Introduction to the Torah

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THE WORD *TORAH*, OFTEN TRANSLATED AS "LAW," IS BETTER RENDERED "INSTRUCTION" OR "teaching." It derives from the Hebrew root *y-r-h*, "to shoot (an arrow)" or "to hit the mark." The Torah is the text that allows a person to live properly. It does so by combining two main genres: law and story. The first third is largely narrative, while much of the rest comprises laws of different types. Thus understanding the Torah simply as law, or calling it "The Law," is inaccurate, and in some circumstances it reflects an erroneous Christian understanding of Judaism as essentially a religion of law.

The Torah, which contains five books (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy), is the first part of the tripartite Jewish Bible, known by the acronym TNK, or Tanakh, for Torah, Nevi'im ("prophets") and Khetuvim ("writings"). The Christian Old Testament is not identical to the Jewish Hebrew Bible in format. The Catholic Bible actually contains several Jewish books (the Apocrypha), such as the Wisdom of Solomon, that are not part of the Jewish Bible. In addition, Christian Bibles divide the Old Testament into four sections: the Torah, Historical Books, Poetic Books and Prophetic Books. This four-part division was likely originally Jewish as well, but it was abandoned by the Jewish community sometime after it was adopted by early Christianity. The fact that the Torah is first in all orders known of the Hebrew Bible—that used now by Jews, Catholics, Protestants and all branches of the Eastern Church—indicates its lofty status as first among equals.

We are not certain what the oldest name of the Torah was. Although the word *torah* appears in the Torah, it means "instruction" or "set of instructions" there, never the collection of the five books from Genesis to Deuteronomy. This is because the Torah came together gradually and so cannot refer to itself as a finished product. Later biblical literature, however, refers to "the Torah," "the Torah of Moses," "the Torah of God" and "the Torah of the LORD." The term *Pentateuch*, from the Greek for "five (*penta*) books (*teuchos*)," is used in English (by way of Latin) as another designation for the Torah, which is also sometimes called "The Five Books of Moses," after its putative author.

Within Judaism, the term *Torah* is used much more widely than as a title of the Bible's first five books. It may refer to the Tanakh or the Hebrew Bible in its entirety. In addition, according to the classical rabbis, much of rabbinic law derives from divine revelation as well, and they therefore distinguish between "the written Torah"—namely, the Pentateuch—and "the oral Torah"—rabbinic laws that are not recorded in the Pentateuch, or rabbinic interpretations of Pentateuchal laws. This chapter will focus on the Torah in the sense of the Pentateuch, although it will conclude with some general observations concerning the relation of the Torah to the broader Hebrew Bible.

The Torah is not a book in our sense of the word—a single, unified composition by one author. Modern scholarship has persuasively argued that each of these books is composite, consisting of many sources from different periods in Israel's history. It is also difficult to find a single theme that unifies the Torah. Although Moses is the central human character of much of the Torah, he is only introduced in chapter 2 of Exodus, its second book. Nor is the early development of Israel as a people the Pentateuch's unifying theme, as may be seen from the first eleven chapters of the Bible, which are concerned with the world from creation to the birth of Abraham.[1] Various other suggested unifying themes for the Pentateuch, such as the covenant, are also incorrect, since they do not explicitly appear at the beginning of the Pentateuch and are continued well beyond it. The notion that the promise of the land unifies the Pentateuch is especially problematic, since this theme, although introduced in Genesis 12, is only fulfilled with the conquest of the land in the book of Joshua, the Bible's sixth book, in which case the Hexateuch ("six books": the Pentateuch plus Joshua) rather than the Pentateuch should be seen as the decisive unit. Some have suggested that this six-book unit is more original than the current Pentateuch and that the current structuring reflects the idea that law is more important than the land of Israel, or at least that observance of God's law is independent of the land.

This idea is consistent with the fact that law, although it is not the only genre of the Torah, is its predominant genre. The Torah contains not only the Decalogue[2] in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 but also extensive legal collections in Exodus 21–23, Leviticus 17–26 and Deuteronomy 12–26, as well as selected laws within various narratives, such as the law of circumcision in the narrative about Abraham in Genesis 17, or the law concerning inheritance of the land by women in Numbers 36, both embedded within narratives about the possession of the land.

Many narrative sections also contain material that is of legal significance. For example, the first creation account in Genesis culminates with the "creation" of the Sabbath,[3] although this would only be legislated in Exodus, first in chapter 16 and then as part of the Decalogue, in Exodus 20:8–11. Similarly, the account of the construction of the tabernacle,[4] a temporary temple for God in the wilderness, is not narrated for its own sake but as an introduction to the various laws of sacrifice, narrated in the following book of Leviticus.

