

# Who Wrote the Bible?



*Richard Elliott Friedman*



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one person. Then imagine giving the book to detectives and leaving them to figure out (1) that the book was not by one person, (2) that it was by four, (3) who the four were, and (4) who combined them.

For those readers who want to get a better sense of how this looks, I have translated the biblical story of Noah's ark, as it appears in Genesis, with its two sources printed in two different kinds of type. The flood story is a combination of the J source and the P source. J is printed here in regular type, and P is printed in boldface capitals. If you read either source from beginning to end, and then go back and read the other one, you will be able to see for yourself two complete, continuous accounts, each with its own vocabulary and concerns:

## The Flood—Genesis 6:5–8:22

(Priestly text in boldface capitals, J text in regular type)

### GENESIS 6:

5 And Yahweh saw that the evil of humans was great in the earth, and all the inclination of the thoughts of their heart was only evil all the day.

6 And Yahweh regretted that he had made humans in the earth, and he was grieved to his heart.

7 And Yahweh said, "I shall wipe out the humans which I have created from the face of the earth, from human to beast to creeping thing to bird of the heavens, for I regret that I have made them."

8 But Noah found favor in Yahweh's eyes.

9 **THESE ARE THE GENERATIONS OF NOAH: NOAH WAS A RIGHTEOUS MAN, PERFECT IN HIS GENERATIONS. NOAH WALKED WITH GOD.**

10 **AND NOAH Sired THREE SONS: SHEM, HAM, AND JAPHETH.**

11 **AND THE EARTH WAS CORRUPTED BEFORE GOD, AND THE EARTH WAS FILLED WITH VIOLENCE.**

12 **AND GOD SAW THE EARTH, AND HERE IT WAS CORRUPTED, FOR ALL FLESH HAD CORRUPTED ITS WAY ON THE EARTH.**

13 AND GOD SAID TO NOAH, "THE END OF ALL FLESH HAS COME BEFORE ME, FOR THE EARTH IS FILLED WITH VIOLENCE BECAUSE OF THEM, AND HERE I AM GOING TO DESTROY THEM WITH THE EARTH.

14 MAKE YOURSELF AN ARK OF GOPHER WOOD, MAKE ROOMS WITH THE ARK, AND PITCH IT OUTSIDE AND INSIDE WITH PITCH.

15 AND THIS IS HOW YOU SHALL MAKE IT: THREE HUNDRED CUBITS THE LENGTH OF THE ARK, FIFTY CUBITS ITS WIDTH, AND THIRTY CUBITS ITS HEIGHT.

16 YOU SHALL MAKE A WINDOW FOR THE ARK, AND YOU SHALL FINISH IT TO A CUBIT FROM THE TOP, AND YOU SHALL MAKE AN ENTRANCE TO THE ARK IN ITS SIDE. YOU SHALL MAKE LOWER, SECOND, AND THIRD STORIES FOR IT.

17 AND HERE I AM BRINGING THE FLOOD, WATER OVER THE EARTH, TO DESTROY ALL FLESH IN WHICH IS THE BREATH OF LIFE FROM UNDER THE HEAVENS. EVERYTHING WHICH IS ON THE LAND WILL DIE.

18 AND I SHALL ESTABLISH MY COVENANT WITH YOU. AND YOU SHALL COME TO THE ARK, YOU AND YOUR SONS AND YOUR WIFE AND YOUR SONS' WIVES WITH YOU.

19 AND OF ALL THE LIVING, OF ALL FLESH, YOU SHALL BRING TWO TO THE ARK TO KEEP ALIVE WITH YOU, THEY SHALL BE MALE AND FEMALE.

20 OF THE BIRDS ACCORDING TO THEIR KIND, AND OF THE BEASTS ACCORDING TO THEIR KIND, AND OF ALL THE CREEPING THINGS OF THE EARTH ACCORDING TO THEIR KIND, TWO OF EACH WILL COME TO YOU TO KEEP ALIVE.

