

Fundamental Issues in the Study of *Tanakh*
By Rav

Dedicated in memory of
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Shiur #4d: Duplication and Contradiction (continued)

E. The Literary Aspect of the Documentary Hypothesis

Like the historical aspect of the documentary hypothesis, its literary aspect, too, contains significant difficulties, and has caused scholars of recent generations to gradually reject parts of the approach.^[1] The attempt to create a uniform continuity within the various documents was unsuccessful, and therefore various attempts were made to divide the documents themselves into sub-sources. The proper sub-division of the four central sources gave rise to much controversy among scholars, with especially contentious debate surrounding the division between the "E" source and the "J" source.

With an absence of agreement concerning even the basic assumptions for the discussion, phenomena such as the stages of development reflected in these sources were difficult to address. Differences of opinion spread also to other aspects of the hypothesis, including the dating of the various documents; the relationship between their various sub-units; the degree to which the redactor was involved in the writing; the question of how and when the sources were joined into a single Torah; and more. These disagreements undermined, to a certain degree, the reliability of the approach as a whole.

However, beyond these debates, the main difficulty in the documentary hypothesis is the very notion that several sources were brought together to form a single work – not an anthology comprising several sources placed in succession, but a single, continuous text in which the various sources are intertwined so as to preserve continuity of theme, despite the disparate origins of the sources. There is no precedent for such an enormous editorial enterprise^[2] and there is no known document from the ancient world that was compiled in such a way.^[3] Why would the anonymous redactor decide to take disparate sources and to weave them into a single work? We might also note that no mention is made anywhere of the independent existence of any of these individual documents prior to their combined presence in the Torah, nor has any archaeological discovery ever been made of any of them in pristine individual form.

At the beginning of the 20th century a new school of thought appeared, founded by the German scholar Hermann Gunkel, who suggested that the text in itself reflects the consolidation of various oral traditions; hence, one need not necessarily posit a

collection of contradictory written sources. While this approach was not meant to replace the documentary hypothesis, it did lead to the development of other scholarly views which tended not to accept the documentary hypothesis in its entirety. Many modern scholars, based in Germany, have almost completely abandoned the documentary hypothesis, and have proposed alternative models to explain the process of the writing of the Torah.^[4] As a result of the diminishing persuasiveness of the documentary hypothesis, many scholars of the last generation eschewed attention to, and analysis of, the distinctions among the various sources (even as they continued to recognize their existence in principle in the process of the consolidation of the Torah), turning instead to literary analysis of the text in its present form, having concluded that there is little to be gained from trying to discover the origins of the Biblical text.

Yet despite all the difficulties we have noted that weaken the claims of the documentary hypothesis and similar models, the textual problems which prompted the hypothesis, and which it attempted to solve, still remain. The contradictions and duplications present in the *Tanakh*, and the impossibility of reading the Torah as a single continuum, have not been solved, and the fact that in many cases one is able to discern a pattern to the contradictions between different units, in terms of the different terminology which they use, including different Names of God, remains valid. Any student of the Torah therefore must confront the challenge of how the contradictions and duplications within the Torah should be addressed.

F. The "aspects" approach

The documentary hypothesis stands, of course, in direct contradiction to the traditional Jewish world-view, which views the Torah as a unified creation emanating from a Divine source. Much of the religious Jewish public has never been exposed to the documentary hypothesis, and even those who have partial familiarity with it have, for the most part, the fundamental questions it sought to address – in fact, the world of Biblical academia is generally dismissed without any serious attention.^[5] Fear of the possible influences of the Enlightenment and its attendant views, which had penetrated the Jewish world, too, likewise led to a general distaste for this academic realm and also, to some extent, to a weakening of *Tanakh* study amongst religious Jews.

The prevalent approach among the Jewish scholars who did address the documentary hypothesis,^[6] such as Malbim, Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, Rav Yitzchak Isaac HaLevy Rabinowitz,^[7] and – especially – Rav David Tzvi Hoffmann,^[8] was to reject it out of hand. However, it would seem that even Rav Hoffmann, who was the only one to tackle the documentary hypothesis head-on, did not succeed in supplying a satisfactory answer to the main question with which we began: what is the meaning of the obvious contradictions and duplications that we find in the Torah, and how do they fit in with the traditional faith in the unity of the Torah? How are we to view the systematic nature of these contradictions?

