How We Know the Torah Was Written in the Tenth Century B.C.E.

Gary A. Rendsburg

For the last two hundred years, a central question in biblical studies has been whether the authorship of the Torah (or Pentateuch). The Age of Enlightenment led scholars to realize that the traditional Jewish and Christian belief in Moses' participation in the creation of the first five books of the Bible was not historically accurate. Accordingly, scholars began to explore the formation of the Torah.

The dominant school was, and is, the JEDP theory, which holds that the Torah is based on four main sources. According to the classical formulation of this hypothesis, the sources and their dates are as follows: J, the Yahwist (Jahwist in German), dating to the 900s B.C.E.; E, the Elohist, to the 800s B.C.E.; D, the Deuteronomist, to the 600s B.C.E.; and P, the Priestly Code, to the 400s B.C.E. According to this theory, the final redaction of the text also took place in the 400s, that is, during the Persian period.¹

A variation on the theme places the Priestly source prior to the Deuteronomist, in the 700s, and thus the entire Torah is considered pre-Exilic (the Babylonian Exile commenced with the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E.).²

Recently, the minimalist school has argued that there were no written sources underlying the books of the Pentateuch prior to the late Persian or even the Hellenistic period.³

Moving towards the minimalist school, but not nearly as radical in its conclusion, is a compromise view which holds that the written sources are generally late, but that some segments of the Torah are to be dated to the pre-Exilic period, in particular the seventh century.⁴

This brief survey indicates that scholars are far from reaching a consensus concerning the crucial question of Pentateuchal authorship.⁵ The drift is clearly in the
PRECEDING PAGES: Two men, dressed as medieval bishops, carefully set a jewel-encrusted crown on the head of David. A pair of angels, floating gracefully above David's head, supports a Latin scroll that reads “Here is the Coronation of David,” in this illumination from the Hachette Psalter (c. 1225).

Like any nascent empire, the monarchy of David and his son Solomon faced numerous obstacles. David may well have been challenged by those who questioned his right to the throne, his decision to make Jerusalem the capital and his efforts to expand Israel's borders into enemy territory. To quiet these critics, David relied on a powerful political tool: propaganda. Under David, the scribes of the tenth-century B.C.E. royal court rewrote Israel's earliest history in order to justify the establishment of the monarchy, author Gary A. Rendsburg suggests. Rendsburg scours the first five books of the Bible—especially Genesis—to determine just how much these books tell us about David's reign.

direction of “the later, the better,” but I would like to reverse that trend with an altogether different proposal. In my view, the Torah stems from the period of the Davidic-Solomonic monarchy, that is, the tenth century B.C.E. Before defending this position in detail, however, I must present a few basic ground rules.

Readers of this magazine know well that a major controversy swirls around the tenth century," that even mentioning the existence of David and Solomon and the United Kingdom of Israel can create a stir in some circles. This is not the place for a full discussion, but suffice it to say that I accept the account in Samuel and Kings as essentially historical.

In addition, I do not accept the results of source criticism as practiced by most biblical scholars. I am not convinced by the finding of the JEDP theory—which one must recall is simply that, a theory, a hypothesis—especially as it relates to the narrative material in the Torah. A literary analysis shows that the prose stories of the Torah should be read as large unified blocks of literature, that is to say, as true literary compositions. Segmenting them into separate sources destroys the literary artistry of the text. Clearly, there is contradictory

SARAH AND ABRAHAM rush to bring cakes and meat to three angelic visitors gathered at a table outside their tent. One angel promises Abraham, "I will return to you next year, and your wife Sarah shall have a son!" (Genesis 18:10), thereby prompting laughter from the 90-year-old mother to be. "Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old?" asks Sarah (Genesis 18:12). God further assures the couple, "Kings will issue from you" (Genesis 17:6). God keeps his promises, and Sarah gives birth to Isaac, ancestor of David.

God's promise seems an anomaly in the days of the patriarchs; only in the tenth century B.C.E., during the time of the monarchy, would such a promise of royal heritage have held any real meaning.

A KING OF AMMON, with plaited hair, curled beard, earrings and crown, may be depicted in this life-size ninth- to eighth-century B.C.E. limestone sculpture found east of the Jordan in the ancient Ammonite capital of Rabbah (modern Amman). According to the Book of Samuel, the Ammonites numbered among the monarchy’s fiercest adversaries until David subdued them at the battle of Rabbah and seized the crown of their king (2 Samuel 12:26-31).

In Genesis, the Ammonites appear as the descendants of Ben-Ammi, the son born to Lot and his younger daughter. Might this be a tenth-century B.C.E. tale designed to give an ignoble heritage to David’s enemies? At the same time, the story establishes David’s right to rule these neighboring people who are, after all, distant cousins of the Israelites.

Material in the stories of the Torah (for example, the two stories of Creation, the lists of Esau’s wives), but this is not the result of independent preexisting written sources being brought together by a redactor in a haphazard manner. Instead, we should imagine a unified effort to produce Israel’s national epic. This endeavor was not inspired by the need to reduce everything to an irreducible single truth (in line with the logical, rational approach of Aristotle and most of Western culture since his time). Rather, it was produced by a culture that was comfortable with incorporating disparate traditions that existed in Israel (in line with the observation of anthropologists who have studied traditional cultures, including traditional Near Eastern societies, whose thought processes are not guided by pure logic).

I do, however, accept the obvious fact that the Book of Deuteronomy presents a different view of law and cult than the Books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. Here we may speak of separate sources, though I would not wish to argue which came first. Instead, I am content with presuming that two competing systems of law and cult existed side by side in ancient Israel, one reflected in Deuteronomy, the other reflected in Exodus-Leviticus-Numbers. We know that there were such competing systems in the late Second Temple period (here I have in mind the differences between the Pharisees and Sadducees from the second century B.C.E. to the first century C.E.). I propose that we assume a similar situation in the First Temple period, as reflected in the two main traditions of the Torah.

I realize that the above statements are broad strokes, but space does not allow a full defense of these views. I only ask the reader to accept them as the foundation for the analysis that follows.

In attempting to prove that the Torah stems from the tenth century, we will focus mostly on the Book of Genesis. I will add a few words later about the other four books of the Torah, but it is the Book of Genesis in particular that allows us to date the great national story of ancient Israel to the period of the United Monarchy.

In my opinion, the individuals responsible for Genesis were royal scribes living in Jerusalem during the reigns of David and Solomon in the tenth century; their ultimate goal was to justify the monarchy in general, and the kingship of David and Solomon in particular. Interpreted in this way, the Book of Genesis appears as a piece of political propaganda.

At the same time, I accept as a given that the Book of Genesis and the Torah as a whole serve literary and theological purposes as well. My focus on the political angle does not lessen my appreciation of these other two aspects of the text. Accordingly, I should say a few words about these dimensions of the Torah.

The author of Genesis far outpaces any other ancient author in literary brilliance, employing all of the techniques and rhetorical devices we usually associate with much more recent literature. The ancient reader (or listener) of Genesis surely would have been entertained. By entertainment, I am not referring to frivolous amusement. I am talking about a culture that values its literature as a national treasure. In countries such as Ireland,
Russia and Iran, literature functions in a way that, say, movies and television function in our society today. The average Irish, Russian or Persian individual, including the average peasant farmer, not only can quote the classics of his national literature but can analyze and fully appreciate all their intricacies. I believe that this kind of literary appreciation was present in ancient Israel as well; hence, the Book of Genesis would have functioned as a form of entertainment.

The theological agenda is obvious: The basic principles of ancient Israelite belief are presented from the start. There is only one God. He created the world in a perfect manner. Man has free will, but he is expected to live up to certain standards. God has a covenant with all mankind, as symbolized by His relationship with Noah. But He also has a special concern for the people Israel, as symbolized by His covenant with Abraham. God punishes iniquity and rewards righteousness.

"BLESSED BE ABRAM!" cries the priest Melchizedek (left) of Salem—an abbreviated form of Jerusalem—as the patriarch returns from a successful battle. Melchizedek, who is identified as priest of El-Elyon (God Most High) proffers bread and wine to Abraham, as depicted in this fifth-century C.E. mosaic from the church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. In return, Abraham offers the priest ten percent of his war booty as a tithe (Genesis 14:18-20).

David, too, apparently honored a local Jerusalemite priest—the Canaanite Zadok; David's action was justified by this account of Abraham's tithe.

Literature and theology are intertwined in a most remarkable way. In a later period, Jewish and Christian writers would adopt the modes of Greek philosophical writing to present the theologies of their respective religions. But in Iron Age Israel, a culture by and large antecedent to classical Greek philosophy, there was no systematic presentation of theology. Instead, religious teaching was conveyed through the literature that emerged as the books of the Torah and the other books of the Bible.

We cannot understand Genesis as a political treatise without first recalling the events of the tenth century B.C.E. The Book of Judges and the first part of the Book of Samuel indicate that in the mid- to late 11th century, certain elements within Israel began to clamor for a king. But the idea of a king faced considerable opposition. A human king was seen as a compromise of traditional Israelite theology, by which God alone was king. Nevertheless, the pro-monarchy movement eventually succeeded. In time, Israel passed from a loose confederation of tribes governed by chieftains (the so-called judges) to a strong centralized monarchy in the hands of David and Solomon.

The monarchy became so strong, in fact, that Israel was able to expand its rule beyond the borders of Canaan. An international empire developed as neighboring countries including Ammon, Moab, Edom and various Aramean states came under Israelite hegemony.

The culture as a whole underwent radical changes. The tenth century was a period of rapid urbanization. The people of Israel had originally been pastoral nomads, or semi-nomads, organized in tribes. Gradually, villages became more and more common in the central hill country, and the people settled down in the land of Canaan. The next step in this process took place in the tenth century. Urban centers developed—not only the capital, Jerusalem, but cities such as Megiddo and Hazor as well.

Establishing Jerusalem as the capital was a radical concept. After all, Jerusalem had not previously been an Israelite city; only with David's conquest in about 1000 B.C.E. was it incorporated into Israelite territory. Moreover, the development of Jerusalem as the national center brought about major changes in the religion of ancient Israel. David brought the Ark to Jerusalem amidst great pomp and circumstance, and Solomon built the Temple to Edwveh to replace the old Tabernacle.

In building the Temple, Solomon established Jerusalem as the only place where sacrifices to God could be offered. This is known as the centralization of worship. Many other scholars doubt that this was a consequence of Solomon's building the Temple; they believe that the centralization of worship occurred only later, during the reign of Hezekiah in the eighth century or of Josiah in the seventh century. But if we look at a passage such as 1 Kings 3:2—"The people
sacrificed in the high places because the Temple was not yet built"—we find that the seeds of cult centralization are already visible at the time of Solomon's construction of the Temple (though on a popular level clearly this was not the case).

Furthermore, David most likely permitted the Canaanite high priest of Jerusalem to continue functioning in that position. Scholars have noticed that two high priests are referred to in the account of David's life: Abiathar and Zadok. Abiathar is mentioned early in the narratives, even before David is king (e.g., 1 Samuel 22:20), but Zadok appears suddenly, and only after the conquest of Jerusalem. Zadok was probably the Canaanite high priest of Jerusalem, whom David permitted to continue to serve. If so, Zadok would also have been king of the city-state of Jerusalem; we now know that among the Canaanites (we have Phoenician evidence to this effect) a single
individual served both roles. I believe that Zadok should be identified with Araunah, the person who sold David the threshing floor for the purpose of building an altar (2 Samuel 24:18-25). Actually, the word Araunah is not a personal name; rather, it is a title meaning "the Lord." (The term was originally Hurrian but is used in other Near Eastern languages as well.) In one instance he is actually called "Araunah the king" (2 Samuel 24:22). Most scholars, puzzled by this phrase, emend the Masoretic Text, but we should accept this passage as it stands.

What kind of reaction did these actions by David and Solomon elicit from the populace? The Bible does not give us much in the way of clues, but we may be permitted some speculation. We know that traditionalists opposed the notion of kingship. Probably, there also was opposition to the choice of Jerusalem as the holy city, cities with a historical link to Israel would have been better candidates. Even more troublesome would have been the decision to retain a local Canaanite priest and turn him into the high priest of Yahweh. And the centralization of worship would have been fine for those who lived near Jerusalem, but for others who dwelled far from the Temple, it might not have been so acceptable.

With this background, we turn to Genesis. Here we see attempts to justify the political and religious developments of the tenth century, presumably to answer any critics that David and Solomon may have had. Here the propaganda aspect of Genesis comes to light.

Look at Genesis 17:6. God tells Abraham that "kings will issue from you." This idea is reiterated in Genesis 17:16: "Kings of nations" will issue from Sarah. In this way Abraham and Sarah are made the progenitors of a royal line. I contend that the only time that this would be considered necessary would be in the time of David and Solomon. Before this, there were no kings (except for Saul, whose kingship is transitional); later, kingship was a fait accompli. The only time kingship needed to be justified was when it was the new creation of Israelite political theorists.

The international empire of David and Solomon serves as the background for the statement in Genesis 15:18 that God gave to Abraham and his descendants "this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates." In the days before David and Solomon, it would have been unimaginable for an author to use these boundaries to define the land that God gave to Israel. After David and Solomon, Israel once more became a small state in the ancient Near East, and these boundaries were an impossibility. Accordingly, this passage makes sense only in the period of David and Solomon.

Furthermore, with the rise of David and Solomon, it was clear to all in the tenth century that kingship would reside with this family from the tribe of Judah. 2 Samuel 7 records the covenant established between God and David, communicated via the prophet Nathan, that David's descendants would rule after him forever. This serves as the background for the statement in Genesis 49:10 that "the ruler's staff shall not depart from Judah."