Thus the Torah contains sections that represent the two main uses of the word *torah* in the Bible. Sections of it are legal, representing the use of the word *torah* in places such as Leviticus 6:7: "This is the law (*torah*) concerning the meal offering." Other parts use stories to teach, representing a use found, for example, in the third part of the Jewish canon (Khetuvim, or Writings), in the book of Proverbs: "Hear, my child, your father's instruction, and do not reject your mother's teaching [Heb *torah*]."[5] Although ancient Near Eastern law collections sometimes had narrative preambles or conclusions, the Torah is exceptional in its context in the manner in which it combines, and sometimes even intertwines, legal and narrative material.

The Torah contains traditions that Moses wrote down in parts of the Torah, as in Exodus 24:4—"Moses then wrote down all the commands of the LORD" (referring perhaps to the preceding laws)—and in Deuteronomy 31:9—"Moses then wrote down all the commands of the LORD" (referring probably to all or part of the Book of Deuteronomy). This does not explicitly suggest that it was compiled by Moses himself, and even these traditions about sections of the Torah as Mosaic are not viewed as historically accurate by most scholars. The phrase *the Torah* in passages such as Deuteronomy 4.44, "This is the law [Heb *torah*] that Moses set before the Israelites," never refers to the complete Pentateuch. Yet it is easy to see how the tradition ascribing these five books in their entirety to Moses developed. As noted, several large sections were explicitly attributed to him at some point in history, and in several places the Hebrew Scriptures suggest that Moses stayed on Mount Sinai for forty days and forty nights.[6] Clearly, this was too long a time for short legal collections such as Exodus 21–23 to have been conveyed to him, and traditions developed that Moses received the entire written Torah from God at that point.

According to the classical rabbis, Moses simultaneously received the oral law, which served as the authoritative interpretation of the written law. The written Torah included, according to all rabbinic sources (which are followed by the early church), even the Book of Genesis, which thus represents God's narration to Moses of the early history of the world and of Abraham and his family. Some

rabbinic sources even suggest that the final chapter of the Torah, Deuteronomy 34, which narrates the death of Moses, was dictated by God to Moses, who wrote them with his tears. The view that the Torah should be understood as the divine word mediated by Moses was the accepted view among Jews and Christians in synagogues and churches throughout the Renaissance.

This perspective of Mosaic authorship of the entire Torah is contradicted by the Torah's narrative, as was only rarely recognized in the Jewish Middle Ages. Abraham ibn Ezra, a scholar active in the twelfth century CE, noted that Genesis 12:6 states in reference to Abraham that "at that time the Canaanites were in the land." The words *at that time* suggest that for the author, the Canaanites were no longer in the land; in other words, it appears that the text was written after the time of Moses, because during his time the Canaanites were still in the land. A small number of other places that suggest authorship later than Moses were pointed out by a few medieval Jewish scholars, but these were not systematized into a thesis that could challenge the dominant view concerning Moses's authorship of the Torah.[7]

modern source theories

Slowly, with the rise of European rationalism, particularly as associated with figures such as Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and Benedict (Baruch) Spinoza (1632–1677), the view that the Torah was a unified whole, written by Moses, began to be questioned.[8] Various theories developed. Some saw the Torah as composed of various fragments (the fragmentary hypothesis), others of a main document that was supplemented by various hands (the supplementary hypothesis) and still others that it was composed of various long documents that were intertwined (the documentary hypothesis). By the late nineteenth century, the documentary hypothesis was dominant, especially in the form popularized in 1878 by the German scholar Julius Wellhausen, that the Pentateuch (or Hexateuch) is composed of four main sources or documents that were edited or redacted together: J, E, P and D.[9] Each of these sources or documents is embedded in a (relatively) complete form in the current Pentateuch, and each has a distinct vocabulary and theological perspective.

J and E are so called after the names for God that each of them uses in Genesis and early in Exodus. J uses the name *Yahweh* (German "Jahwe," hence "J"), translated in the New Jewish Publication Society (the Tanakh used in this volume) as "LORD," even though it is really a personal name, whose exact meaning is unknown, from the root *to be* (or perhaps "the one who causes all to be"). E prefers to call the deity *Elohim* (translated as "God"), an epithet that also serves as the generic term for God or gods in the Bible.[10] P, which also uses *Elohim* (and other names, such as the enigmatic El Shaddai), identifies the Priestly material. D refers to Deuteronomy, a recapitulation of the speeches of Moses.

The difference in divine names, however, is not the main criterion used by scholars for suggesting that the Torah is not a unified composition. Much more significant are doublets and contradictions, in both narrative and legal material. For example, it has long been noted that chapters 1–3 of Genesis twice narrate the creation of the world. People are created first in 1:27—"So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them"—and then again in 2:7—"Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being."

Furthermore, the second creation account does not simply mirror or repeat the first but differs from the first both in outline and in detail. Genesis 1:1–2.4a,[11] the first account, narrates the creation of a highly symmetrical world by a very powerful deity who creates through the word. In this account man and woman are created together (1:27) after the creation of the land animals (1:25). In contrast, the second story, in Genesis 2:4b–3:24, says that man was created (2:7), then the animals (2:19) and then woman (2:21–22). Its focus is on the creation of humanity, not of the entire physical world, and God anthropomorphically "forms" various beings, rather than creating them with the word. The Hebrew word *bara'*, which is used only of God as "creator," typifies the first story, but it is totally absent in the second. Genesis 1–3 contains two separate accounts, written by two authors, representing different worldviews about the nature of creation, humanity and God.

While the two creation accounts appear as two totally separate blocks of material in Genesis 1:1–2:4a and 2:4b–3:24, in several other cases such a clear-cut division of sources is impossible for narrative reasons. For example, the flood story culminates in a tradition that God will never again bring a flood on the land;[12] for this reason, the J and P narratives cannot appear as separate and complete narratives, so they are intertwined. Similarly, the story of the plague of blood in Exodus 7:14–24 contains two intertwined accounts; for example, in J Moses is the protagonist, and the blood affects only the Nile (vv. 17–18), while in P Aaron appears as well, and the flood affects all Egyptian water sources (vv. 19, 24). The following frog plague is similar. In such cases, the narratives are combined skillfully. Careful attention to plot and vocabulary help modern scholars discern the original building blocks or sources of the story, although this is sometimes obscured by the English translation, which often levels the different versions in an attempt to create a more unified final text that reads well.

The legal material in the Torah is also the product of several sources. For example, slave laws concerning Hebrew or Israelite slaves are found in the Torah in Exodus 21:1–6, Leviticus 25:39–46 and Deuteronomy 15:12–18. These laws cannot be reconciled in a straightforward fashion since three different notions of slavery underlie them. For example, Exodus differentiates between the treatment of male and female slaves, whereas Deuteronomy insists that they should both be treated similarly. While Exodus and Deuteronomy agree that a slave who loves his master may opt to remain a slave "for life"[13] or "forever,"[14] Leviticus[15] insists that slavery does not really exist, since slaves must be treated "as hired or bound laborers," and they may only serve "until the year of the Jubilee," which occurred every fifty years.[16] Such legal differences are not surprising given that the Torah is composite and that the different legal collections reflect norms or ideals of different groups living in different times.

In fact, it is possible to trace distinctive styles and theological notions that typify individual Pentateuchal sources. For example, the J source is well known for its highly anthropomorphic God, who has a close relationship with humans, as seen in Genesis 2:4b–3:24, which includes, for example, a description of the LORD God "walking in the garden,"[17] and says that the LORD God "made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them."[18] On the other hand, in E, the Elohist source, God is more distant from people, typically communicating with them by dreams or through intermediaries, such as heavenly messengers or "angels" and prophets.

The P or Priestly source is characterized by a strong interest in order and boundaries,[19] as well as an overriding concern with the priestly family of Aaron and the Temple-based religious system. D, Deuteronomy, is characterized by its focus on Moses and its unique, preaching-like style, which insists strongly that God cannot be seen, as in this source's description of revelation: "Then the LORD spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice."[20] This explains why this source, uniquely, insists that God does not physically dwell in the Temple or tabernacle; rather, the Temple is "the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name."[21] In contrast, Priestly literature suggests that God's "Presence" (Hebrew *kavod*) dwells there. D also emphasizes that this one God must be worshipped in one place only;[22] this place is later understood to be Jerusalem.

The narrative sources J, E, P and D also have legal collections associated with them. Many scholars refer to these as "codes," but this is imprecise. As far as we know, Israel and its neighbors did not have legal codes in the sense of documents intended for use in the law-court, organized with such a use in mind.[23] The Covenant Collection in Exodus 20:22–23:33 is associated with J or E. The Holiness Collection (or "H") of Leviticus 17–26 is so named because of its central injunction: "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy."[24] It is a later reformulation of priestly law and thought, influenced by P, certain prophetic ideals and other texts. The Deuteronomic law collection appears in Deuteronomy 12–26.

We know nothing about the authors of the sources as individuals. Only a small elite of males (perhaps 5 percent) in the ancient Near East, the area that is now called the Middle East, were literate; the sources' authors were likely among these, unless of course the sources were first oral literature, as some think, and were later recorded. Most ancient Eastern documents were written anonymously—as were their sources. Although the Torah may contain some documents written

by women or that circulated in women's groups—such as the *Song of the Sea* in Exodus 15, a typical victory song written by women after their men returned from battle[25]—the vast majority of the Torah, both legal and narrative sections, was written by men, and it reflects the ideas and aspirations of male elites. It is therefore important not to confuse "ancient Israel" (what ancient Israel really looked like from a broad perspective) and "biblical Israel" (the picture that is depicted in the Bible, including the Torah; much of this is prescriptive, by and to a small community, and it represents various ideals rather than the reality).

