Introduction

What Is the Biblical Priestly Narrative?

The biblical priestly narrative is, first and foremost, a hypothetical document. To explain what I mean by this, and why this edition is not simply one scholar's imagination run wild, I first offer a very brief introduction. I survey some of its central points of agreement in the field of biblical studies about the composition of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), commonly called the Torah or Pentateuch. Then I explain the specific methodological approach that stands in the background of this project.

Around the seventeenth century, scholars began to question, and ultimately reject, the idea that the Torah was written by Moses.[1] But if Moses did not write it, then who did? And more pointedly, how many people wrote it? Unfortunately, there is not a single answer to either question. Debates about the literary history and authorship of these five books began with Baruch Spinoza and continue to this day.

There are, however, a few broad conclusions that nearly all biblical scholars have come to agree on. Many of these conclusions can be

[1] The term "Torah" is often used in Jewish contexts to refer to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. It typically signifies a coherent and religiously authoritative text. In academic discourse, it is more common to use the term "Pentateuch" to refer to these same first five books. In this introduction, I will primarily make use of the term "Pentateuch," and use the term "Torah" only when I am referring to the reception of this text in a Jewish context (either early or modern).

summed up in the statement that the Pentateuch is a composite text. Its division into five books was not original, but it is nevertheless made up of multiple parts with different authors. The Five Books of Moses are not five books, and they are also not by Moses.

The works that we now know as Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are not an original part of this text; they are a result of choices made by scribes centuries after the texts that make up the Pentateuch were written. No one ever set out to write "Genesis." Instead, the book we now know as Genesis is the result of Persian and Hellenistic-era Jewish scribes being faced with technological limitations. In the latter half of the first millennium BCE, texts composed in Hebrew were written on scrolls made either of animal skins (parchment) or plant materials (papyrus). Today, all five books are commonly copied onto a single large scroll, which can be found in every synagogue.[2] But in antiquity, these scrolls could not be infinitely long; at some point they would tear. According to the scholar Menahem Haran, an estimate for the maximum length of a scroll at the time is roughly equivalent to the book of Chronicles, which spans more or less 1650 verses (in modern editions) or around 48 pages in modern print Bibles.[3] The Pentateuch, by comparison, covers about 146 pages or 5,845 verses—about three and a half times the size of Chronicles.

Since the Pentateuch was too long for a single scroll, ancient scribes chose to break it into five sections at relatively logical points in the story. Genesis narrates the creation of the world through the Israelites' descent into Egypt; Exodus covers the Israelites in Egypt through the revelation at Sinai; Leviticus describes the creation of a mobile tent-shrine and home for the Israelite god, Yahweh; Numbers tells of the Israelites' departure from Mount Sinai and their wanderings in the wilderness; and Deuteronomy is Moses's final speech to the Israelites on the day of his death while they stand at the edge of the Promised Land. Today, we are accustomed to thinking of "books" as what authors

[2] The first-known Torah scrolls date to the late antique period. For a more robust discussion of the history of the Torah scroll, see David Stern, *The Jewish Bible: A Material History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), 11–62.

[3] To see a full discussion of this, see Menahem Haran, "Book-Size and the Device of Catch-Lines in the Biblical Canon," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 36 (1985): 5–8.

write. In this case, what we encounter now as the five "books" of the Pentateuch are the result of scribes reaching the limits of what a scroll could contain. Rather than completely filling one scroll and moving to the next, these scribes chose to make thematic divisions that resulted in five scrolls of unequal lengths.

But why would these scribes be faced with this problem at all? If the Pentateuch was too long for a single scroll, wouldn't an author have separated their own work into such sections when faced with this same limitation? This leads to one point that scholars largely agree on: the Pentateuch as we have it today was not composed in this form. One of the main contributions of pentateuchal scholarship over the last two centuries has been in showing that within the Pentateuch, there are multiple versions of stories that contradict each other in some way. This has led to the conclusion that the Pentateuch was made up of several smaller strands of texts that were each written by different authors. These strands were later combined into what we know today as the Pentateuch by a series of editors over an extended period of time.

This is what we mean when we say that the Pentateuch is a composite text: it is made up of multiple different compositions written by multiple authors. Each of these compositions would have been short enough to fit on a single scroll.[4] How many different compositions were there? How many different authors were responsible for the contents of what is now the Pentateuch? These remain open questions, investigated and debated by scholars in the field of pentateuchal studies. There is precious little agreement among scholars about these issues, with two notable exceptions. As Reinhard Kratz puts it, "we can distinguish and isolate two distinct literary strata within the Pentateuch: the book of Deuteronomy . . . and the so-called Priestly Writing (P)."[5] Most of the disagreement has been on the identification of authors and units within the nonpriestly, non-Deuteronomic strands.

[4] Menahem Haran, "Book-Scrolls at the Beginning of the Second Temple Period: The Transition from Papyrus to Skins," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 54 (1983).

[5] Reinhard G. Kratz, "The Pentateuch in Current Research: Consensus and Debate," in *The Pentateuch: International Perspectives on Current Research*, ed. Thomas B. Dozeman, Konrad Schmid, and Baruch J. Schwartz (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 34.

The present book is focused on the priestly source; I will not enter into debates about other sources. For our purposes, what is important is that the existence of a distinct priestly source is broadly recognized by scholars. The vast majority of texts assigned to this source are widely agreed on. This is what makes an edition like this one possible: the source may be hypothetical, but there is a broad scholarly consensus about its content and concerns.

I will discuss these in greater detail below. For now, there are a few elements of the priestly source that are worth highlighting. First and foremost, the reason this source is given the name "priestly" is because one of its central concerns is with the communal practice of religion, which in this story (and in ancient Israel and Judah more generally) means a temple-based sacrificial cult. This source contains the most extensive and detailed descriptions of ritual practices, sacrifice, and purity laws in the entirety of the Hebrew Bible. No other text comes close to the level of detail provided in the priestly stratum until a tractate of the Mishnah (i.e., tractate Kedoshim) in the first centuries of the common era. This focus on temple ritual and the role of the priests in mediating those rituals has been taken as this source's defining characteristic. As we will see below, this conventional name can be a bit misleading.

Another significant characteristic of the priestly source is that it was not composed by a single author (or even a single school of authors). The priestly source, as scholars identify it today, is itself a composite text that has been edited and supplemented over the course of several centuries. At least two different editorial schools have been identified by scholars, the most significant of which is known as the "Holiness School."[6] This Holiness School is thought to be responsible for the second half of Leviticus (chapters 17–26) and many other smaller sections throughout Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers. A later set of priestly authors and editors has been identified in some of the texts in the book of Numbers, especially in the festival calendar in Numbers 28–29. What makes the layers in the priestly source different from the multiple layers in the Pentateuch as a whole is that they seem to have been added only to the priestly source itself, and not to the

[6] For the most complete discussion of the existence of a "Holiness School," see Israel Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence: The Priestly Torah and the Holiness School* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007).

Pentateuch as a whole.[7] It is important to recognize this characteristic of the priestly source from the outset. This is a work composed by many hands over the course of many centuries. What enables it to cohere as a single identifiably "priestly" story is that all these authors and editors largely bought into and built on both the broad worldview and the specific plot points established in a first edition of the priestly source.

Finally, it is worth underscoring this final point: one of the reasons that the priestly source is largely recognized is because of its very distinct perspective and story. Many parts of the priestly source stand in direct contradiction with other nonpriestly texts found in the Pentateuch. Perhaps the most significant example of this is the priestly Meeting Tent, which is described to Moses on Mount Sinai and which will serve as Yahweh's Dwelling Place among the Israelites. According to the priestly source, this tent is very large and quite ornate, including skillfully embroidered curtains, gold and silver-plated furniture, and many different rooms. Crucially, this Meeting Tent is said to sit at the center of the Israelite community, with the people setting up camp all around it. There is another Meeting Tent described in a nonpriestly literary strand of the Pentateuch, though, and that one is quite different. That Meeting Tent is smaller, lacks any detailed description at all, is fit only for a single person (Moses), and sits at some distance from where the community lives. Contradictions like these serve as signals for scholars of the composite character of the Pentateuch and demonstrate that there is more than one perspective represented in it.