During the United Monarchy, the nations geographically closest to Israel were governed the most firmly, and this is reflected in Genesis. Thus, Moab, Ammon and Edom, the three Transjordanian states ruled by David and Solomon, all appear in Genesis as the sons of Lot (and thus the grandnephews of Abraham) or as the brother of Jacob. In other words, the Genesis author portrays the ancestors of these
History with a Past

The accompanying article attempts to uncover the political agenda of the Torah. The narrative describes an earlier historical period, but imbedded into the narrative is the political message of an author from a later period. Obviously, the biblical material can be read without its later political agenda, simply as great literature or as insightful theology or as embellished history.

However, great literature that deals with historical events but also reflects a contemporary political agenda has been a common phenomenon throughout history. Probably the example best known to modern readers, especially Americans, is Arthur Miller’s The Crucible. This is an outstanding play and a great work of literature. But as everyone who sees or reads the play is keenly aware, it is also a strong contemporary political statement. Miller tells the story of the witch trials that occurred in 17th-century Salem, Massachusetts. But the story is told through the filter of the McCarthyism of the 1950s, of which Miller himself was a target. The story is set in the past, but it tells us more about the present.

Another excellent example is the motion picture and television series M*A*S*H. Robert Altman’s 1969 film is set in Korea, but the true message relates to another war in Asia, Vietnam. The main character, Hawkeye Pierce, played by Donald Sutherland in the movie version and by Alan Alda in the subsequent television series, gives expression to an anti-war sentiment that typified the Vietnam era of the late 1960s and early 1970s but is largely anachronistic when set in Korea in the early 1950s. As with The Crucible, so with M*A*S*H. We are looking at the historical past, but we are seeing present-day events.

The majority of Shakespeare’s histories present the events in the lives of the kings of the House of York and the House of Lancaster in the late 14th and 15th centuries. But as students of these plays recognize, the characterizations bespeak the monarchy of Shakespeare’s own day. The most telling remark is that of Queen Elizabeth I herself, who is reported to have said to the keeper of the Tower, “I am Richard II, know ye not that?”

All of these works purport to present history, but the authors do not present the literal truth of the historical epochs portrayed. Nor do the authors of these classics invent the stories out of whole cloth. Something similar, I suggest, happened with the narratives in the Torah. Clearly, these narratives cannot be seen as the literal truth. The history of the Torah is an idealized history. However, we should not simply dismiss the existence of the heroes of the Torah in a rush to conclude that they were created ex nihilo by ancient Israelite literati. These texts pack their punch specifically because the historical characters are real. If Richard II had been an invented figure, the impact of the play on Elizabethan England, and on Elizabeth I, as witnessed by her comment above, would not have been as powerful.

Naturally, there is a crucial difference. Because we have the historical records of the kings of England, the Salem witch trials and the Korean War, we are able to judge the historical picture of the artistic creations under discussion. The sources allow us to reconstruct the true history and to distinguish this history from the literary representation. Since we lack contemporary records about the characters in the Torah, we cannot do this with the Bible. But it is quite possible that individuals such as Abraham, Joseph and Moses existed in history, even if the literary presentation of them is a far cry from their actual lives.—G.A.R.

three countries as related to the patriarchs in order to justify Israelite rule over them.

We can be even more explicit. From an analysis of the germane passages in 2 Samuel, we know that in Moab and Ammon the native kings were permitted to rule as tributary vassals, but in Edom the king was deposed, and David and Solomon exercised direct rule over their southeastern neighbor. This explains why Edom, in the character of Esau, is seen as a twin brother of Israel, in the character of Jacob. Moab and Ammon, on the other hand, as portrayed in Genesis by Lot’s two sons, are more distantly related. In addition, note that in Genesis 27:40 it is predicted that Esau would throw off the yoke of Jacob, a clear reflection of the Edomite rebellion against Israel during Solomon’s reign (1 Kings 11:14-22).

The significance of Jerusalem is reflected in several passages. In Genesis 14:18-20, we read how Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest to the god El-Elyon (commonly translated as “God Most High”), greets Abraham with bread and wine and then blesses him. Abraham responds by giving Melchizedek a tenth of all he has, in other words, the priestly tithe. Later, Abraham specifically identifies El-Elyon with his God, Yahweh (Genesis 14:22).

Virtually all scholars agree that Salem is short for Jerusalem; on this point there is little debate. But what is the purpose of these verses? I believe these lines were included by a royal scribe in David’s court to justify the continued status of Zadok as priest in Jerusalem. The scribe is trying to demonstrate that David did nothing differently from what the glorious ancestor
Abraham did. Abraham titled to a Canaanite priest in Jerusalem, and David did the same.

The story of the binding (Hebrew, qədād) of Isaac (known as the sacrifice of Isaac in Christian tradition), recorded in Genesis 22, is also relevant. A key phrase in this passage is the expression "the mount of the Lord" (Genesis 22:14). Whenever this phrase is used elsewhere in the Bible, it refers to Jerusalem (Isaiah 2:3, 30:29; Micah 4:2; Zechariah 8:3; Psalms 24:3). All of these texts are later than the period of David and Solomon, but it is possible that the expression had already come into use by the time of the monarchy.