Critical biblical scholarship through much of the twentieth century was quite confident in dating each of the Pentateuchal sources along with the legal collections they incorporated. J was seen as the earliest collection, often dated to the period of David and Solomon in the tenth century BCE, followed by E, which was often associated with the early history of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. D was connected to the reform of King Josiah of Judah in the late seventh century, and P was seen as deriving from the sixth century. Scholars now agree that the reasons given for assigning these dates are problematic, and a lively debate has developed concerning such fundamental issues as the relative order of these sources and the extent to which any of them are as early as previous scholars had suggested. The existence of E as a complete source has been questioned as well, especially since E first appears well after the beginning of the Torah and is very difficult to disentangle from J after the beginning of Exodus. Thus, many scholars now talk of JE together as an early narrative source, incorporating diverse traditions.[26]

Additionally, most scholars now do not see D and P as representative of a single author writing at one particular time but recognize that each was produced by a group or "school" over a long time. Thus, it is best in some cases to speak of streams or strands of tradition and to contrast their basic underpinnings, rather than to speak of a source as a single document deriving from a single author, period and locale. For example, as noted above, in D Yahweh's name (Hebrew *shem*) resides in the Temple, while in P the Divine Presence (Hebrew *kavod*) is there. To offer another example that differentiates between these two great streams of tradition, Deuteronomy views Israel as intrinsically holy—as seen, for example, in Deuteronomy 7:6, "For you are a people holy to the LORD your God"—while the Priestly view, articulated most clearly in the Holiness Collection, suggests that Israel must aspire to holiness—as in Leviticus 19:2, "You shall be holy."

The last few decades have seen some erosion of the classical documentary hypothesis. The very early dating of the J and E sources has been questioned, with much justification. Some have returned to a type of supplementary hypothesis, viewing the Torah as an original core that has been added to over time. Others have seen P as earlier than D, while still others have claimed that J is the latest of the sources. Yet, within scholarly circles, the idea that the Torah is a composite text with a long and complex history is the dominant model. Even most scholars who read the Torah as a single literary text acknowledge that this unity is the result of the book's redaction, rather than it being authored by a single individual. The concepts of JED and P thus remain useful, if not as "documents," then at least as an important starting point for understanding the prehistory of the Torah.

Compilation and Redaction of the Torah

It is unclear how these various sources and legal collections, which now comprise the Torah, came together to form a single book. Scholars posit an editor or series of editors or redactors, conveniently called R, who combined the various sources, perhaps in several stages. Certainly not all ancient Israelite legal and narrative traditions were collected and redacted as part of the Torah, as the Torah itself occasionally indicates when it refers to other sources.[27] Much was certainly lost. Without access to this lost material, it is impossible to fully reconstruct how and why the redactor(s), R, functioned in a particular way.

It is sufficient to note two fundamental ways that the redaction of the Torah differs from modern editing. (1) Modern works typically reflect a unified viewpoint, yet the redaction of the Torah, like the editing of other ancient works, was not interested in creating a purely consistent, singular perspective, but incorporated a variety of voices and perspectives and wished to preserve them despite

their repetitions and contradictions. (2) Unlike modern works, where there are legal copyright protections for authors so that their works may not be reused or reworked without permission, the Torah is an anonymous compilation. In many ways the Torah is like a document on the Internet that has had many authors and has gone through much editing and reediting, often with no attribution.

It is unclear exactly when the Torah was redacted—namely, when various sources became the Torah. Some scholars believe that this took place during the Babylonian Exile, after the destruction of the First Temple in 586 by the Babylonians, as Judaism developed from a Temple-centered religion to a book-centered one—a development unique in the ancient Near Eastern world. Others believe that Ezra the scribe, who according to the Bible lived in the fifth century, was empowered with creating the Torah following the Return, as may be suggested in Ezra 7:14, where the Persian King Artaxerxes tells Ezra, "For you are commissioned by the king and his seven advisers to regulate Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God, which is in your care."[28] The result of this final redaction was the creation of a very long book (really a scroll or set of scrolls, since books in our sense were not yet invented), narrating what must have been felt to be the formative period of Israel, from the period of the creation of the world through the death of Moses. Perhaps the events narrated in Genesis 1–11 were included as a justification of the choosing of Abraham, describing in detail the failures of humanity, as seen especially in the Garden of Eden story,[29] the flood narrative[30] and the Tower of Babel episode,[31] which necessitated the choosing of a particular nation by God.

the content of the torah

According to both Jewish and Christian tradition, the Torah is divided into the five books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. In some, but not all cases, these are framed as separate books—this is especially the case with Deuteronomy, which is introduced as speeches by Moses shortly before his death, as distinct from the end of the previous book, Numbers, which claims to contain "the commandments and regulations that the LORD enjoined upon the Israelites, through Moses, on the steppes of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho."[32] Many of the other books are not separated as clearly, and thus it is proper to read the Torah as a single narrative rather than several separate sections, as the Christian Gospels or the Chapters of the Quran are typically read.