21 AND YOU, TAKE FOR YOURSELF OF ALL FOOD WHICH WILL BE EATEN AND GATHER IT TO YOU, AND IT WILL BE FOR YOU AND FOR THEM FOR FOOD."

22 AND NOAH DID ACCORDING TO ALL THAT GOD COMMANDED HIM—SO HE DID.

#### GENESIS 7:

1 And Yahweh said to Noah, "Come, you and all your household, to the ark, for I have seen you as righteous before me in this generation.

2 Of all the clean beasts, take yourself seven pairs, man and his

woman; and of the beasts which are not clean, two, man and his woman.

3 Also of the birds of the heavens seven pairs, male and female, to keep alive seed on the face of the earth.

4 For in seven more days I shall rain on the earth forty days and forty nights, and I shall wipe out all the substance that I have made from upon the face of the earth."

5 And Noah did according to all that Yahweh had commanded him.

**6 AND NOAH WAS SIX HUNDRED YEARS OLD, AND THE FLOOD WAS ON THE EARTH.**

7 And Noah and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives with him came to the ark from before the waters of the flood.

**8 OF THE CLEAN BEASTS AND OF THE BEASTS WHICH WERE NOT CLEAN, AND OF THE BIRDS AND OF ALL THOSE WHICH CREEP UPON THE EARTH,**

**9 TWO OF EACH CAME TO NOAH TO THE ARK, MALE AND FEMALE, AS GOD HAD COMMANDED NOAH.**

10 And seven days later the waters of the flood were on the earth.

**11 IN THE SIX HUNDREDTH YEAR OF NOAH'S LIFE, IN THE SECOND MONTH, IN THE SEVENTEENTH DAY OF THE MONTH, ON THIS DAY ALL THE FOUNTAINS OF THE GREAT DEEP WERE BROKEN UP, AND THE WINDOWS OF THE HEAVENS WERE OPENED.**

12 And there was rain on the earth, forty days and forty nights.

**13 IN THIS VERY DAY, NOAH AND SHEM, HAM, AND JAPHETH, THE SONS OF NOAH, AND NOAH'S WIFE AND HIS SONS' THREE WIVES WITH THEM CAME TO THE ARK,**

**14 THEY AND ALL THE LIVING THINGS ACCORDING TO THEIR KIND, AND ALL THE BEASTS ACCORDING TO THEIR KIND, AND ALL THE CREEPING THINGS THAT CREEP ON THE EARTH ACCORDING TO THEIR KIND, AND ALL THE BIRDS ACCORDING TO THEIR KIND, AND EVERY WINGED BIRD.**

**15 AND THEY CAME TO NOAH TO THE ARK, TWO OF EACH, OF ALL FLESH IN WHICH IS THE BREATH OF LIFE.**

**16 AND THOSE WHICH CAME WERE MALE AND FEMALE, SOME OF ALL FLESH CAME, AS GOD HAD COMMANDED HIM.** And Yahweh closed it for him.

17 And the flood was on the earth for forty days and forty nights, and the waters multiplied and raised the ark, and it was lifted from the earth.

18 And the waters grew strong and multiplied greatly on the earth, and the ark went on the surface of the waters.

19 And the waters grew very very strong on the earth, and they covered all the high mountains that are under all the heavens.

20 Fifteen cubits above, the waters grew stronger, and they covered the mountains.

21 **AND ALL FLESH, THOSE THAT CREEP ON THE EARTH, THE BIRDS, THE BEASTS, AND THE WILD ANIMALS, AND ALL THE SWARMING THINGS THAT SWARM ON THE EARTH, AND ALL THE HUMANS EXPIRED.**

22 Everything that had the breathing spirit of life in its nostrils, everything that was on the dry ground, died.

23 And he wiped out all the substance that was on the face of the earth, from human to beast, to creeping thing, and to bird of the heavens, and they were wiped out from the earth, and only Noah and those who were with him in the ark were left.