Finally, the centralization of worship in Jerusalem is reflected in the Book of Genesis. Although Abraham built altars elsewhere in the land of Canaan—for example, at Shechem (Genesis 12:6-7) and between Bethel and Ai (Genesis 12:8)—only the story in the qədād (Genesis 22) does he actually make a sacrifice, specifically, the ram that he found caught in the thicket. The message would have been clear to anyone living in Solomon’s time: Yes, we know there are altars throughout the countryside, and some are even as old as father Abraham himself. But the only place where the patriarch himself actually sacrificed is the mount of the Lord, that is to say, Jerusalem. That is why only the Jerusalem Temple is approved for sacrifices to Yahweh.

Jerusalem is alluded to in one other spot in the Book of Genesis. Of the four rivers of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:10-14), there is no difficulty in identifying the two that still have the same names—the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. But the other two, the Gihon and the Pishon, remain problematic. No amount of geographical gymnastics will solve all the problems inherent in locating two rivers with these names. At the same time, however, it is difficult to imagine an ancient Israelite reading this passage without his attention being called to a Gihon very close to home. I refer, of course, to the powerful spring and water source of Jerusalem called the Gihon (1 Kings 1:33). No doubt we are dealing here with the transfiguration of a myth.

Moreover, there is a concentration of key words in the Genesis 22 story that begin with the consonants yod and resh, the same letters that begin the word "Jerusalem." Most prominent are the phrases Elohim yir'eh, "God will see" (v. 8); YHWH yir'eh; Adonai yir'eh (v. 14); and b'khar YHWH yir'eh, "on the mount of the Lord [there is vision]" (v. 14). All of these words evoke the name Jerusalem. Note also "the land of Moriah." This word occurs in the Bible in only one other place, 2 Chronicles 3:1: "Solomon began to build the Temple of YHWH in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, which appeared to David his father, and which David had prepared as the place, at the threshing floor of Ornan [variant of Araunah] the Jebusite." This passage comes from a late book; it indicates that by the Persian period Jewish readers of the Torah had identified Moriah with Jerusalem. Unfortunately, we have no independent confirmation, especially from an earlier period, that Moriah was in the vicinity of Jerusalem.

ENRAGED WITH JEALOUSY, Jacob’s sons strip their younger brother, Joseph, of his ornamental robe and throw him into a well. This plaque of enamel set in gilded copper is one of a series completed in 1181 by Nicholas of Verdun to ornament the pulpit of the Klosterneburg Abbey, near Vienna.

The brothers later rescue Joseph, only to sell him into slavery. They then stain his robe with the blood of a young goat and return home to present their father with this false evidence of Joseph’s death. The account of Joseph’s betrayal and eventual reunion with his brothers, which makes up the letter portion of Genesis, suggests that the brothers’ hatred was inspired both by the favoritism Jacob showed for Joseph (the son of his beloved wife Rachel), as well as Joseph’s own confidence—evident in his dreams—that he would come to rule over his older siblings.

The closest biblical parallel is the lengthy and violent succession narrative of David’s sons. Here, too, the father shows favoritism and fails to end the infighting among his fiercely competitive sons, but regardless of that phenomenon, the author of the Eden story is evoking Jerusalem as the place where civilization started. In short, we have here a very subtle reference to the centrality of Jerusalem.

Most of Genesis, of course, tells the story of a family, what scholars call the patriarchal narratives. Time and again, however, these stories reflect the family of David and Solomon. An oft-repeated theme in Genesis is the motif of the youngest son. Isaac superseded Ishmael; Jacob superseded Esau; Judah (fourth among Jacob’s sons, but last of the original set born to Leah) and Joseph (eleventh in line) supersede their older brothers; Perez superseded Zerah; and Ephraim superseded Manasseh. This pattern is also anticipated in the story of the first two sons born to mankind. Cain is the firstborn of Adam and Eve, yet God favors Abel, the younger son. The theme may also appear in the Book of Exodus, where Moses is specifically described as three years younger than Aaron.

What is the fascination with this motif in Genesis? Why emphasize time and again that younger or youngest sons supersede their older brother or brothers? In answering this question, we must remember that David was the youngest of Jesse’s seven sons, and Solomon was among the youngest, if not the youngest, of David’s many sons. The issue of who would succeed David dominates 2 Samuel 13 through 1 Kings 2 to such an extent that many scholars call this section of the Bible the Succession Narrative. There were many sons of David in contention. Amnon was the firstborn, but he was killed by his brother Absalom (2 Samuel 13:29). After Absalom rebelled, he was killed by David’s general Joab (2 Samuel 18:14-15). The two remaining candidates were Adonijah and Solomon,

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and although Adonijah was older, and in fact claimed the throne at one point when David was old and feeble (1 Kings 1), in the end Solomon won out.