Genesis, called *Bereishit* in Hebrew after its first word ("In the beginning"), is really a story of several beginnings. The focus of chapters 1–11 is by and large, but not totally, universal, and contains such well-known stories as the six-day creation, the Garden of Eden, the flood and the Tower of Babel. At the beginning of chapter 12, Abram, later called Abraham, is commanded by the LORD, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you."[33] This begins the ancestral stories, concerning Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob (also called Israel), Rachel, Leah and the two concubines. Much of the end of Genesis focuses on Jacob's son, Joseph, who is the ultimate cause for the family's migration from the land of Israel—a central theme of the other ancestral narratives—to Egypt. Genesis ends with the death of Joseph.

Many scholars differentiate between the first third of Genesis and the rest. This is not accurate, since even though the beginning chapters appear universal, they are told from an Israelite perspective, and the latter section is no more historically accurate than the initial chapters. The chapters about the ancestors are not interested in what actually happened, but like many mythological texts, they are validating present institutions and order by anchoring them in the deep past.

Exodus, the English name of the Torah's second book, is a misnomer; although the exodus from Egypt is narrated in chapters 14–15, the book has many other foci as well. In Hebrew it is named *shemot*, "the names of," after the book's first words—all the other books of the Torah are named similarly after an important first word, following an ancient Semitic tradition for naming literary works. It includes stories of the early life of Moses and his appointment as Yahweh's prophet from the different sources, followed by accounts of plagues against the Egyptians, which in the

redacted version total ten. Israel flees from Egypt as the Reed Sea, often mistakenly called the Red Sea, parts to let them through, drowning the Egyptians who were chasing after them. Soon thereafter, Israel arrives at Sinai, where they are given the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments), and then another set of laws, the Covenant Collection. The importance of the Decalogue is highlighted through its description as unmediated divine revelation, but it is nowhere depicted as the center of the Bible or as the core moral principles of Israel. The remainder of the book narrates in great detail the construction of the tabernacle (Hebrew *mishkan*), which is to be constructed as a place where Yahweh or his Presence (*kavod*) will dwell (from the Hebrew root *sh-k-n*). This is narrated in great detail by the Priestly author, since it serves as a prototype of the Jerusalem Temple, where the priests would serve. The story of the golden calf is intertwined with the beginning of the tabernacle construction narrative.

Leviticus, laws concerning priests, is the Bible's third book. It is in its entirety P or Priestly. It begins with a description of various sacrifices, and then contains regulations concerning ritual purity and impurity. This issue is of paramount importance to the priests, since ritual impurity may defile the Temple, causing Yahweh, or the Divine Presence, to abandon it. The laws of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, in chapter 16 are aimed at assuring that Yahweh will stay in the Temple, protecting Israel. A subsection called H, for Holiness, in chapters 17–25 presents a variety of cultic and moral laws, including the famous "Love your fellow as yourself: I am the LORD."[34] H concludes with a series of (short) blessings and (long) curses.[35] Chapter 27 is a later addition; in antiquity, before word-processing programs were developed, additional material that was found was typically added to the end of a book.

Numbers, the Torah's fourth book (named after the census at the book's beginning), is largely but not entirely Priestly. The beginning is all Priestly, but then it turns to the story of spies or scouts, who were sent to determine how to best conquer the land of Israel. Their report is about how the Canaanite residents of Israel scared the Israelites, who were then punished—almost that entire generation was to die in the wilderness, and only their children would possess the land. Stories of other rebellions against Yahweh follow. Most of the final chapters narrate the conquest of the Trans-Jordan, the land to the east of the Jordan River. In that context, Balaam, a seer, is hired to curse Israel, but he instead blesses them. The poetry of that blessing is very difficult, but it highlights Israel as Yahweh's cherished people, whom its God will protect.

