deference to Jewish practice of not pronouncing the divine name or writing it in its pronounceable form. When they read YHWH, they bow their head and say the word ‘*adonāy*’ (‘Lord’).

A third strand in the hypothesis is the strand called **D**. Scholars speak of the **Deuteronomic School** (or the **Deuteronomists**). It was members of this School that were responsible for the creation of the Book of Deuteronomy as well as the books of the Former Prophets: Joshua and Judges (both relying on pre-existing written sources), and especially Samuel and Kings. This part of the earlier consensus has for the most part survived and we will examine these books in Chapter Nine.

A fourth strand in the hypothesis is the strand called **P**. Scholars speak of the **Priestly School** which was responsible for most of Exodus, and for Leviticus and Numbers. The Priestly School also played a leading role in composing the Book of Genesis. This part of the earlier consensus has also survived and we will examine these books in Chapters Ten and Eleven.

Scholars still recognise the existence of **P** and **D**, but support for the existence of **J** and **E** has largely collapsed (see *Introduzione all'Antico Testamento*, edited by Erich Zenger, Queriniana 2005, pages 149-150).

No new consensus has been achieved. Scholars present a wide variety of theories about the details of the process involved in the development of the Torah. What follows is my best attempt to state the key insights that have come from recent scholarship. If we imagine the Torah as a river, we are seeking the headwaters, from the second half of the eighth century, and the main tributaries that swelled the river till it settled into the Torah three centuries later in the second half of the fifth century BC.

The first thing to note is the importance of certain stages in the process of the development that led to the establishing of the text of the Torah. The first significant event is in 721BC, which saw the fall of Samaria and the northern kingdom (Israel), and the flood of refugees into Jerusalem (see Chapter Thirteen). The refugees brought with them the traditions (oral and perhaps some written) from the northern sanctuaries, including stories of Jacob, the narrative cycle of Joseph and stories of the emergence of Yahwism in Canaan under Joshua. It was perhaps scribes in the court of Hezekiah (727-699) who first combined this northern material with the stories of Abraham that circulated in Judah. The result was what we might call the first draft of the patriarchal narrative now found in Genesis 12-50. It is important here to stress the respect the scribes had for the various traditions they weaved together. They were aware of the fact that the traditions did not always harmonize. Nevertheless, they preserved them with their variations, lest some of God's revelation be lost.

It is likely that the refugees also brought with them a spiritual reflection on the essence of the religion of Israel (Yahwism) composed in an attempt to resist the influence of Assyrian religion and influenced by the oracles of the prophets Amos and Hosea. It is this spiritual reflection that was the first stage of what would later develop into the Book of Deuteronomy. During the reigns of Hezekiah (727-699) and Manasseh (698-643) the Deuteronomists continued their spiritual reflections. It was the covenant of the people with YHWH that mattered, not the vassal treaty being imposed on them by Assyria. We could call its authors the early Deuteronomists. We will examine this more closely in Chapter Nine.

The second significant stage brings us to the reign of King Josiah (640-609; see Chapter Fourteen). The demise of Assyria provided the opportunity for Josiah in the second part of his reign (722-709) to attempt to re-take the northern kingdom and re-establish a united Israel. Building on traditions from Israel and Judah, scribes produced an account of the escape of their ancestors from Egypt led by Moses, and the revelation on Mount Sinai: material that would develop into what we now have in Exodus 1-24. Both the Deuteronomists and the Priests had input into this. That different traditions were included in the story of Moses is seen, for example, in the different accounts of the crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus 14-15. They also produced an early draft of what would become the Book of Joshua. The spiritual reflections of the Deuteronomists and the accounts of Moses and Joshua supported King Josiah in his determination to expand Judah and establish the Land promised by YHWH to Abraham, the Promised Land of the Golden Age of David and Solomon. The scribes wanted the readers to see 'Egypt' in the light of their experiences of 'Assyria'. They wanted them to see 'Mount Sinai' as fulfilled in 'Mount Sion'. They wanted them to see the conquests under 'Joshua' as fulfilled in 'Josiah'.

The third significant event is 597BC, which saw the capture of Jerusalem and the exile of the king and leading citizens to Babylon (see Chapter Fifteen). This was followed ten years later by the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. During the exile, in the absence of the temple, the Priestly School (**P**) worked on the material now found in Exodus 25-40 and in the Book of Leviticus (we will examine these in chapter ten), while the Deuteronomists (**D**) worked on the Books of the Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings (we will examine these in chapter nine). The Books of the Former Prophets are sometimes listed as 'history'. This is valid in the sense that they concern real historical figures, and that for the lists of kings they draw on court records. However, the Hebrew listing of these books as 'Prophets' is important. The authors refer those interested in history to the court records. Their focus is on what YHWH is doing in their history. Their judgment of the various leaders is made on the basis of their obeying or not obeying the Torah. It is especially clear in the narratives concerning David and Solomon that the authors are constructing stories to underline what they see as behaviour that is proper, or not proper, for a king.

The fourth significant event is the return of the exiles to Judah in 528BC (see Chapter Fifteen). Influenced by what they had learned in Babylon, scribes from different schools, besides continuing their work on the Moses material, worked on what we know as the primeval history in Genesis 1-11. They set out to demonstrate that the God of Moses, the God of the patriarchs, is the God who created the universe. During the post-exilic period, the Priestly School (**P**) also produced the Book of Numbers, applying the revelation of Exodus to the changed conditions of the second temple.

The fifth significant event takes us to the middle of the fifth century and the arrival in Judah of the priest Ezra and the governor Nehemiah (see Chapter Sixteen). Pressured, it seems, by Persia, scribes combined Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy to establish the final version of the Torah.

That the scribes came from various Schools is clear from the obvious discrepancies in Genesis that caused earlier scholars to propose the existence of **J** and **E** as sources. Many other examples could be listed. Some differences are radical. The Deuteronomists, for example, saw the covenant as conditional: if we fail to keep our commitment, God will not keep his. The Priestly School saw things differently. God's commitment, according to them, is unconditional. Disobedience will prevent us receiving God's blessing, but it cannot annul God's commitment. Both views can be found in the Torah.

This could not have happened without much discussion and debate. The scribes could not have produced the Torah without a profound respect for the inspired word that was understood to be more important than the viewpoint of a particular School. The post-exilic members of the Isaiah School expressed the attitude that must have been basic to the work of producing the final redaction. God says:

This is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word.

– Isaiah 66:2

All parties must have been committed to preserving God's inspired word. They must have wanted to keep all points of view, no matter how impossible it was to harmonize them, lest something of the mystery of God be lost. The words of the prophet Jeremiah pick up something of their respect for the mystery of God's self-revelation:

Is not my word like fire, says YHWH, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?'

– Jeremiah 23:29

They wanted to glimpse the many shafts of light that came as they wrestled with God's word, which transcended limited human capacity to comprehend the mystery of God.

The Torah found its settled form c. 400BC. Part of this process involved the separating of the Book of Joshua from the Torah, and making it the first book in the 'Former Prophets' (Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings).