

# *Four Sources Of The Pentateuch*

*A brief résumé of the four-source theory at its height seems in order, since the subsequent turmoil has yielded few manageable substitutes, and Wellhausen's original theory did much to make sense of what can often seem to be impenetrable and senselessly complex tracts of writing.*

**J** The *Jahwist* is proposed as the earliest source. He calls God JHWH. His earthiness and practicality seemed to have its basis in a very “incarnated” experience of religion. He has been located in the heart of Jerusalem, where the “incarnate” evidence of Hebrew religious experience - the Temple, the Ark, the Monarchy, the walled City - are influentially dominant. Therefore the writer has been imagined to be in court circles. His use of the traditions has not been afraid to make pictures of God that are sometimes shockingly anthropomorphic: God forms the first man out of dust, like a sculptor forming clay in his hand: he breathes into the figurine, which receives the breath of God (Heb *ruah*, Gk *pneuma*, Lat *spiritus*) and man becomes a living being. God plants a garden, forms living creatures for the man to name, and operates surgically to produce woman; God walks with them in the garden in the cool of the day. After the Fall, God makes clothes and puts them on his creatures; at the Flood it is God's hand that closes the door of the Ark. At the Exodus God fights Pharaoh and wins, incidentally blowing the sea apart with his breath, and clogging the chariot wheels in the bed of the Sea of Reeds. One of our questions will be how to relate this earthy, primitive feel to the stories to the extreme sophistication of conceptual content, for instance in the account of the Fall.

**E** by contrast is a Northern source, edited after the division of Israel/Samaria from the Southern Judah. With the signs of God's presence in Jerusalem lost, and a discredited, man-made monarchy replacing the providential Davidic throne, a much more lofty and distant sense of God appears. *Elohim* is beyond the reach of humanity, communicating through angels and intermediaries. The prophets have their rôle too: Moses strikes the sea with his rod, and it divides; there is no Elohist God clogging chariot wheels. The kings lose their special relationship with God, and religious leadership passes far more into the hands of prophets, who arise with their own authority (which they often use to denounce the ruler). Religion becomes something of a wild card, as opposed to the heavily institutional Southern faith which is at home at the king's right hand. The status of humanity vis-à-vis the divine changes; the language of awe and terror enters the faith at its heart.

These two sources are combined somewhere in the time of Solomon; the author of this combined literature is called *the Jehovist*. His genius is vital to the spirit and power of the Pentateuch.

**P** is a source emanating from priestly circles late in the story, perhaps even in Babylon. The first creation account (Gen 1) is theirs, showing the supremacy of the one God over the Babylonian sun, moon and stars: he is their creator and they obey him. We should sustain the

knowledge that the Israelites lost the whole mindset of their faith when the monarchy was obliterated and the walls of Jerusalem slighted. The priests were effectively left to rebuild the national consciousness in a spiritual fashion which did not depend on the factors they had lost. They sometimes descend, like all priests, into great banality, and sometimes ascend to great heights. Priests like genealogies, lists, etiologies (explaining how names came to be given to places or people), dates, prescriptions for liturgies, and the very rhythm of liturgy; even in the Creation account we can sense the processional arrival of creatures and the responsorial beat of the morning and evening, the utter authority of the Creator (“He spoke...it was so”). The registration of divine laws, particularly relating to ritual purity, is ascribed to priests. In Babylon, where the actual practice of religion is no longer physically possible, the faith becomes spiritualised: *sacrifice* yields to *sacrifice of praise*, *the land* yields to *the body of the believer*, the keeping of its bounds expressed in *circumcision*: the separation of the Israelite from the gentile becomes vital, and receives its sharp delineation in the food laws and the Sabbath, which take on quite inordinate weight and significance.

**D** The Deuteronomist is the only source acknowledged to be firmly recognisable in the present climate. The book Dt is set as the Last Will and Testament of Moses, put before the Israelites on the heights of Pisgah, on the threshold of the Promised Land. In fact it must date from c 750 BC and, in its final edited form, may be addressed to returning exiles in 538 BC. It is deeply conservative, recalling Israel to the Covenant with God, which Babylon appeared to have negated. It places the relationship of the individual Israelite with God at the summit of what a human being can mean. It reiterates and amplifies laws from the previous books of the Torah. It lays down the rules for the building of the Sanctuary and its rituals.

Despite being acknowledged as among the latest of the writings in the Torah, it contains some of the most ancient.

It embodies a dramatic demand for personal holiness on the part of every Israelite, and it is no surprise that Jesus quotes it to Satan as the response to all temptation.

We should like to think that these four sources are easy to recognise, but the text is far more complicated than it might have appeared to the likes of de Wette and Wellhausen. Scholars are therefore becoming more cautious in their attribution of texts to this or that source. However, the categories themselves are holding up reasonably firmly, and it is worthwhile to read up about them, simply to refine our own response to what we are reading in the texts.