A revolution in the attitude of Jews who believe in the unity of the Torah towards the research by biblical scholars was brought about by Rav Mordekhai Breuer (1921-

2007), a Torah sage as well as a scholar of world renown in the field of biblical study who developed the "aspects approach,"^[9] or in Hebrew, *shitat ha-bechinot*. The principal innovation of the approach was to acknowledge and utilize the claims of the documentary hypothesis which saw the Torah as made up of multiple and frequently contradictory texts, while maintaining that these differences and contradictions were nevertheless Divinely authored and intended, rather than a combination by a later editor of multiple human authors and traditions.

He expressed the significance of the documentary hypothesis as follows:

"These conclusions of biblical scholarship are based on firm evidence which can in no way be refuted, and anyone who seeks the truth and acknowledges the truth cannot deny the truth that arises from the words of these scholars. And since our tradition teaches that one cannot deny that which the eye sees and the ear hears, we too – as faithful Jews – shall not deny that which the human intellect indicates with certainty. We cannot deceive our souls in turning a lie into truth, and truth into a lie..." (*Shitat ha-Bechinot*, p. 112)

Yet Rav Breuer maintained that the contradictions are part of God's method of writing the Torah in such a way as to present different subjects in their full complexity. According to this approach, the Torah presents different aspects of reality – on both the narrative and the halakhic level – through the technique of multiple descriptions of a given topic or event. These descriptions can be presented individually and alone, each expressing one aspect of reality in its pristine form, or can be presented in combination with other conflicting descriptions that express a different aspect of the issue. When one steps back from the text and considers the multiple aspects of a topic that have been presented, the differences cease to appear as contradictions, but rather as expressions of the multi-faceted nature a given topic which, taken together, give us the whole picture. Thus Rav Breuer continues:

"The man of science sees in the Torah a collection of documents, written by J, E, D, P, and redacted later on by R.... The man of great faith, in contrast, sees in the Torah the work of God. This man believes that God Himself wrote J, E, D, and P, and He Himself also took on R's redaction work." (ibid., pp. 132-133)

Rav Breuer applied his approach in his books,^[10] and we shall examine very briefly a few examples of his approach.

Let us start with a famous example of where two seemingly different versions of the same event are placed alongside one another, that of the first two chapters of *Bereishit*, which both describe the creation of the world.^[11] In keeping with his approach, Rav Breuer argued that these two chapters represent two different aspects of God's relationship with, and guidance of, the world. Chapter 1, in which God is called "Elo-him," represents the world of nature, where the order of Creation follows a natural progression from plant life, via animals, to the creation of man – who is likewise created naturally, male and female together. In this natural world, man's role is to rule over

nature – but he has no creative role, nor any special quality that separates him fundamentally from the animal kingdom.

Chapter 2, on the other hand (starting from verse 4), where the Name Y-H-V-H is added to God's Name, expresses revelation and the connection between God and man. Man stands at the center of this world, and until he is created, there is no point in creating plants and animals (which are created after him). Man's role in chapter 2 is "to cultivate it and to guard it": he has a creative role, relating to his obligation to develop the world, and to eat in a manner that is different from the animals. He is a creature with intelligence, able to give names to the animals, and he is given special prohibitions by God – he may not eat from the Tree of Knowledge. In this world, the creation of woman, who is created in this version after man, is not intended solely for the purpose of continuing the human race; her role is also, perhaps fundamentally, to alleviate man's loneliness by providing him with a partner, a "helpmate," whom he can love and rejoice in.

Thus, the Torah does not give us one account of how the world was created, but rather presents each aspect as though it stands alone: how the world would have been created had it been a world of nature alone, and how it would have been created had it been a world only of revelation and direct contact between God and man. In reality, "both these and those are the words of the living God," and the truth is a combination of these two ideas together.^[12] Man is at one and the same time a part of the natural world and the most sophisticated creature in it, with the natural role of reproducing and continuing the human race, but also fundamentally separate from nature and a part of God Himself – a creature endowed with intelligence who may be commanded, and whose connection with his partner is not like that which exists among the animals, but has a strong social-spiritual component as well.^[13]

