

The JEPD Theory

A long tradition holds that the five books of the Pentateuch or Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) were written by Moses. The tradition honors Moses because of his esteemed position as lawgiver and friend of God. But it is highly unlikely that he wrote the version of the Pentateuch that we have today. Even a casual reader will notice problems with this idea when reading the text. There are inconsistencies and duplications, not to mention the fact that Moses would have needed to write about his own death before it happened.

Scholars in the last century have felt that the best way to explain the various inconsistencies and duplications in the books of the Pentateuch is to assume that the books are a redaction—that is, an edited version of several different original sources. This is called the documentary hypothesis. Using the techniques of source criticism and redaction criticism, some modern scholars propose that four sources (or traditions) contributed to the five books of the Pentateuch. These sources are the following:

- the Yahwist (abbreviated J from the German word for Yahwist)
- the Elohist (abbreviated E)
- the Deuteronomist (abbreviated D)
- the Priestly (abbreviated P)

Based on the abbreviations used for the four sources, the documentary hypothesis is also called the four-source theory or the JEPD theory. These four sources have been identified by biblical scholars by their specific literary styles and theological concerns. The theory also proposes that each source reflects a particular community and historical situation, which explains the focus of their theology. We will briefly examine each source's perspective. Keep in mind that this is only a theory; we have no actual J, E, or P texts apart from the Bible itself. (On the other hand, the Book of Deuteronomy is widely accepted as the work of an independent author who had little if any responsibility for Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, or Numbers. Thus, Deuteronomy is the D text.)

The Yahwist (J)

The Yahwist source originated in the southern kingdom (Judah), perhaps as early as the reigns of King Solomon or even King David. It is the earliest source, dating back to the tenth century BC. Its theology is focused on God's promises for salvation and the importance of cultic worship. Here are some of the characteristics of the Yahwist source:

- God is referred to as Yahweh (translated as LORD [small caps] in English).
- The holy mountain is called Sinai.
- God is anthropomorphized—that is, he is given human characteristics and feelings. (He walks in the garden and talks with Adam.)
- The natives of Palestine are called Canaanites.
- Some examples are the story of Adam and Eve (see Genesis 2:4–25) and the account of the Ten Plagues (see Exodus 7:14—10:29).

The Elohist (E)

The Elohist source developed in the northern kingdom (Israel). It is thought to have developed a little later than the J source, in the ninth century BC. Its theology focuses less on Temple worship (that happened in



the southern kingdom) and more on morality and Israel's proper response to God: faith and fear of the Lord. **Some think that the Elohist tradition reworked the Yahwist writing, altering the perspective from J's pro-monarchy perspective to a more pro-covenant perspective.** Some of the characteristics of the Elohist source are these:

- **It emphasizes prophecy.**
- **God is referred to as Elohim ("Lord God" in English translation).**
- The holy mountain is Horeb.
- The natives of Palestine are called Amorites.
- **God speaks in dreams.**
- Some examples are the sacrifice of Isaac (see Genesis, chapter 22) and the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 20:1–17).

The Deuteronomist (D)

The Deuteronomist source is the clearest independent source. The author is responsible for most if not all of the Book of Deuteronomy and most likely the historical books of Joshua through Second Kings (not including Ruth). This collection of books, Deuteronomy through Second Kings, is called the Deuteronomistic history and was most likely written in the seventh and sixth centuries BC. But the person(s) responsible for creating this collection remains a mystery (although the Book of Deuteronomy is often associated with the book found by King Josiah around 622 BC [see 2 Kings, chapter 22]). The Deuteronomist theology teaches that all the bad things that happened to the Israelites were God's punishment for the grave sins of the leaders and the people. Some characteristics of the Deuteronomistic source are these:

- The book of Deuteronomy is a retelling of the stories of Exodus through Numbers (Deuteronomy means "second law").
- Deuteronomy interprets Israel's history as a cycle of God's forgiveness and renewal of the Covenant, followed by the people's failure to live the Covenant, followed by the bad things that happen to them as punishment.
- It emphasizes the Israelites' covenantal obligation.
- The holy mountain is Horeb.
- It emphasizes law and morals.
- An example is the Book of Deuteronomy.

The Priestly (P)

The priestly source is thought to have developed during and after the Exile (587–538 BC), thus it dates around the sixth century BC. Some think it never existed as an independent source but is the work of the final person or group revising and adding to the JED sources after they had been joined (see below). The theology of this source is that the Jewish people's religious identity is found in proper worship and special laws that set them apart from other people. It represents the priestly class's rejecting the idea of religious identity being found in a divinely appointed king (an approach which had failed them). Rather, this source focused on cult and ritual. The priestly source has these characteristics:



- emphasis on Temple cult and worship
- emphasis on the southern kingdom of Judah (because that is the location of Jerusalem and the Temple where cultic worship occurs)
- emphasis on the role of the Levites, the priestly class or tribe
- emphasis on genealogies and tribal lists, which established the different groups in Israelite society, including the priestly class
- emphasis on order and the majesty of God and creation
- examples: first Creation story (see Genesis 1:1—2:4), the Book of Leviticus

