

Preface

Open your Bible, and you get contradictions. Did Noah take the animals equally, or did he distinguish clean and unclean? The Biblical text says, *both*. Contradictions are a problem for those who take the Bible as the Word of God: how can God contradict himself? This book instead asks the historical question: how did these texts get to be the way they are? In that light, contradictions are nothing but evidence of change; they are not the problem; *they are the answer*. But theories dealing with them *as* problems still dominate the Biblical scene, and some of them at least must be addressed. For instance:

The **Four Document Hypothesis** (4DH),¹ is the current most widely accepted solution for the problem of contradictions in the five Pentateuch texts (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). The hypothesis, best known in the Graf-Wellhausen version of 1892, posits four texts, each without internal contradictions, whose *combination* yielded our present texts: J (Jehovah, 09c). E (El, 08c), D (Deuteronomy, 07c), and P (Priestly, 05c).²

It was found hard to consistently distinguish J and E, which in practice were often combined as JE. The priestly P attracted early disagreement; statements of priestly interest were found to be both very early and very late, leading to the separation of P1, P2, and P3, plus H for the “Holiness Code,” Leviticus 17-27. H H Rowley, surveying the situation at mid-century, said of it:³

That it is widely rejected in whole or in part is doubtless true, but there is no view to put in its place that would not be more widely and emphatically rejected . . . [it] is only a working hypothesis, which can be abandoned with alacrity with a more satisfying view is found, but which cannot with profit be abandoned until then.

It was not abandoned. Some⁴ speak of a “breakdown,” and scholars still argue whether some passage is “Pre-P” or “post-P.” It is easily shown that the 4DH gives wrong solutions for intertwined stories like Noah’s Ark in Genesis (§9); for P in Leviticus, see §29-31. Such are the wars of the Pentateuch.

But Biblical problems are wider than the Pentateuch, and deeper than Noah; the gods are more numerous than Yahweh. We will begin instead with a look at the Land and its earlier inhabitants: the Canaanites, with their god El.

¹For a modern reference, distinguishing the four documents and their subvarieties, using ten (!) colors, see Freedman **Bible** 2003.

²Pfeiffer (1941; 2ed 1948) 139. There are many variants of the theory.

³Rowley **Growth** (1950) 46.

⁴Dozeman **Pentateuch** (2011) 1.

Approach

Audience. This book is offered to the judgement of scholars, but it has been written to be accessible to the informed general reader. It is hoped that the one will bear with what has been done to offer a welcome to the other.

Scope. This is not an Introduction to the Old Testament, which would have to be many times larger. But the few passages which can be considered here may suggest the value of the historical approach: of recognizing changes, both in the texts and in the times. There is more to the Bible than the Bible, and the first five chapters, the Orientation, are meant to give some background in Egypt and Mesopotamia. Readers may find helpful the introductions to each section, which pause to summarize the steps in the larger argument.

Opposing Views. Apart from the 4DH, there are the myth of the Twelve Tribes (see §39), the idea that the Song of Deborah (§40) is the oldest thing in the Bible, and the claim that King Josiah (§54) was inspired by a suddenly rediscovered copy of Deuteronomy. These too will require some notice.

But our aim is not controversialist, and we will mostly just present our own reading of the textual evidence, and the historical picture to which it leads us, leaving that picture to speak for itself, as all views ultimately must.

Details

Dates BC/BCE are given with a proposed zero: 06c is “sixth century [BC].” For events, see the Chronology at p243. For places, besides the maps at p246, see the Zondervan Essential Atlas of the Bible (2013), here cited as **Atlas**.

Quotations follow English Bible numbering, and use the ASV translation. Asterisks (as Exod *20:1-17, the Decalogue) mark passages considered to be interpolations; §9 is “chapter 9” of this book, where Noah will be unriddled. Short citations of other works are expanded in the Works Cited list at p248.

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Dedication

Abraham ibn Ezra, in the 11th century, had made a beginning by rejecting Moses’ authorship of the Pentateuch texts. But the systematic study of the Bible really began with the 1670 Tractatus of Benedict de Spinoza.

This book is dedicated to Benedict de Spinoza.

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