How can Solomonic rule be justified in that case, especially when firstborn royal succession was the norm in the ancient Near East? The answer lies before us: imbed the notion of ultimogeniture into the national epic that comes down to us as the Book of Genesis. God has favored younger sons since Abel. He has blessed the younger sons of Israel since the inception of the

THE FIRST MURDER involves a brother killing a brother. In contemporary artist Catherine Kaufman’s painting, Cain points a gun toward Abel, who writhes in anguish before he crumples to the ground. The only other biblical account of fratricide appears in the story of David’s son Absalom, who murders his older brother and David’s firstborn son, Amnon. According to author Rendsburg, the Genesis account serves as an apologia for David’s own story, reminding readers that David’s spotted family history is no worse than that of Israel’s earliest ancestors.

Like David’s royal scribes, artist Kaufman has also recast a contemporaneous political event in the guise of an ancient drama from Genesis. The full title of her painting is “Cain and Abel: The Assassination of Rabin”—a reference to the 1995 murder of the Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin by a fellow Jew.

covenant: Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Joseph, Perez, Ephraim and Moses. Who could criticize David’s selection of Solomon to succeed him as king over all Israel?

The conflict among David’s sons—between Amnon and Absalom, and between Adonijah and Solomon—is also hinted at in Genesis; in fact, fraternal conflict was common to all three patriarchal generations. It is mildest in the case of Ishmael and Isaac (where it is more the mothers, Sarah and Hagar, who are at odds); the strife increases in the story of Jacob and Esau; and it becomes a major motif in the account of Joseph and his brothers. Again, a Davidic-Solomonic author is retrojecting the events of his own day into the days of the patriarchs. This is especially evident in the case of Joseph. The hatred and fighting among the brothers appears over an extended narrative, as is the case in the Succession Narrative of 2 Samuel and 1 Kings. In both cases the father is portrayed as helpless. Jacob can do nothing to stop the boys, and he probably makes matters worse by showing favoritism to Joseph and perhaps to Benjamin. Similarly, David is unable to prevent his sons from fighting, and he too probably makes matters worse by showing favoritism, first to Absalom and in the end to Solomon.

The first pair of brothers, Cain and Abel, are also involved in the first case of fratricide. The only
Putting Spin on Genesis

Like any political leader, David faced considerable opposition—especially as he assumed leadership of the emergent Israelite nation. He had to make tough decisions, and he had to convince his people that they were good decisions. According to author Gary A. Rendsburg, one way David and his royal scribes did this was by rewriting history, that is, by retelling the ancient stories of Genesis in such a way that they offer justification for David's own actions. When the story of David and, later, Solomon is read in light of Genesis, the kings' most controversial actions suddenly seem understandable; many even receive divine approval.

Here's a summary of some of the challenges faced by David and Solomon, and the justification given in the Book of Genesis for their actions:

**What David and Solomon Faced**

1. David establishes the monarchy despite opposition from traditionalists, who believe God alone may reign as king.
2. Jerusalem—previously not an Israelite city—is established as capital.
3. David pushes the borders of his kingdom, engaging in battle with the neighboring states.
4. The nations of Ammon, Moab and Edom come under David's hegemony.
5. David permits the local Canaanite priest and king Zadok (also known as Araunah, "the Lord") to retain the title of high priest—a move that is sure to incense more conservative worshipers.
6. Solomon's Temple becomes the center of Israelite worship—presumably in the face of opposition from those who must now travel a great distance to make sacrifices in Jerusalem.
7. David and Solomon—both younger sons—become king in the place of their elder brothers, in direct conflict with longstanding Near Eastern practices of primogeniture.
8. David commits adultery with Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, and is tricked into admitting his guilt; he is subsequently forgiven.