24 **AND THE WATERS GREW STRONG ON THE EARTH A HUNDRED FIFTY DAYS.**

GENESIS 8:

1 **AND GOD REMEMBERED NOAH AND ALL THE LIVING, AND ALL THE BEASTS THAT WERE WITH HIM IN THE ARK, AND GOD PASSED A WIND OVER THE EARTH, AND THE WATERS WERE DECREASED.**

2 **AND THE FOUNTAINS OF THE DEEP AND THE WINDOWS OF THE HEAVENS WERE SHUT,** and the rain was restrained from the heavens.

3 And the waters receded from the earth continually, **AND THE WATERS WERE ABATED AT THE END OF A HUNDRED FIFTY DAYS.**

4 **AND THE ARK RESTED, IN THE SEVENTH MONTH, IN THE SEVENTEENTH DAY OF THE MONTH, ON THE MOUNTAINS OF ARARAT.**

5 **AND THE WATERS CONTINUED RECEDING UNTIL THE TENTH MONTH; IN THE TENTH MONTH, ON THE FIRST OF THE MONTH, THE TOPS OF THE MOUNTAINS APPEARED.**

6 And it was at the end of forty days, and Noah opened the window of the ark which he had made.

**7 AND HE SENT OUT A RAVEN, AND IT WENT BACK AND FORTH UNTIL THE WATERS DRIED UP FROM THE EARTH.**

8 And he sent out a dove from him to see whether the waters had eased from the face of the earth.

9 And the dove did not find a resting place for its foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for waters were on the face of the earth, and he put out his hand and took it and brought it to him to the ark.

10 And he waited seven more days, and he again sent out a dove from the ark.

11 And the dove came to him at evening time, and here was an olive leaf torn off in its mouth, and Noah knew that the waters had eased from the earth.

12 And he waited seven more days, and he sent out a dove, and it did not return to him ever again.

**13 AND IT WAS IN THE SIX HUNDRED AND FIRST YEAR, IN THE FIRST MONTH, ON THE FIRST OF THE MONTH, THE WATERS DRIED FROM THE EARTH.** And Noah turned back the covering of the ark and looked, and here the face of the earth had dried.

**14 AND IN THE SECOND MONTH, ON THE TWENTY-SEVENTH DAY OF THE MONTH, THE EARTH DRIED UP.**

**15 AND GOD SPOKE TO NOAH, SAYING,**

**16 "GO OUT FROM THE ARK, YOU AND YOUR WIFE AND YOUR SONS' WIVES WITH YOU.**

**17 ALL THE LIVING THINGS THAT ARE WITH YOU, OF ALL FLESH, OF THE BIRDS, AND OF THE BEASTS, AND OF ALL THE CREEPING THINGS THAT CREEP ON THE EARTH, THAT GO OUT WITH YOU, SHALL SWARM IN THE EARTH AND BE FRUITFUL AND MULTIPLY IN THE EARTH."**

**18 AND NOAH AND HIS SONS AND HIS WIFE AND HIS SONS' WIVES WENT OUT.**

**19 ALL THE LIVING THINGS, ALL THE CREEPING THINGS AND ALL THE BIRDS, ALL THAT CREEP ON THE EARTH, BY THEIR FAMILIES, THEY WENT OUT OF THE ARK.**

20 And Noah built an altar to Yahweh, and he took some of each of the clean beasts and of each of the clean birds, and he offered sacrifices on the altar.

21 And Yahweh smelled the pleasant smell, and Yahweh said to his heart, "I shall not again curse the ground on man's account, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from their youth, and I shall not again strike all the living as I have done.

22 All the rest of the days of the earth, seed and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease."

## Each in Its Own Words

The very fact that it is possible to separate out two continuous stories like this is remarkable itself, and it is strong evidence for the hypothesis. One need only try to do the same thing with any other book to see how impressive this phenomenon is.