The work of identifying the different sources or layers in the Pentateuch is the work of recovering these different perspectives and different

[7] There are of course exceptions to this. A number of scholars understand the priestly stratum to be the latest source, written after all the others and meant to be a kind of redactional layer to hold the entirety of the Pentateuch together. Those scholars who argue this typically claim that the authors responsible for this were a part of one of these later priestly schools. One example of this is the work of Erhard Blum, whose most exhaustive treatment of this is found in *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch,* Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990), 221–360. For a summary of this approach in English, see Erhard Blum, "Issues and Problems in the Contemporary Debate Regarding the Priestly Writings," in *The Strata of the Priestly Writings: Contemporary Debate and Future Directions,* ed. Sarah Shectman and Joel S. Baden (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2009), 31–44.

versions of the origins of the Israelites. Disentangling the priestly source from the other materials in the Pentateuch allows for the emergence of a version of a story that might seem familiar at first glance but actually presents a very different version of the story. But why is it important to present the priestly narrative on its own? What is at stake here? There are a few different ways to answer these questions. First, presenting the priestly narrative as an independent text challenges readers to engage with the entirety of the priestly perspective, one that does not marginalize ritual and law. In this way, this presentation of the priestly narrative counters the idea that it is an impoverished narrative. Rather, it is marked by its own concerns that cannot be reduced to a simplistic comparison with what other sources do or do not say.

This text also provides us with an opportunity to think more deeply about ancient scribes, practices of writing, and the reception of pentateuchal texts in early Jewish communities. Before the advent of the printing press and publication as we know it today, writing was often a more collective endeavor. The biblical priestly narrative is no exception; there is not a single "author" of this story. It was written by many hands over the course of multiple centuries. To reduce this text to the work of a single "author" would be to ignore the complexity of its composition and the continued resonance in the community of the ideological perspective it promotes. Indeed, it is worth underscoring that this text promotes an ideology that is distinct from that of the Pentateuch or the Hebrew Bible as a whole. The predominant voice of the Hebrew Bible is a Deuteronomistic one, one that focuses on the failure of the Israelites to keep God's commandments and the punishments they face for those failures.[8] The biblical priestly narrative presents a fundamentally different perspective, one that is wholly optimistic about Israel's desire and ability to fulfill God's commands. Being confronted with this different perspective should push us to rethink the history of the Pentateuch and its reception in early Jewish communities. Since the formation of the Pentateuch in the fifth through fourth

[8] "Deuteronomistic" refers to the ideologies expressed in the Deuteronomistic History, which spans the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. "Deuteronomic," on the other hand, refers only to the book of Deuteronomy. The two are related, but broadly speaking, Deuteronomistic theology builds on and extends Deuteronomic theology.

centuries BCE, scholars have often assumed that the redacted form of the Pentateuch is the primary text for early Jewish communities going forward. While the redacted form certainly represents one path, it is possible that another path forward might be identified in a continuation of the worldview and writing practices established in the biblical priestly narrative.

METHODOLOGY FOR IDENTIFYING THE PRIESTLY NARRATIVE

P in Genesis through Deuteronomy: A Neodocumentarian Approach

There are a number of different approaches that scholars take when it comes to identifying different sources or strata in the Pentateuch.[9] Many of these approaches are mutually exclusive and are based on very different models of how and when the various parts of the Pentateuch were composed. But, as noted above, where these different approaches overlap is in their general agreement about the existence of identifiable priestly and Deuteronomic sources. This means that the majority of the disagreement among pentateuchal scholars, from a methodological standpoint, is focused on the analysis of the nonpriestly, non-Deuteronomic materials in the Pentateuch. This also means that it becomes possible to sidestep some (though not all) of these debates in this book, because this book is an edition and translation of the priestly source. In this section, I will first address some of the major debates that continue about the nature of the priestly source, before then introducing the methodological approach I have taken in this edition and translation to identify the pentateuchal priestly materials. Finally, I will address one particular phenomenon that emerged in the combination of priestly and nonpriestly materials in

[9] This section is meant to provide an explanation of my methodological approach to creating this edition of the biblical priestly narrative. While it is meant to be clear and relatively easy to follow, it is undoubtedly the most technical section of this introduction. It is entirely possible to read this book without the materials discussed in this section. For those readers who may be interested in the motivation for creating this translation, but who find discussion of methodology too technical or tedious, I would suggest looking to the "Why Create This Translation" section of the translator's note for an abbreviated version of the main takeaways here.