**Genesis's Justification**

1. The establishment of the monarchy is endorsed by the highest power—God himself, who promises David's ancestor Abraham: "Kings will issue from you" (Genesis 17:6).
2. One of the four rivers of Eden, the place where civilization began, shares its name with Jerusalem's Gihon spring, around which David builds his city.
3. David's military expansion fulfills God's promise to give Abraham's heirs the land "from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates" (Genesis 15:18).
4. The ancestors of the three nations are recognized as close relatives of the patriarchs. Ammon and Moab are depicted as sons of Lot and his daughters, while Esau, or Edom, is the brother of Jacob.
5. Abraham presents a tithe to Melchizedek, the local priest of ancient Salem, or Jerusalem.
6. The only sacrifice: Abraham ever makes—the burnt ram offered in place of Isaac—takes place on Mt. Moriah or the mount of the Lord, usually identified as Jerusalem.
7. Abel supersedes Cain, Isaac supersedes Ishmael, Jacob supersedes Esau, Judah and Joseph supersedes their older brothers, Perez supersedes Zerah, Ephraim supersedes Manasseh, and Moses supersedes Aaron.
8. Judah sleeps with his daughter-in-law, Tamar, and is tricked into admitting his guilt; Judah is forgiven.
DRESSED IN ARMOR, Joshua (at right) spears an Amaelekite while his fellow Israelite soldiers beat their fiercest enemies with clubs. At left, Moses, flanked by Aaron and Hur, watches over the battle. According to Exodus 17, whenever Moses held his rod aloft, the Israelites prevailed; but as he tired, and his arms dropped, the Amalekites gained the field. So, Aaron and Hur sat Moses on a stone to rest and supported his arms. “And Joshua overwhelmed the people of Amalek with the sword.” Moses predicted: “The Lord will be at war with Amalek throughout the ages” (Exodus 17:13,16). This woodcut appears in the Nuremberg Chronicle, a history of the world produced in 1493, soon after the invention of the printing press.

The Bible presents the Amalekites as Israel’s chief enemy throughout David’s reign, but they are not mentioned afterwards. Thus, Rendsburg argues, the Torah references to the Amalekites as Israel’s chief enemy can be dated no later than the tenth century B.C.E.

He slept with his daughter-in-law, Tamar, when she was disguised as a whore, and then he was tricked into admitting his guilt. The same is true of David. The story of his great sin with Bathsheba forms the focal point of the narrative about his life in 2 Samuel, and he too is tricked into admitting his guilt.

Judah was unaware that Tamar was the woman with whom he had slept. When he learned that Tamar was pregnant, Judah assumed that she had committed adultery, and therefore he proclaimed her death sentence: “Bring her out, and let her be burnt” (Genesis 38:24). Only upon learning that he had been tricked did Judah admit his guilt with the famous line: “She is more righteous than I” (Genesis 38:26). David, likewise, was tricked into admitting his guilt: When the prophet Nathan told David a parable (2 Samuel 12:1-4) about a rich man who steals a lamb from a poorer fellow, David assumed that the case was a real one, and he condemned the unnamed rich man of the parable. David actually pronounced two sentences: first, presumably out of rage, the death penalty (2 Samuel 12:5); and then, upon further reflection, fourfold restitution (2 Samuel 12:6), in accordance with the law of Exodus 21:37. At that point Nathan issued his famous accusation, “You are the man” (2 Samuel 12:7), whereupon David admitted his guilt: “I have sinned before the Lord” (2 Samuel 12:13).

The author of Genesis 38 may have been poking fun at the royal family, mocking the king and his court. Or, he may have been writing an apologia for the royal family, stating in a sense that the clan has always suffered internal strife. In either case, it is clear that Genesis 38 reflects the situation of King David and has political overtones.

In many ways, the world of Genesis mirrors the personal and political situation of David and Solomon. The era of these two kings was one of rapid change for the nation. A new political entity—a united country ruled by a series of kings—was created. This powerful king ruled far and wide, from the Euphrates to the Brook of Egypt. Jerusalem, a city with no ties to traditional Israel, became not only the capital but the religious center of the country. Sacrifice, which had been permitted throughout the country, was now limited (at least officially, according to the Jerusalem authorities) to the newly built Temple in Jerusalem. Furthermore, the old king-priest of Jerusalem, a man named Zadok,
with the foreign title Araunah, was permitted to retain his religious functions and was even made high priest of Israel. Finally, when David grew old and a successor needed to be named, it was his youngest son, Solomon, who was selected, quite unexpectedly and quite contrary to usual practice in the ancient world.

How does a ruler get the support of the people for such changes? By writing a great epic about the nation’s founding fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I do not mean to suggest that the tenth-century scribes simply invented these stories about the men of Genesis—for almost without doubt, stories about these heroes circulated earlier. But they did cast older traditions in a new light. Everything was seen through the filter of Davidic-Solomonic rule. All of the monarchy’s developments were anticipated in hoary antiquity, and all were sanctioned by God. Kingship, power, Jerusalem’s centrality, acceptance of a Jerusalemite priest, supremacy of the youngest son—all were divinely approved since the beginning.

At the same time, this great epic suggested that the negative traits of the royal family should not cause great concern. Hatred among brothers was common among the patriarchs too, but in the end, all’s well that ends well. Sure, David is guilty of a great sin—adultery with Bathsheba—but his ancestor Judah also committed a great sexual offense, and Judah’s sexual sin did not prevent God from blessing Judah’s descendants with kingship. David is forgiven in the same way. Thus, apologia are included in Genesis to downplay the more negative sides of David’s story. Or perhaps, as intimated above, such stories were included in Genesis as a critique or a lampoon of David.