But it is not only that it is possible to carve out two stories. What makes the case so powerful is that each story consistently uses its own language. The P story (the one in boldface) consistently refers to the deity as God. The J story always uses the name Yahweh. P refers to the sex of the animals with the words "male and female" (Gen 6:19; 7:9,16). J uses the terms "man and his woman" (7:2) as well as male and female. P says that everything "expired" (6:17; 7:21). J says that everything "died" (7:22).

The two versions do not just differ on terminology. They differ on actual details of the story. P has one pair of each kind of animal. J has seven pairs of clean animals and one pair of unclean animals. ("Clean" means fit for sacrifice. Sheep are clean; lions are unclean.) P pictures the flood as lasting a year (370 days). J says it was forty days and forty nights. P has Noah send out a raven. J says a dove. P obviously has a concern for ages, dates, and measurements in cubits. J does not.

Probably the most remarkable difference of all between the two is their different ways of picturing God. It is not just that they call the deity by different names. J pictures a deity who can regret things that he has done (6:6,7), which raises interesting theological questions, such as whether an all-powerful, all-knowing being would ever regret past actions. It pictures a deity who can be "grieved to his



heart" (6:6), who personally closes the ark (7:16) and smells Noah's sacrifice (8:21). This anthropomorphic quality of J is virtually entirely lacking in P. There God is regarded more as a transcendent controller of the universe.

The two flood stories are separable and complete. Each has its own language, its own details, and even its own conception of God. And even that is not the whole picture. The J flood story's language, details, and conception of God are consistent with the language, details, and conception of God in other J stories. The P flood story is consistent with other P stories. And so on. The investigators found each of the sources to be a consistent collection of stories, poems, and laws.

## The Doorstep

The discovery that there were four separate, internally consistent documents came to be known as the Documentary Hypothesis. The process was also called "Higher Criticism."<sup>4</sup> What had begun as an idea by three men of the eighteenth century came to dominate investigations of the Bible by the end of the nineteenth century.

It had taken centuries of collecting clues to arrive at this stage which one could regard as fairly advanced or really quite minimal, depending on one's point of view. On the one hand, for centuries no one could easily challenge the accepted tradition that Moses was the author of the Five Books, and now people of acknowledged piety could say and write openly that he was not. They were able to identify at least four hands writing in the first five books of the Bible. Also, there was the hand of an extremely skillful collector known as a redactor, someone who was capable of combining and organizing these separate documents into a single work that was united enough to be readable as a continuous narrative.

On the other hand, what these detectives of biblical origins had arrived at was only the doorstep. They were able to see that a puzzle existed, and they were able to begin to get an idea of how complex the puzzle was going to be. True, they could identify four documents and a redactor, but who wrote those documents? When did they

live? What was their purpose? Did they know each other's work? Did any of them know that they were writing a *Bible*, a work to be held as sacred and authoritative? And the mysterious redactor: was it one person, or were there several? Who were they? Why did they combine the documents in this complex way? The answers were buried in the pages of the Bible and in the soil of the Middle East. By digging into both, my predecessors and I found out how the stories in those pages were connected with that world.

## Two Countries, Two Writers

The first two sources, J and E, were written by two persons who lived during the period that I described in the last chapter. They were tied to the life of that period, its major events, its politics, its religion, and its catastrophes. In this chapter I intend to demonstrate this and to identify the persons who wrote them.

First, the author of J came from Judah and the author of E came from Israel. A number of biblical scholars before me have suggested this, but what is new here is that I mean to present a stronger collection of evidence for this than has been made known before, I mean to be more specific about who the two writers were, and I mean to show more specifically how the biblical stories actually related to these two men and to the events of their world.

