

JEDP: Sources in the Pentateuch

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The letters **JEDP** are a designation used by scholars to identify the component parts or **sources** that they understand were used to compile the first five books of the Old Testament. There have been various opinions as to whether these sources were written or oral traditions, and whether each source represents an independent strand or a stage in the development of an older source.

This particular way of studying the biblical text is called **source analysis** or very broadly **literary analysis**, emphasizing that the object of study is the biblical text itself to distinguish it from **historical analysis** that focused on reconstructing history apart from the biblical text. There is a long and interesting history of the development of this method of biblical study that dates back to Jewish scholars in the 11th century AD.

Contrary to some anti-scholarly rhetoric that is common in some church traditions even today, there was never any intent in this method to discredit any aspect of the Bible. That arose more as a reaction against the challenge this investigation raised concerning established ideas about Mosaic authorship that were deeply ingrained in some church tradition.

The conclusion that the material of the Pentateuch is composite, written by different people or different communities over a long period of time, came from a study of the biblical text itself apart from the dogma and traditional interpretation that had been in place for centuries. That dogma itself, however, was not a conclusion arrived at by investigation, but by acceptance of still earlier tradition. It was not until the Reformation and the Enlightenment that systematic questions could be asked and investigated in these areas (recall that Galileo tried that in the area of natural science, and was quickly silenced by the church because it was too disquieting to established views of truth!).

There were excesses in this endeavor, however. For the first time in the church, Scripture could be investigated apart from the authority of the church in telling people what they must believe and what the text meant. Unfortunately, that led to some people focusing more on the process of investigation than what they were investigating.

By the beginning of the 19th century, some scholars were so enamored with this method of biblical study that the number of posited sources for the Pentateuch greatly multiplied. Scholars also grew increasingly confident in their ability to identify these sources, sometimes as many as three in a single verse. This excessive zeal to dissect the biblical text into component parts led to a backlash against such methods from some circles. That reaction itself became overly zealous in the other direction, and, when combined with emerging Fundamentalism in the 1920s, resulted in the anti-scholarly rhetoric and biases toward biblical study that still echo in the church today.

Scholarship gradually realized the excesses, since all such scholarship must be done in a larger community, and began to modify perspectives, both in terms of the number of identifiable sources and the confidence in being able to identify them. Also there arose a steady recovery of a focus on the whole of the biblical text as well as its component parts.

Today, some have declared “source criticism” dead as a specific biblical study tool. However, even though methods of biblical study have moved far beyond such minute dissection of the text, the insight that the Pentateuch is composite and "grew" over a long period of time has been a lasting contribution of this method of study. While the early formulations of JEDP may not be widely accepted today among many biblical scholars, there is little question that the Pentateuch, and the larger biblical text, is composed of diverse strands of tradition compiled over the course of many years. This is in line with what New Testament scholars understand about the growth of the Gospel traditions as well, witnessed by the fact that we still have four "sources" of those traditions in the four Gospels. So, it would be helpful for students of Scripture to understand the approach of source criticism in order to gain a better appreciation not only of the biblical text, but of the development of modern biblical studies.

Originally, JEDP referred to what scholars had identified as the four main sources of the Pentateuch. There were various perspectives as to the details, but this was generally called the "documentary hypothesis" of biblical origins (sources = documents). This referred to the conclusion that the Pentateuch as we have it had been composed or compiled from a variety of previously existing documents or sources. The letters were simply the abbreviations for those earlier documents or sources.

The earliest strands of the biblical traditions, dating perhaps to the time of the Davidic monarchy (1,000 BC), were given the designations "J" and "E". The designation **J** was given to material that primarily used the proper name for God, YHWH (we are not sure how it was pronounced; German scholars developed the method and used the letter "J" since that is the German equivalent of "Y" in Hebrew). It was posited that this material was written or preserved in the **Southern Kingdom of Judah** after the division of the Kingdom in 922 BC, and perhaps as late as the 8th century BC. It contained the traditions of the Davidic monarchy and the establishment of Jerusalem as the center of worship, as well as recounting the story of the emergence of Israel as a people under God's guidance. While there is some legal material in these sources, most of it is **epic narrative**, traditional recounting of the origins of a people and their journey through history.

E was similar material that used the generic term for deity (*elohim*) in referring to God. It originated in the **Northern Kingdom of Israel**, perhaps earlier than J before the establishment of the monarchy, although most placed it around the 8th century BC. Rather than material about the Davidic monarchy, E contained the tribal traditions of the conquest of the land and the traditions about the covenant and the worship centers outside Jerusalem.

