THE TORAH AND ITS INFLUENCE

Western Canon 1 | Brendan Shea, PhD (Brendan.Shea@rtc.edu)

"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day." (Genesis, King James Version, 1: 1-5)

The **Torah** (also known as the **Pentateuch** or the **Books of Moses**) is the traditional name given to the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures (or **Tanakh)**: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. It was written in Israel in an ancient form of Hebrew, and tells the story of the Jewish people and their struggles. The written Torah (in the finalized form we now have it) was likely composed and compiled over a period of 1100 years (from 1000 BCE to 100 CE) with oral versions of the story likely being much older than this. There is considerable scholarly debate over the exact age. Scholarship treats the Torah as a sort of "fictionalized history," which combines aspects of what we now call "history" (e.g., providing a record of things that happen), with more literary elements (lots of accounts of the motivations of various characters, the religious meaning of events, etc.). It is neither "history" in the sense that modern historians would write nor is it intentionally "fictional" in the sense of a novel. In this (short) lecture, we'll be focusing on the *literary* (as opposed to *historical*) elements of the Torah.

The Torah is a foundational text for three major world religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Many believers in these religions hold that the Torah was written (with divine guidance) by the prophet **Moses.** Moreover, many of the stories in the Torah—Adam and Eve, Noah and the Flood, Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt, etc. are widely known even among those who aren't members of these religions. The Torah is easily among the most influential documents ever written**,** and is one of the foundational texts of the so-called **Western Canon** (the books and works of art that have been most influential on "Western Culture"). In this lecture, we'll be taking a look at the Torah, with a special emphasis on the books of Genesis and Exodus. Many of the characters, stories, and themes will be ones that we'll be returning to over the course of the semester.

So, What is "Western", Anyway? In courses on the history of philosophy, literature, or the arts (such as this one), it's common to separate so-called "Western" culture and literature from other traditions (such as those of India, China, or Africa), at least in historical terms. One way of making this distinction (though its hardly the only way!) is to define "the West" as the cultural/artistic tradition that was strongly influenced by (1) the Torah and Hebrew Scriptures and (2) Greek literature and philosophy. This includes ancient Israel and Greece, but also Rome and early Jewish, Christian, and Muslim cultures (largely in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East). This definition is hardly perfect (for one, it ignores the exchange of ideas between "West" and "East"), and it starts to break down in the modern world, as the pace of globalization has increased (for example, Christianity and Islam have spread far outside of the traditional "West", and ideas like Buddhism are popular within Western countries). Nevertheless, it can provide a good rule of thumb: at least historically, most "Western" artists had at least a passing familiarity with the ideas, characters, and themes of the Torah.

COMPOSITION OF THE TORAH

While the authorship of the Torah has traditionally been ascribed (by many Jews, Christians, and Muslims) to the prophet Moses, most modern scholars hold that the written text we have now reflects both (1) an older oral tradition and (2) multiple writers, who wrote at different times. In this sense, it's very similar to other ancient books such as *Gilgamesh* of ancient Sumeria or the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of ancient Greece.

The Documentary Hypothesis and the Two Creation Stories. Modern scholars generally agree that that the books of the Torah were written down at different times and by different authors. These authors can be distinguished by, among other things, the way that they refer to or describe God (as **YHWH** or **Elohim**), the different versions of stories they tell (e.g., there are two very different creation stories in the first few pages of Genesis), the extent to which they seem to be **monotheistic** (e.g., do they talk about "gods" other than God?) and the language they use. Somewhat more controversially, the **documentary hypothesis** claims to identify FOUR different documents that were put together to form the Torah, usually labeled J (for "Yahweh"), E (for Elohim), D (for the book of Deuteronomy), and P (for "priest"). These four documents were then put together over time (and edited, etc.) to produce the document we have today.

Adam and Eve. According the documentary hypothesis, the **Yahwist** source (J) wrote around 1000 BCE. The Yahwist source is generally concerned with humanity's relationship with God, as opposed to the details of history or the cosmic history of the universe. So, there's lot of concern about what it means to be a "good" or "bad" person. This source provides, among other things, the famous story of Adam (the first man) and Eve (the first woman) in Genesis ch. 2. The main events of this story are roughly this:

1. The first living being Yahweh created was a male human being named **Adam**. Next came the animals, then a woman named **Eve,** who was formed from Adam's rib. Adam and Eve begin their (naked, happy) life together in the perfect **Garden of Eden.** They can eat whatever they like, except the fruit from the tree of knowledge.
2. God ("Yahweh") is depicted as being something like a super-powerful human, and walks around the Garden.
3. A snake tricks Eve into eating from the tree, and she convinces Adam. They get tossed out of the Garden because of this. One of their sons (Cain) kills the other (Abel). They have another son, Seth. Humanity descends from these flawed figures.

Another Creation Story. Genesis ch. 1 also contains a second version of the creation story, which the Documentary Hypothesis holds was written by the "Priestly" source some 500 to 600 years after the Adam and Eve story. This story describes creation in the following way:

1. God created the world from sort of primeval ocean/water/stuff (the "deep"), by separating light from darkness, water from sky, land from water, and so on. This process of creation takes six days, with humans being created on the sixth day.
2. Here, humans are created *after* the animals, and man and woman are created together. Humans are created "in God's image."
3. The God of this creation story is described in much more abstract language, as opposed to the anthropomorphic language of the Adam and Eve story. The language here is at least suggestive of **monotheistic** ("single God") religion, with an all-powerful and all-knowing God, which is among the central beliefs of modern Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.
4. The concern here is less with humanity than with the nature of God and the universe as such.