Summary Chart of Four Pentateuch Sources

	Date	Place	Divine Name	Religious features	Literary features
Yahwist	United Monarchy (~950 BC)	Jerusalem?	Uses Yahweh throughout the Pentateuch	Sacrifice is not limited to one single place nor is the priesthood limited to one family. Heads of household can make sacrifices.	Lively narrative and anthropomorphic view of God.
Elohist	Divided Monarchy (~850 BC)	Northern Kingdom (Israel)	<i>Elohim</i> used exclusively until the divine name is introduced in Exodus.	Sacrifice is not limited to one single place nor is the priesthood limited to one family. Heads of household can make sacrifices.	Lively narrative and anthropomorphic view of God.
Deuteronomist	Reign of Josiah (~625 BC)	Southern Kingdom (Judah)	Not applicable	Only the Levites can make sacrifices in the one place God chooses.	Sermonic, with characteristic phrases.
Priestly Writer	End of the Exile (~500 BC)	Babylon and / or Jerusalem	<i>Elohim</i> used exclusively until the divine name is introduced in Exodus.	Only the offspring of Aaron can make sacrifices. A single place of sacrifice is presumed.	Preserves traditions, such as genealogies, precise locations, ages, and so on. Regal view of God.

(This chart is adapted from *Encountering Ancient Voices: A Guide to Reading the Old Testament*, by Corrine L. Carvalho, Saint Mary's Press, 2006, page 34.)



The Four Sources Combined

Remember that JEPD theory is only a theory and not a proven fact. It is an elegant theory that gives us important insights into the development of the Pentateuch. But the actual number of sources, who wrote them and why, and when they were combined is still a matter of scholarly debate. Given that, here is the most commonly accepted understanding of how these four sources were combined into the five books of the Pentateuch we have today:

1. During the relatively stable years of King David and King Solomon (1000–922 BC), scribes in the royal court and Temple (the two were intimately connected) began to capture the Israelites' oral histories and religious stories in writing, the beginning of the J source.
2. After the brief civil war following Solomon's death (922 BC), there were two kingdoms. Judah (the southern kingdom) kept or continued the written tradition (J), and the northern kingdom developed an alternative written tradition (E).
3. After the northern kingdom was conquered and destroyed by the Assyrians (721 BC), Israelite refugees fled to Jerusalem, bringing their written tradition (E) with them. Seeking to capture the truths of both the J and E sources, a new tradition was created by combining the two. Appropriately, this theoretical source is called the JE source.
4. At some point, another written tradition was created—essentially the Book of Deuteronomy and perhaps also Joshua and Samuel. This source implied that the bad things happening to the Israelites were God's punishment for their failure to be faithful to the Covenant. This source was lost, but was found by King Josiah during his renovation of the Temple (622 BC). This tradition was expanded to become the Books of Deuteronomy through Second Kings.
5. After the southern kingdom was conquered by the Babylonians (587 BC), many of the Israelite religious leaders were taken to Babylon in captivity. While in Exile (and perhaps after their return from Exile), they began to rewrite their history to emphasize that their religious identity—their right relationship with God—should be found through proper worship and a strict code of law. They did this by revising and adding to the JE source to create the Books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. They added these books to the Deuteronomistic collection (Deuteronomy through Second Kings) and the writings of the prophets to form the first canon of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Other Views of the Sources

(This section is taken from Carvalho, *Encountering Ancient Voices*, page 35.)

Currently, the four-source model is being hotly debated. No, it is not because biblical scholars reject the idea that ancient authors used sources, but because they question whether “four” sources is overly simplistic. In addition, they wonder about the date and provenance of the sources.

In the past 110 years, the presence and identity of D and P have remained firm. These sources have very distinct language and literary style. They each have a consistent theology. They probably represent the work of schools of thought rather than the production of a single literary genius. Within each source there is use and development of earlier material.



One of the big questions for D is its extent and date. Is D limited to the Book of Deuteronomy, or can it be found in other parts of the Pentateuch? Did D redact the whole Pentateuch? What is the relationship between D and the history that follows in Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings?

The date of P is also a major issue for source critics. Is it the presentation of an ideal Israel from the Restoration Period or of the laws of the priests of the monarchy? Is P the redactor of the Pentateuch or simply another source used by the final redactor?

The material outside of D and P does not show the same cohesion. Can this material be neatly divided up into two separate sources (J and E), or does it represent a much more complex accretion of various traditions over time? Was this material the early base that influenced D and P, or was it a series of late traditions added to a D or P base?

Referenced Material and Further Information

Books

Achtemeier, Paul J., ed. *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*. New York: HarperCollins, 1996. See article "Sources of the Pentateuch."

Quinn, Mark, and Mark Scott. *Step by Step through Scripture*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 1999.

Web Sites

ccat.sas.upenn.edu/rs/2/Judaism/jepd.html (contains an excellent graph)

ccat.sas.upenn.edu/rs/2/Judaism/jp-flood.html (coordinating Web site on JEDP and the Flood narrative)