Let us now examine an example where the two aspects are not separated but intertwined in the text. We mentioned in a previous *shiur* the contradictions in the description of the plague of blood in Egypt. Here, too, it seems that the Torah is describing two separate aspects of the plague.^[14] First we read of the specific command to Moshe to address **Pharaoh**, and to strike the water of the **Nile**. This striking seems to represent the beginning of Pharaoh's punishment, "measure for measure," for his command that all boys born to Am Yisrael be cast into the Nile:

"Go to **Pharaoh** in the morning – behold, he goes out to the water – and you shall stand at the bank of the **Nile** to meet him, and you shall take in your hand the staff which turned into a snake. And you shall say to him, The Lord God of the Hebrews has sent me to you, to say, Let My people go, that they may serve Me in the wilderness, for behold, you have not obeyed until now. So says the Lord: By this shall you know that I am the Lord: behold, I shall smite with the **staff that is in my hand** upon the water that is in the **Nile**, and it shall turn to blood. And the fish that are in the Nile will die, and the Nile will stink, and the Egyptians will no longer be able to drink water from the Nile." ([Shemot 7:15-17](#))

The same Nile in which Moshe had been hidden as an infant, and where he was saved from the bloodbath that was the fate of the other Jewish babies, becomes – at Moshe's command – a river of blood.^[15]

The Torah then goes on to describe the other aspect of the plague of blood, which places it as part of a more general theme within the plagues as a whole that are intended as a response to Pharaoh's demand, "Show a sign for yourselves" (7:9), after the sign involving the serpent does not have the desired effect, and "Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them" (7:13). From this perspective, the plague on the Nile represents an "escalation" in the power of the sign, and therefore the plague affects not only the Nile but also every source of water in Egypt. For this purpose the staff of Aharon is used, just as it had been for the sign of the serpent:

"And God said to Moshe: **Say to Aharon, Take your staff** and stretch out our arm over the **water of Egypt** – over their rivers, over their canals, over their ponds, and over every pool of water, that they shall become blood, and there shall be blood throughout the land of Egypt, both in [vessels of] wood and in [vessels of] stone." (7:13)

Thereafter, the Torah records the execution of both aspects together: "And **Moshe and Aharon** did so, as God had commanded..." (verse 20) – detailing first the one aspect of the plague and then the other:

"... And **he lifted the staff**^[16] and he struck the water that was in the **Nile**, before the eyes of Pharaoh and before the eyes of his servants, and all the water that was in the Nile turned into blood. And the fish that were in the Nile died, and the Nile stank, and the Egyptians were unable to drink water from the Nile..." (verses 20-21)

This description corresponds exactly to the warning that had been issued concerning the striking of the Nile by Moshe.

The Torah then immediately goes on to describe the second aspect of the plague:

"And there was blood **throughout the land of Egypt**" (verse 21).

Just as the two aspects of the plague of blood are intertwined in both the introduction and the enactment of the plague of blood, the end of the plague is likewise described from both perspectives. According to the aspect that describes Aharon's striking of the water, the main purpose of the plague is to serve as proof of God's existence. But it becomes apparent that once again, the plague has not achieved its aim, and the result is the same as after the sign of the snake:

"And the magicians of Egypt did the same with their secret arts, and Pharaoh's heart was hardened, nor did he listen to them, as God had said. And Pharaoh turned and went to his house, and did not take even this to heart." (verses 22-23)

It would seem, then, that according to this aspect, the plague of blood had already ended – for if all the water in Egypt was blood, the Egyptian magicians would not have been able to perform the same feat, since they would have had no fresh water to use. Thus, Aharon's sign ended after some time, and then the magicians managed to replicate the sign, and therefore Pharaoh once again refused to award Aharon's sign any serious attention.

However, in terms of Moshe's specific striking of the Nile, the plague had not yet ended, as the Torah immediately goes on to note:

"And all the Egyptians dug around the Nile for water to drink, for they could not drink of the water of the Nile. And seven days were completed, after God had struck the Nile." (verse 24)

According to this description, the plague lasted a week, and the Egyptians were unable to drink water from the Nile – the same Nile which in the past had been full of the corpses of Jewish babies. It was only at the end of the week that the plague was seen to have ended, and it was time for another plague.^[17]

Thus, we conclude that the plague of blood had a dual purpose – to serve as a 'measure for measure' punishment of the murder of the Israelite baby boys in the Nile and as a sign, common to all the plagues, of God's truth and power. The Torah presents both aspects through the intertwining of their various elements, giving us a multi-faceted and nuanced presentation of the plague of blood.