Deuteronomy, the Torah's final book, is named from the Greek *deutero nomos*, or second law, since Deuteronomy presents itself as Moses retelling the laws (and the history of Israel) to the generation about to enter the land of Israel. However, this retelling is quite different from what is narrated in Exodus and Numbers—even the Decalogue in Deuteronomy 5 differs in significant details from that found in Exodus 20. The first eleven chapters are mostly a retelling of history, while the next fifteen or so are largely legal. The legislation of Deuteronomy is quite distinctive, emphasizing the centralization of worship, the importance of total obedience to Yahweh and a particular concern for the lower classes. It concludes with the death of Moses, the main (human) character of much of the Torah, and his succession by Joshua, the protagonist of the following book. Its final verses emphasize the incomparable greatness of both Yahweh and his messenger Moses: "Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses—whom the LORD singled out, face to face, for the various signs and portents that the LORD sent him to display in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his courtiers and his whole country, and for all the great might and awesome power that Moses displayed before all Israel."[36]

the torah as an ancient eastern text

Given that the Torah is an ancient Near Eastern text, it should come as no surprise that it partakes in many of the motifs and conventions of surrounding civilizations, including the great civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt and the smaller Phoenician and Aramean states to the north, its neighbors Ammon and Moab to the east, and Edom, to the south.[37] In some cases, we can see that its authors knew other ancient Eastern texts, and in others that they knew and imitated the forms

of ancient Eastern literature. The importance of the Bible, including the Torah, is not in its originality but in the manner in which it combined various preexisting ideas and added some novel ones, serving as a core text for religious civilizations for such a long time.

The clearest cases of ancient Eastern influence come from Canaanite literature and from Mesopotamia. We do not have the Canaanite literature that Israel would have known directly, although we have many texts that were excavated in the twentieth century from ancient Ugarit, modern Ras-Shamra in Syria. Most come from the fourteenth century BCE, and scholars believe that they are more or less representative of the Canaanite culture that Israel encountered in the land of Israel. We also have a number of texts from Mesopotamia—from both Assyria (northern Mesopotamia) and Babylon (southern Mesopotamia). Israel and Judah were often vassals of one or the other of these prestigious civilizations, and elites would have known, and been influenced by, its literature. In addition, the Judeans spent part of the sixth century in exile in Babylon, where many came into direct contact with Babylonian literature and traditions. Surprisingly, given the tradition of Israel having been enslaved for many years in Egypt early in its history, the influence of Egyptian literature is much less evident. Later in the biblical period, authors were influenced by Persian theology, and then by Greek ideas.

Most of the influences of Ugaritic literature are found outside the Torah, especially in biblical poetry. One example in the Torah is Numbers 12:13, where, after Moses's sister is afflicted with a serious skin disease (typically mistranslated as leprosy), the text reads, "So Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, 'O God, pray heal her!'" The Hebrew word used for *God* unexpectedly is *el*—this reflects the Canaanite deity El or Il, whose portfolio included healing the sick. The idea that this appeal for healing is to God as El rather than Yahweh reflects Canaanite influence.

The clearest cases of influence of Mesopotamian texts on the Bible are from the Epic of Gilgamesh and the flood story in Genesis and from the laws of the goring ox in the Laws of Hammurabi and the Covenant Collection in the Book of Exodus.

The Epic of Gilgamesh was an ancient bestseller, telling of the search of Gilgamesh, whom we know was a historical king, for immortality. In the process of that quest, he sought out Utnapishtim—literally, "the one who found life"—who survived a cataclysmic flood with his family and others in an ark. The parallels between this story and the story of Noah in Genesis 6–9 are striking, including the way in which the ark is constructed, the landing of the ark on a mountain, the use of birds to determine if the flood had subsided, sacrifice to God/gods after the flood and a divine promise that such a flood would not recur. There is even a "smoking gun" that indicates that the biblical author knew the flood story from Gilgamesh tablet eleven. Genesis 6:14 uses the word *kofer* for pitch, used to caulk the wood of the ark. This is not the Hebrew word for pitch but a borrowing from Akkadian, the Semitic language of Gilgamesh: the likely explanation of why this unexpected word was used is because the author was influenced by its use in the Mesopotamian epic.[35] When the Torah copies other traditions, it changes them—it "Israelizes" them. Thus, in the Israelite flood story, a single God brings forth the waters due to people's grave sins; in Gilgamesh XI it is the noise of the population that bothers the gods. In Genesis, God fully controls the waters, and all of nature, while in Gilgamesh (as in Mesopotamian culture as a whole) nature sometimes stands above the deities, and thus in Gilgamesh the gods are frightened by the flood that they unleash.

The Hammurabi Law collection, now found in the Louvre, derives from the king of that name, who reigned in eighteenth-century BCE Babylonia. It contains several laws about what happens if an ox gores a person or a slave. Contrary to the image that we may have from the running of the bulls, however, oxen do not typically gore people, especially to death. Yet, the same legal situation is presented in the Book of Exodus, in the same order found in Hammurabi. From this and other similarities, it is clear that the author of the Covenant Collection knew the Hammurabi Law and "Israelized" it as well. Here, too, he made significant changes; these most likely reflect the absolute value of human life within ancient Israel.