The mere fact that different stories in the first books of the Bible call God by different names of course proves nothing in itself. Someone could write about the queen of England and sometimes call her the queen and sometimes call her Elizabeth II. But, as I have said, there was something more suspicious about the way the different names of the deity lined up in the first few books of the Bible. The two different names, Yahweh and Elohim, seemed to line up consistently in each of the two versions of the same stories in the doublets. If we separate the Elohim (E) stories from the Yahweh (J) stories, we get a consistent series of clues that the E stories were written by someone concerned with Israel and the J stories by someone concerned with Judah.<sup>5</sup>

3. For readers who are interested in more precise details, Samuel had died by this time, and Shiloh had fallen to the Philistines. The priests of Shiloh therefore were located at this time at the city of Nob.

## Chapter 2

1. The first version of the creation story is Gen 1:1–2:3; the second version is Gen 2:4–24.

2. The flood story appears here on pp. 54–59 with the two versions separated.

3. Genesis 15 and Genesis 17.

4. The term “Higher Criticism” was used to distinguish this kind of work from textual study, which was referred to as “Lower Criticism.” In textual study, a biblical scholar compares the various oldest surviving manuscripts of the Bible—the Masoretic Hebrew text, the Greek versions, the Vulgate (Latin), the Aramaic, and now the Qumran (“Dead Sea Scrolls”) texts, among others. When the versions differ, the scholar tries to determine which is the original and which is the result of a scribal error or emendation. Often fascinating and important for biblical interpretation, this study of the words of the text itself was nonetheless regarded as “lower” (though not necessarily in a negative sense) than the study of content and history involved in study of the sources.

5. The names of God were the first, not the only, clue. For example, the E source speaks of the mountain of God at Horeb; the J source calls it Mount Sinai. E calls Moses’ father-in-law Jethro; J calls him Reuel.

6. Gen 13:18; 18:1.

7. Gen 15:18.

8. Gen 32:25–31; 1 Kings 12:25.

9. J = Gen 28:11a,13–16,19. E = Gen 28:11b,12,17–18,20–23; 35:1–7.

10. Genesis 34.

11. Gen 33:19.

12. The birth of Benjamin is described in Gen 35:16–20, usually regarded as E. For the technical discussion of this matter, see my article

# Appendix

## Identification of the Authors of the Five Books of Moses

### THE BOOK OF GENESIS

J                      E                      P                      R

Creation	2:4b-25	1:1-2:3	
Generations of heaven and earth			2:4a
Garden of Eden	3:1-24		
Cain and Abel	4:1-16		
Cain genealogy	4:17-26		
Generations of man	5:29		*5:1-28, 30-32
Sons of God and human women	6:1-4		
The flood	6:5-8; 7:1-5, 7, 10, 12, 16b-20, 22-23; 8:2b-3a, 6, 8-12, 13b, 20-22	6:9-22; 7:8-9, 11, 13-16a, 21, 24; 8:1-2a, 3b-5, 7, 13a, 14-19; 9:1-17	

\*Entries marked with an asterisk, see Notes on Identification of Authors.

	J	E	P	R
Noah's drunkenness	9:18-27			
Noah's age				*7:6; 9:28-29
Generations of Noah's sons	10:8-19, 21 24-30		10:1b-7, 20, 22-23, 31, 32	10:1a
The tower of Babel	11:1-9			
Generations of Shem				11:10a, *10b-26
Generations of Terah				11:27a, *32
Abraham's migration	12:1-4a		11:27b-31; 12:4b-5	
Promise to Abraham	12:6-9			
Wife/sister	12:10-20			
Abraham and Lot	13:1-5, 7-11a, 12b-18 [*14:1-24]		13:6, 11b-12a	
Abraham's covenant	*15:1-21		17:1-27	
Hagar and Ishmael	16:1-2, 4-14		16:3, 15-16	
The three visitors	18:1-33			
Sodom and Gomorrah	19:1-28, 30-38		19:29	
Wife/sister		20:1-18		
Birth of Isaac	21:1a, 2a, 7	21:6	21:1b, 2b-5	
Hagar and Ishmael		21:8-21		
Abraham and Abimelek		21:22-34		
The binding of Isaac		22:1-10, 16b-19		*22:11-16a