D was the designation given to **deuteronomic** material. This was understood to be instructional or preaching material that used language, concepts, and theological

perspectives very similar to that found in the Book of Deuteronomy as well as some of the prophets (*e.g.*, Jeremiah). It focused on faithfulness to God using the covenant traditions as a basis, and was concerned with obedience as proper response to God's grace. It also included much of the legal material that revolved around obedience to God as faithfulness to the Torah.

There was always debate about the exact time frame of this material, but it was generally agreed that there were two distinct phases in the editing or "redaction" of D material. Some saw it as living tradition that was constantly reapplied within the community. It contained traditions from Moses, but scholars thought that an early form of Deuteronomy was in place as a written document during the reign of Josiah (c. 621 BC), which he used as a basis for his reforms. A later version of this material was reedited after the exile to apply the theology of Mosaic traditions to the crisis of the exile. The perspective of D was also thought to have influenced some of the historical traditions in Samuel-Kings and some of the prophetic traditions, especially that of Jeremiah.

The **P** material was understood to be **priestly** material, and focused on the concerns of priests serving in the Jerusalem temple. This would include technical record keeping and legal traditions related to the proper functioning of the Temple and its associated activities. It included material such as detailed regulations about how to observe festivals, the counting of days, the ordering of events into sequence, genealogies and statistics, as well as reflective theological material that related to the keeping of religious law.

Like D, or Deuteronomic material, this priestly material was understood to contain traditions from all periods of Israel's history. But the final shaping of the P traditions are considered late in the development of the final form of the Pentateuch, since the priests emerged as the leaders and wielders of power only after the return from exile. Therefore, most of the priestly material, in the form we have it now, is usually understood as post-exilic in the fifth century BC or later.

There was always debate over whether there was ever an independent "P" document, or whether this material was simply a rewriting of other traditional material from the perspective of priestly concerns (such as the "second" creation account of Genesis 1). This re-writing of older material is called "redaction" (editing) and this led to ongoing discussion whether the "redactor" was simply a compiler of other material or was a creative author. This same discussion relates to the Gospels as well, where it is more obvious that common material from traditional sources is being used, yet is given unique theological slants by each of the four authors.

Today, while there are still challenges from some to the idea of sources in the Pentateuch, it is generally accepted even by very conservative scholars. However, there have been significant modifications from 100 years ago and the whole scenario of "source criticism" has been vastly simplified. Rather than "sources" as specific written documents many scholars now talk about **traditions**, emphasizing that Scripture grew out of the ongoing life of a worshipping community rather than simply being composed by a single

individual at one time and then merely edited. This has shifted an emphasis from the "authors" of Scripture to its function within the community.

The sources or pre-canonical traditions of the Old Testament are now generally simplified into three. The material of J and E has now been combined into what is generally termed the **JE epic narratives**. On the one hand, this is an acknowledgement that it is mere speculation to try to subdivide the text any further. On the other hand, it concedes that this material remains distinctive from other Pentateuchal material.

Scholarly have continued to acknowledge the complexity of the **deuteronomic traditions** within the history of the biblical communities. The debates concerning this material have centered largely on the various editions through which the D material passed, whether D was ever actual documents or more a theological point of view from which other traditions were evaluated, and the influence of the D perspective on the compilation of other traditions within the Old Testament.

The **priestly traditions** are also now seen as much more complex than a simple P designation allows. Although the final composition is still placed in the post-exilic era, most scholars now considered the P traditions to contain significant amounts of much older material. At the least, that suggests that it is no longer adequate to deal with all priestly material as if it were a creation of the post-exilic priestly hierarchy.

All this suggests that there is still validity in understanding a diversity of material in the Pentateuch that arose from different time periods with different emphases, much as we understand the diverse Gospel material of the New Testament (see The Synoptic Problem). Of course, this would preclude Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch as we have it now, although it would not deny that some material may have come from Moses.

This understanding of a dynamic to the biblical text over a considerable time period has allowed us to view the text in different ways than in the "absolute law" categories that has been common. Examination of individual texts with sensitivity to their location within various traditions has led us to an awareness that there are obvious differences in various strata of Pentateuchal material. For example, there is a marked difference in the development of religious laws within the various traditions. The JE material allows worship of Yahweh at various outlying shrines (Shiloh, Bethel, Gilgal, Shechem) while the D material is insistent that sacrifices are only to be allowed at Jerusalem.

Likewise, even within these traditions there is evidence of a dynamic at work within the community, as seen for example, in the various systems of tithing in Deuteronomy that traces the development from a primarily agrarian economy to an urban one. Yet, most scholars now emphasize more the whole of the canonical material and affirm that study of the component parts are not as important as how the material has been "shaped" in the formation of the canonical books that exist now. That means that source analysis is simply another tool in understanding the biblical texts.