The Book of Deuteronomy, both in its general structure and in the structure of its parts, reveals clear Assyrian influence. Unlike Leviticus, which contains laws and then curses, Deuteronomy contains a lengthy historical prologue, followed by laws, curses and other features. In its structure, Deuteronomy is similar to treaties the great Assyrian kings made with the people they conquered—

Assyrian vassal treaties. There are also very close literary correspondences between these treaties and Deuteronomy. For example, in these treaties the vassal was commanded to "love" the crown prince just as in Deuteronomy 6:5 (which later became part of the Jewish *Shema* prayer[39]) Israel was commanded to love Yahweh. These similarities make it likely that Deuteronomy as a whole should be read as a theologized treaty (Hebrew *berit*), in which Yahweh replaces the Assyria overlord.

Many genres and ideas that people think are unique to ancient Israel were well known in antiquity. Morality, prayer, law, even prophecy were known among Israel's neighbors. The seer Balaam, central to the second half of the Book of Numbers, is attested to in a nonbiblical inscription. The idea that gods are very involved in history and in the day-to-day affairs of the world, which was once thought to be an Israelite innovation, is found often among Israel's neighbors.

Given the date of composition of the Torah, soon after the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus the Great of Persia, it is not surprising that Persian words and ideas are hardly found in it and that Greek notions are totally absent—in contrast to later books of the Hebrew Bible, where they are found in abundance. To offer here but a single later example, the Persian-period text Isaiah 45:7, "I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe," likely reflects the vigorous dialogue with Persian Zoroastrianism of that era.[40] The text from Isaiah makes it clear that Yahweh is responsible for both good and evil.

It is often pointed out that the Torah is unique in the ancient Near Eastern world in its monotheistic beliefs. Monotheism is very difficult to define, and there are several Torah texts that suggest that Yahweh was a high, even an incomparable deity, though not the only god. This is clearest in the early text from Exodus 15:11: "Who is like You, O LORD, among the celestials [better: 'gods'—Hebrew *elim*]." Yet even in these texts Yahweh is much more powerful than other deities, who are subservient to Him. What is stated in the Decalogue—"You shall have no other gods besides Me"[41] rather than "There is no other God besides Me"—is more typical. It is almost better, therefore, to speak of monotheizing tendencies in the Torah rather than to speak of the Torah, or the Hebrew Bible as a whole, as a totally monotheistic corpus. However, certain late Torah texts teach that Yahweh alone is God: "It has been clearly demonstrated to you that the LORD alone is God; there is none beside Him."[42]

One idea that is unique to ancient Israel within the ancient world is the idea that law derives from God. Some other civilizations such as the Hittites and the Mesopotamians had legal collections, but these were never attributed to the deity. In Mesopotamia, in particular, the king was responsible for establishing justice, and the Laws of Hammurabi were presented *to* the deities, not received *from* them. This meant that in ancient Israel, at least as reflected in the Torah, law had a different force, and both tort law and cultic law were understood as divine. For example, in the rest of the ancient Eastern world, if a man committed adultery, he was seen as committing a civil crime against the woman's husband, while in ancient Israel, as reflected in the story of the attempt of Joseph's master's wife to seduce him, adultery was seen as a crime against Yahweh: "How then could I do this most wicked thing, and sin before God?"[43] The idea that law was of divine origin made Israel fundamentally different from its neighbors (with, again, the possible exception of the Zoroastrians, perhaps known later than the other neighbors in a relationship in which influence may have run both ways).

the torah and the rest of the hebrew bible

As noted above, the word *Torah* has many uses—the first five books of the Bible, the entire (written) Hebrew Bible and the entire corpus of (originally oral) rabbinic literature in addition to the Bible. This essay has focused on the Torah in the sense of the Pentateuch, since it is first among equals.

In the Jewish order of the Hebrew Bible, the tripartite Tanakh, the Torah is followed by the canonical section Nevi'im, the prophets, which is further subdivided into two parts: the former prophets and the latter prophets. The former prophets—Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings—are historical books that tell the history of the conquest of Israel through the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem in 586 BCE. They are not historical books in the sense of accurately describing the past;

they contain internal contradictions, and they are sometimes contradicted by contemporaneous ancient sources. Like other premodern texts about the past, they are highly ideological and rarely represent eyewitness accounts.

When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek as the Septuagint, the translation of the "seventy," beginning in the third century BCE, the long books of Samuel and Kings were divided in half; this explains why in English Bibles we now have First Samuel, Second Samuel, First Kings and Second Kings. The designation of Joshua–Kings as former prophets is somewhat misleading. Although these books mention prophets such as Joshua, Samuel and Nathan, their main focus is on the military and political leadership of figures such as Joshua, the judges and the kings. The books of Joshua–Kings share many stylistic and theological similarities with the preceding Book of Deuteronomy, and many biblical scholars call Deuteronomy–Kings the Deuteronomic History, in the sense of five books that adhere to the ideas and language found in Deuteronomy.