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

^[1] Reviews of approaches opposing the documentary hypothesis may be found in sources cited previously: A. Rofe, pp. 83-112; B.Y. Schwartz, pp. 218-225. See also M.Z. Segal, pp. 127-147; R. Alberts, "*Tahalikh Tzemichatah shel ha-Torah – Gishot ba-Mechkar ha-Moderni*," *Beit Mikra* 55 (2) 5771, pp. 5-38.

^[2] As noted by M.Z. Segal, p. 144: "No work has ever been composed through this approach of joining fragments – neither in biblical literature, nor in world literature... This entire idea, set forth by the proponents of the documentary hypothesis, runs contrary to common sense and to scientific truth."

[3] This problem troubled many scholars, prompting them to seek sources for this sort of compilation during the biblical period. Y.H. Tigay, "*Ha-Chumash ha-Shomroni ke-Degem Empiri le-Bikkoret ha-Sifrutit shel ha-Torah*," *Beit Mikra* 22 (3) (70), 5737, pp. 348-361, and in his wake A. Rofe (ibid) pp. 101-104, cite, as evidence of a style that brings contradictory sources as part of a single text, the Samaritan Chumash and manuscripts found at Qumran, in which the narratives in *Sefer Shemot* include parallel fragments from *Sefer Devarim*. Tigay acknowledges (p. 360) that, since in the Samaritan Sefer Torah the fragments that were integrated into *Sefer Shemot* remained unchanged in their place in *Sefer Devarim*, "the proto-Samaritan redactor is revealed as having added into one fundamental text an addendum from another text, instead of presenting them equally or creating a completely new version through his own free workings of them. A greater measure of freedom than this is attributed to the redactor of the Torah" (ibid.). Beyond this, however, there is a significant difference between these sources and what appears in the Torah: in these sources some changes have been introduced in order to create a single narrative continuum. For example, in the story of the appointment of the judges, in [Shemot 18:13-27](#), the Samaritan Chumash includes some verses from the parallel narrative in [Devarim 1:9-18](#) – but they have been altered with a view to turning the resulting text into a single continuous narrative: Moshe's words to the people, which in *Sefer Devarim* are recorded in the first person, as part of his speech, are reworked in the Samaritan Chumash in the third person (for example: instead of "And I said to you at that time, saying, I cannot bear you alone", in [Devarim 1:9](#), the Samaritan text reads: "And Moshe said to the people, I cannot bear you alone"). In other words, even in the Samaritan Chumash and other similar sources we find no situation of contradictory narratives which are presented in juxtaposition; rather, they demonstrate an attempt to forge the different sources into a single continuum that does not grant legitimacy to the contradictions.

[4] See Alberts, pp. 6-7.

[5] This thoroughgoing apathy arose, among other reasons, from the fact that some of the greatest supporters of the critical approach were outspoken anti-Semites who used it as a means of launching attacks on Jews and on Judaism. For a general discussion of the topic see Y. Shavit and M. Eran, *Milchemet ha-Luchot – Ha-Hagana al ha-Mikra be-Mea ha-Tesha Esreh u-Pulmus Bavel ve-ha-Tanakh*, Tel Aviv 5764, esp. pp. 68-80.

[6] A review of Jewish Orthodox grappling with the documentary hypothesis is presented by Shavit and Eran, pp. 72-75.

[7] In his book *Dorot Rishonim*, vol. 6, Jerusalem 5699.

[8] We have mentioned Rav Hoffmann's book on the subject previously. In his commentary on *Vayikra* and *Devarim* he deals extensively with the critical approach.

[9] This new approach was first published in the journal *De'ot* 11, pp. 18-25, and after that he wrote several more articles on the subject. His own articles, and other articles written about his approach, appear together in the book *Shitat ha-Bechinot shel Ha-Rav Mordekhai Breuer*, Alon Shvut 5765; the references from this point onwards are to this book. The best discussion in English of Rav Breuer's work appears in *Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah*, ed. Shalom Carmy (The Orthodox Forum, Aronson, 1996), which features a number of articles by Rav Breuer and others about his approach.