This shift to canonical and theological concerns leads to new questions in relation to the sources. The primary questions are no longer, "What is the origin of this source?" or "When in Israel's history was this material originally written" (which are historical questions). Now, the primary questions in relation to the sources focus on theological questions such as, "How did the author/redactor use this material to make his point?" or "What ideas about God does this particular arrangement of the material confess?"

An exemplary text to see how the JE, D, and P traditions can be observed in a single passage is Exodus 12-13, the Passover narrative. The traditions are usually understood to break down in this way:

JE narrative: The story line of the exodus in the narrative material runs through chapter 11 with **Moses** as the main character (11:10 is a transition verse).

11:1 The LORD said to **Moses**, "I will bring one more plague upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt; afterwards he will let you go from here; indeed, when he lets you go, he will drive you away. . . .11:9 The LORD said to Moses, "Pharaoh will not listen to you, in order that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt."

Priestly: the narrative is interrupted at 12:1-20 with priestly instructions from **both Moses and Aaron**, who is the paradigm for OT priests, about the proper time and manner to observe Passover, including keeping the Passover lamb shut up for three days and outlining a seven day festival (recall in the narrative, the Israelites had to leave hastily in the course of a single night, not even having time to allow the bread to rise).

1 The LORD said to **Moses and Aaron** in Egypt, 2 "This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. 3 Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household. 4 If any household is too small for a whole lamb, they must share one with their nearest neighbor, having taken into account the number of people there are. You are to determine the amount of lamb needed in accordance with what each person will eat. 5 The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. 6 Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the people of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. 7 Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs. 8 That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast. 9 Do not eat the meat raw or cooked in water, but roast it over the fire-- head, legs and inner parts. 10 Do not leave any of it till morning; if some is left till morning, you must burn it. 11 This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the LORD's Passover. 12 "On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn-- both men and animals-- and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. 13 The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt. 14 "This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD-- a lasting ordinance. 15 For seven days you are to eat bread made without yeast. On the first day remove the yeast from your houses, for whoever eats anything with yeast in it from the first day through the seventh must be cut off from Israel. 16 On the first day hold a sacred assembly, and another one on the seventh day. Do no work at all on these

days, except to prepare food for everyone to eat-- that is all you may do. 17 "Celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread, because it was on this very day that I brought your divisions out of Egypt. Celebrate this day as a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. 18 In the first month you are to eat bread made without yeast, from the evening of the fourteenth day until the evening of the twenty-first day. 19 For seven days no yeast is to be found in your houses. And whoever eats anything with yeast in it must be cut off from the community of Israel, whether he is an alien or native-born. 20 Eat nothing made with yeast. Wherever you live, you must eat unleavened bread."

JE: the story line is picked up again in 12:21-39, with instructions from **Moses alone**, repeating some instructions, and emphasizing not the correct observance, but the *significance* of the actions and their memorial.

21 Then **Moses** summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go at once and select the animals for your families and slaughter the Passover lamb. 22 Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood in the basin and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the doorframe. Not one of you shall go out the door of his house until morning. 23 When the LORD goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe and will pass over that doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down. 24 "Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants. 25 When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. 26 And when your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' 27 then tell them, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.'" Then the people bowed down and worshiped. 28 The Israelites did just what the LORD commanded Moses and Aaron. 29 At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh, who sat on the throne, to the firstborn of the prisoner, who was in the dungeon, and the firstborn of all the livestock as well. 30 Pharaoh and all his officials and all the Egyptians got up during the night, and there was loud wailing in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead. 31 During the night Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "Up! Leave my people, you and the Israelites! Go, worship the LORD as you have requested. 32 Take your flocks and herds, as you have said, and go. And also bless me." 33 The Egyptians urged the people to hurry and leave the country. "For otherwise," they said, "we will all die!" 34 So the people took their dough before the yeast was added, and carried it on their shoulders in kneading troughs wrapped in clothing. 35 The Israelites did as Moses instructed and asked the Egyptians for articles of silver and gold and for clothing. 36 The LORD had made the Egyptians favorably disposed toward the people, and they gave them what they asked for; so they plundered the Egyptians. 37 The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth. There were about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children. 38 Many other people went up with them, as well as large droves of livestock, both flocks and herds. 39 With the dough they had brought from Egypt, they baked cakes of unleavened bread. The dough was without yeast because they had been driven out of Egypt and did not have time to prepare food for themselves.