The latter prophets contain Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Twelve Minor (in the sense of short, not insignificant) prophets. These books reflect a selection from several centuries of prophecy in ancient Israel. Given the complicated way that biblical books were edited and supplemented over time, it is often difficult to know exactly what in these books is from the named prophet or what might have been added by his disciples or later editors. It is likely that the canonical section of Nevi'im was closed by the fourth century or so.

The final canonical section has the rather vague name Khetuvim (Writings), reflecting the broad range of literature it encompasses. It was probably canonized by the first century CE. Its order in different manuscripts is highly variable, but in the JPS Tanakh it appears in the following order. Psalms is a collection of prayers of the individual and the community, from many different times and places. Proverbs is a collection of longer and shorter sayings. Job is a work reflecting on theodicy, the presence of evil given a good God. The five *megillot* (scrolls) that were read on various festivals or holy days include Song of Songs, which is a love poem; Ruth, which is a polemical work, emphasizing that kindness is more important than Jewish ethnicity; Lamentations, which is a collection of five poems reflecting on the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE; Ecclesiastes, which is a wisdom work, insisting on Yahweh's great power in relation to people; and Esther, a burlesque tale explaining the origin of the Purim festival. Daniel is an apocalyptic work, Ezra–Nehemiah (separated into two books in the Septuagint) is a "history" of the period after Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon in 539, and Chronicles (also divided into two books in the Septuagint) is a retelling of history from Adam through Cyrus.

How the Bible became the Bible—what is often called the process of canonization—is a complex and debated question. It is likely that this took place in stages, with the Torah canonized first, in or soon after the Babylonian Exile, the Prophets several centuries later and the Writings last, late in the Second Temple period.[44] This process does not mean, however, that all sections of the Nevi'im are later than all parts of the Torah and that all of Khetuvim are later than all parts of Nevi'im. In fact, much of the literature in the Torah and the Nevi'im (and to a lesser extent, Khetuvim) came into being at the same time. For example, the author of Amos 5:25, "Did you offer sacrifice and oblation to Me those forty years in the wilderness, O House of Israel?" does not know the Priestly stories that insist that sacrifice was an important part of the worship of Yahweh in the wilderness. So Amos, among the Prophetic writings, is earlier than the Priestly texts now found in the Torah.

Even though the Jewish canon is divided into three sections, which may seem to be of equal authority, the beginning of the Nevi'im and Khetuvim sections each refer to the Torah as authoritative. Joshua 1:7–8 reads, "But you must be very strong and resolute to observe faithfully all the Torah that My servant Moses enjoined upon you. Do not deviate from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Let not this Book of the Torah cease from your lips, but recite it day and night, so that you may observe faithfully all that is written in it. Only then will you prosper in your undertakings and only then will you be successful." The first psalm, at the beginning of Khetuvim, notes that for the righteous individual, "The Torah of the LORD is his delight, and he studies that teaching day and night."[45] Thus, the structure of the Bible suggests that the Torah is its most important section.

Like the Torah, most of the rest of the Bible is also elite male literature—just like most other writing from the ancient East. The Book of Ruth, which focuses on the relationship between two women, is likely one of the exceptions. I Samuel 1 and 2 contain prayers by Hannah, a woman, the mother of the prophet Samuel, and a prayer in I Samuel 2 is reflected in Psalm 113, suggesting that women could declaim psalms. However, we must be very careful in using the Torah and the rest of the Bible to reconstruct ancient Israelite culture—the Bible is but a fragment of the literature from that much broader ancient society.

conclusions

Although the Bible shares many ideas with surrounding civilizations, in its final form the Bible, and even the Torah, are unique within their ancient context, which produced no other work of comparable length or inclusiveness in terms of the time covered and the sources systematically incorporated. This extensive, inclusive nature of the Torah has created a fundamental and interesting challenge with which all serious biblical interpreters have either consciously or subconsciously grappled: Do we concentrate on interpreting the individual sources, on hearing the voices of the component parts of the text before redaction took place? Or do we focus on the final product, an approach that has been called holistic reading?

Finally, within this volume, we must consider the role that interpretation within each faith community should play in how we understand the Torah and in determining which sections of the Hebrew Bible are the most important. The three great monotheistic religions all view the Hebrew Bible as significant, but we must remember that it is of different significance to each, that each considers different parts of it to be especially significant, and that each interprets it differently. For these reasons, it is possible to consider the Torah as a book that both unifies and separates Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Ezra Expounds on the Completed Torah, the "Law of Moses"