[10] *Pirkei Mo'adot*, Jerusalem 5746; *Pirkei Bereishit*, Alon Shvut 5758; *Pirkei Mikraot*, Alon Shvut 5769.

[11] For more extensive discussion, see *Pirkei Bereishit*, pp. 82-122.

[12] If the biblical text presents "aspects" of the full truth, how can we know what actually happened? Counterintuitively, Rav Breuer suggests that we look in the midrash: "Someone who believes that only the plain, literal level of the text is the 'correct' or 'true' interpretation of the Torah, will have trouble believing that the plain level of the text does not describe what 'actually' happened, 'in reality.' But their view is the view of the Sadducees and the Karaites. Faithful Jews believe that both the *peshat* (literal level) and the *derash* (homiletical level) provide correct and true interpretations of the Torah. The *derash* describes what actually happened in reality, while the *peshat* describes what should have happened. This principle is well-known and universally accepted in the halakhic realms of the Torah; my 'aspects approach' merely applies this method to the narrative, as well. This being the case, where is the problem, and where is the innovation?" (*Shitat ha-Bechinot*, pp. 299-300).

[13] Obviously, there are also other ways of understanding the nature of the contradictions, and especially the significance of the two different Names for God in the two accounts of creation. Rav Breuer makes extensive use of the expressions "*middat ha-din*" (the Divine attribute of strict justice, reflected in the Name "Elo-him"), and "*middat ha-rachamim*" (the Divine attribute of mercy, reflected in the Name "Y-H-V-H"), based on Chazal's teachings in this regard. U. Cassuto, *Torat ha-Te'udot ve-Sidduram shel Sifrei ha-Torah*, Jerusalem 5719, pp. 19-38, explains the relationship between the two Names in a slightly different way: he posits that the Name "Elo-him" is a "general Name" and therefore appears in various possessive forms, implying the definite article: "*Elo-henu*" (our God), "*Elo-hekha*" (your God), etc. The Name Y-H-V-H, on the other hand, is a "private Name" which is not made explicit and does not appear in any possessive form; this is the Lord God of Israel. Hence, the Name "Elo-him" expresses a general, objective description of a universal God and transcendental Being, while the Name "Y-H-V-H" expresses the unmediated relationship between God and His creatures in general, and Israel in particular. For this reason, chapter 1 presents a general, overall description of Creation, while in chapter 2 the description is personal and subjective. Likewise, the dual description of the Flood: the first description, which mentions "Y-H-V-H", as a personal Name, describes God as having "regretted... and was sorrowed in His heart," since the text is speaking here of the direct relationship between God and man. The description using God's "general Name," on the other hand, makes no mention and gives no hint of this relationship. The Torah begins with both descriptions in order to express the two aspects of God's relationship with man and to convey both the required "fear of God" – arising from a sense of distance, and "love of God" – arising from a sense of closeness.

[14] The explanation proposed here is slightly different from that given by Rav Breuer himself: see *Pirkei Mo'adot*, pp. 208-218.

[15] The connection between the striking of the Nile and the casting of the newborn boys into the Nile is apparent not only in the repetition of the word "*yeor*" (Nile) multiple times in both narratives, but also in another linguistic link: Moshe is sent to Pharaoh prior to the plague, and God commands him, "You shall stand (*ve-nitzavta*) at the bank of the Nile (*al sefat ha-yeor*) to meet him" (verse 15). The language here is highly reminiscent

of the description of Moshe's concealment as an infant: "And she placed him in the reeds at the bank of the River (*al sefat ha-yeor*). And his sister stood (*va-tetzav*) at a distance, to know what would be done with him" (2:3-4). Notably, the expression "*al sefat ha-yeor*" (at the bank of the Nile) is not mentioned in the other plagues.

^[16] The reference here is to Moshe, as we see later on: "And God said to Moshe, Pass before the people and take with you some of the elders of Israel, and **the staff, with which you struck the Nile**, take in your hand as you go" ([Shemot 17:5](#)).

^[17] Two distinct aspects are apparent in the plague of frogs, too, as Rav Breuer notes, *ibid.*