P: the priestly tradition again interrupts the narrative in 12:40-51, again with both **Moses and Aaron** the authority, and gives further specific directions for the proper observance of Passover. There is some tension with the immediately preceding section where it states that a "mixed crowd" went up from Egypt, and the priestly regulations that no "foreigner" may eat of Passover (the **Israelites** were the foreigners in Egypt; and they did not have slaves to worry about, **they** were the slaves!).

40 Now the length of time the Israelite people lived in Egypt was 430 years. 41 At the end of the 430 years, to the very day, all the LORD's divisions left Egypt. 42 Because the LORD kept vigil that night to bring them out of Egypt, on this night all the Israelites are to keep vigil to honor the LORD for the generations to come. 43 The LORD said to **Moses and Aaron**, "These are the regulations for the Passover: "No foreigner is to eat of it. 44 Any slave you have bought may eat of it after you have circumcised him, 45 but a temporary resident and a hired worker may not eat of it. 46 "It must be eaten inside one house; take none of the meat outside the house. Do not break any of the bones. 47 The whole community of Israel must celebrate it. 48 "An alien living among you who wants to celebrate the LORD's Passover must have all the males in his household circumcised; then he may take part like one born in the land. No uncircumcised male may eat of it. 49 The same law applies to the native-born and to the alien living among you." 50 All the Israelites did just what the LORD had commanded Moses and Aaron. 51 And on that very day the LORD brought the Israelites out of Egypt by their divisions.

Deuteronomic: The consecration of the firstborn in 13:1-16 is an example of D reflective theology, repeating much of the material from chapter 12, but from the perspective of faithful observance of the Torah as a response to God's grace in the exodus with the **entire community as the focus**. The language and phrasing here is very similar to corresponding passages in Deuteronomy. There is again emphasis on teaching the children, but with much more emphasis on the symbols as ways to recall God's actions. There is also theological reflection on the events themselves and the proper response to them in light of relationship with God, and the grace the community has experienced.

1 The LORD said to Moses, 2 "Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether man or animal." 3 Then Moses said to the people, "Commemorate this day, the day you came out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery, because the LORD brought you out of it with a mighty hand. Eat nothing containing yeast. 4 Today, in the month of Abib, you are leaving. 5 When the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Hivites and Jebusites-- the land he swore to your forefathers to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey-- you are to observe this ceremony in this month: 6 For seven days eat bread made without yeast and on the seventh day hold a festival to the LORD. 7 Eat unleavened bread during those seven days; nothing with yeast in it is to be seen among you, nor shall any yeast be seen anywhere within your borders. 8 On that day tell your son, 'I do this because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt.' 9 This observance will be for you like a sign on your hand and a reminder on your forehead that the law of the LORD is to be on your lips. For the LORD brought you out of Egypt with his mighty hand. 10 You must keep this ordinance at the appointed time year after year. 11 "After the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites and gives it to you, as he promised on oath to you and your forefathers, 12 you are to give over to the LORD the first offspring of every womb. All the firstborn males of your livestock belong to the LORD. 13 Redeem with a lamb every firstborn donkey, but if you do not redeem it, break its neck. Redeem every firstborn among your sons. 14 "In days to come, when your son asks you, 'What does this mean?' say to him, 'With a mighty hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. 15 When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD killed every firstborn in Egypt, both man and animal. This is why I sacrifice to the LORD the first male offspring of every womb and redeem each of my firstborn sons.' 16 And it will be like a sign on your hand and a symbol on your forehead that the LORD brought us out of Egypt with his mighty hand."

JE: the narrative story line is picked up again in 13:17-22 and the following chapter with the leadership of **Moses at the center**.

17 When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, "Lest the people repent when they see war, and return to Egypt." 18 But God led the people round by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle. 19 And **Moses** took the bones of Joseph with him; for Joseph had solemnly sworn the people of Israel, saying, "God will visit you; then you must carry my bones with you from here." 20 And they moved on from Succoth, and encamped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. 21 And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night; 22 the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.

This illustrates that even in what seems like a single unified passage, there may be more than one voice speaking with more than one point of concern and emphasis. This does not lessen the credibility of Scripture in any way, unless, of course, that credibility is tied to traditional affirmations about who wrote what. Yet, we simply do not have enough information to determine that, and the evidence points in a different direction.

Understanding the dynamic nature of the biblical text allows us to see the work of God as dynamic in this community of faith as they worked throughout history to come to terms with God's revelation of himself and put that into practice in their lives. That is still the task we face today, and this understanding of the dynamic aspect of Scripture may allow it to be more relevant in our own lives today.