This story has some similarities to some other creation myths we know about from the time (such some Babylonian myths), which posit the creation of Earth by divine action from some sort of formless watery stuff. However, the role that God plays in this story is very different from creation myths where selfish gods created humans as slaves or servants. If the writers/sources were "priests" of some type, it's possible this version of the creation story is intended, at least in part, to provide an explanation of how the God of Judaism was *different* (and more worthy of worship) from the gods of the other cultures with which the Jews were familiar.

Why do you think the Torah contains two versions of the creation story? What is different about them? The same? How would you describe the purpose/meaning of each story?

MAJOR CHARACTERS AND EVENTS

"And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him…. Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I. And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me" (Genesis 22)

There are a number of notable events and characters of the Torah. Many of these will reappear in later works of literature, philosophy, and art.

Noah, the Flood, and the first covenant (Genesis 6-7). Like other literature of the time (notably "Gilgamesh"), the Torah contains the story of a flood, along with an explanation of why/how God allowed it. Humanity becomes wicked, and God decides to send a 40-day flood to wipe humans and animals. However, he decides to spare Noah (a "just" man) along with his family. Noah and his family build an ark to ride out the flood, and take with them two of each type of animal. After the flood, God makes a **covenant** with Noah not to flood the earth again, and sends a rainbow as a sign of this covenant. The idea of this covenant—between the Jewish people and God—is central to later Jewish theology and religion. Both Christians and Muslims will later take on this idea of covenant and attempt to expand/alter it to fit their (somewhat different) models of religious belief.

Abraham, the sacrifice, and another covenant (Genesis 22). God makes another covenant with Abraham, who will become the "father" of the Jewish people. Genesis describes God asking Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac (by tying him to an altar and killing him with a knife), and Abraham agrees to do this. In recognition of his obedience, God relents and makes a covenant to grant his descendants land and prosperity. The Muslim Qur'an traces the ancestry of Mohammed to Ishmael (another of Abraham's sons, who it is argued was the real victim of the sacrifice), while the Christian Gospels claim Abraham as an important ancestor of Jesus. Abraham is so central to these religions that scholars sometimes call Judaism, Christianity, and Islam the **Abrahamic Religions.**

Moses and the Escape from Egypt (Exodus 1-18). The book of Exodus tells the story of the flight of Jews from Egypt, where they have been enslaved. They are led by the prophet **Moses,** who is something like the "central character" of the Torah as a whole. God (through Moses) convinces the Egyptian Pharaoh to let them leave by sending a series of *plagues* on Egypt. This culminates in the killing of all first-born children, though those of the Jews are "passed over" (giving us the holiday of **Passover).** Later, Moses parts the Red Sea to let his people through, but it closes up and destroys the Pharoah's pursuing army. In the book of Exodus, God suggests that the *reason* for these sorts of actions—that is, "hardening" the Pharoah's heart to make him resist God/Moses, and then punishing the Egyptian people—is in part meant as a demonstration of God's power/supremacy.

The Ten Commandments and Deuteronomy ("Second Law"). Moses brings the **Ten Commandments** from Mt. Sinai shortly after the escape from Egypt, which contains moral precepts about the worship of God (e.g., no worshipping other gods, keeping the sabbath) and other people (no killing, adultery, etc.). The latter half of the Torah has many more specific laws. Deuteronomy (the final book of the Torah) sets up the remainder of the Hebrew Scriptures by reiterating and reinterpreting the law, by affirming the primacy of God over other beings, and making clear the *conditional* nature of the covenant between God and the Jewish people (e.g., bad things will happen when/if they disobey the law). In later books of the Hebrew Scriptures (as well as in the Christian New Testament and Qur'an), this is used to explain why bad things happen.

Does the Torah endorse monotheism? Modern Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are monotheistic (single-God) religions, as opposed to polytheistic (many god) religions. The Torah itself doesn't contain any explicit statement of this doctrine, and occasionally mentions other "gods." This has led some scholars to argue that the Torah is—at least in certain respects—compatible with polytheism, and that some of the early authors of the Torah might not yet have adopted monotheism. However, even here, the God of the Torah is portrayed as being superior to other beings (not to mentions humans), while they are powerless against God. In this respect, the Torah is pretty clearly different from more traditional polytheistic religions. The first clear, unambiguous statement of monotheism is usually taken to occur later in the Hebrew Scriptures, in the book of Isaiah ch 44: "I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me there is no God."

REVIEW QUESTIONS

The Torah introduces a number of themes and issues that will be prominent throughout Western literature, art, and philosophy. Here are seven such questions. Take a few minutes to think about what sort of answers the Torah suggests to such questions.

1. What is the nature of the universe? How was it created?
2. What is the nature of humanity?
3. What is the nature of God?
4. Who are the Jewish people? What is their relationship with God? With other nations and peoples?
5. Why do bad things happen?
6. What are the rules for ethical behavior? How can we know about them?
7. What can we learn (as readers) from these sorts of stories?

Can you think of any themes or questions that come up as you read the Torah?