The author of Genesis pulled it off brilliantly. On the face of it, the narrative is about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, about their lives and about early Israelite history. But this history reflects the contemporary world of the author, the time of David and Solomon, through and through.

If I am correct, then we can in a general sense identify the author of Genesis. He was a man at home in the Davidic-Solomonic court. He had a masterful understanding of literature, theology and politics, which he skillfully combined in creating a national epic. And just as his colleagues provided a balanced picture of David and Solomon in the books of Samuel and Kings—with their virtues and their warts alongside each other—so did the author of Genesis present the material in a balanced fashion.

My approach to the Book of Genesis can be applied to the other books of the Torah, but I will limit myself to just two examples. In the final four books of the Torah, Israel’s number one enemy is Amalek. God promises to annihilate the Amalekites in Exodus 17:14-16, and Israel is commanded to blot out all memory of them in Deuteronomy 25:17-19. So too in the oracles of Balaam: “[Amalek’s] fate is to perish forever” (Numbers 24:20, consistent with the Exodus and Deuteronomy passages); and “[Israel’s] king shall rise above Agag, and his kingdom shall be established” (Numbers 24:7), referring to Agag, king of the Amalekites, whom Saul defeated (1 Samuel 15). In the historical books of the Bible, the Amalekites are mentioned for the last time in the reign of King David (2 Samuel 8:12). The focus on Amalek as the enemy of Israel would be meaningless at any time after the tenth century.

Most of the laws of the Torah cannot be set in a particular time frame or a specific place. Laws dealing with food, harvests, slavery, marriage, kidnapping and murder are often relevant in many places and times. But there is one law that does bespeak a chronological setting. I refer to the limits placed upon the king in Deuteronomy 17:16-17. The king is forbidden to do three things: to return to Egypt to trade horses, to marry many wives “lest his heart go astray” and to amass silver and gold in excess. Obviously, these stipulations are associated with King Solomon, who is described as having done all three in 1 Kings 10:10-11:8. This Deuteronomistic law makes sense only within the context of the tenth century, either late in Solomon’s reign or soon thereafter, especially given the Bible’s honest appraisal of public dissatisfaction with the king in some circles. Several analogies from American law immediately come to mind: The 22nd Amendment to the United States Constitution limits a president to two terms; it was proposed in 1947 and ratified in 1951 after Franklin Roosevelt was elected to four terms. Campaign finance reforms instituted in the 1970s and 1980s were a direct reaction to the excesses of Richard Nixon.

Scholars who hold to a late dating of the Torah have tried to situate the authorship of the five books within the Persian period (sixth to fifth century B.C.E.) using similar methods to mine. For example, they believe that the reference to Abraham (still called Abram at that point) traveling from Ur of the Chaldees (Kasdim) to Canaan (Genesis 11:31-12:6) was included in order to encourage Judean exiles to return to the land of Israel from their homes in Babylonia after 539 B.C.E. Accordingly, one might say that my view and the alternate view are competing plausibilities, especially as they stem from similar methodologies.

Lest you think that subjective judgment is the only way to decide the issue, let me offer one purely objective criterion that demonstrates that the text of Genesis cannot come from the Persian period. This is the linguistic evidence, which is almost never confronted by those who would date the Torah to the Persian period.

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Hebrew, like all languages, undergoes changes as the centuries passed. We can clearly distinguish pre-Exilic Hebrew, or Standard Biblical Hebrew, from post-Exilic Hebrew, or Late Biblical Hebrew. Hebraists who have investigated the question have concluded, with great unanimity, that the language of the Torah reflects Standard Biblical Hebrew. To illustrate the argument with just one point: If the Torah were composed during the Persian period, we would expect to find Persian loanwords in it, just as they occur in works that surely derive from the fifth century B.C.E.—books such as Esther, Ezra and Nehemiah. But not a single one can be found in the much larger corpus of Genesis through Deuteronomy. All of this points to the fact that the Torah is a product of the tenth century B.C.E., created by royal scribes in the court of David and Solomon who sought to further the political agenda and religious initiatives of the early monarchy.


2. This approach originates with the Israeli scholar Yehezkel Kaufmann (The Religion of Israel, trans. Moshe Greenberg [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1960], pp. 17-200), and is favored today by, among others, Jacob Milgrom (Leviticus 1-16, Anchor Bible 3 [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1991], pp. 3-35).

3. This view has been proffered by scholars such as Nieh Peter Lemche. His most recent book is The Israelites in History and Tradition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).


9. The use of the phrase “the Agagite” in Esther (3:1-10, 8:3-5, 9:24) as an epithet of Haman is a literary construction used to set Haman against Mordecai, for the latter is introduced as a descendant of Kish (like Saul! (Esther 2:5).


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