

# Unity of the E Text

This is a preview of a section from the book

## The Bible Untangled

Read the Texts that Were Edited Together  
to Form the Early Books of the Bible

Edited with commentary by Charles Siegel

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His decisions.<sup>74</sup> He does not walk on the earth. He speaks to most people in dreams or through angels. Moses is the only person He speaks to directly, and even Moses can see only His back and not His face.<sup>75</sup>

One striking feature of the E text is that it does not include any of the earlier myths that are at the beginning of the Bible: creation, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah's flood, the tower of Babel. The E text starts with Abraham, and it is concerned with the patriarchs and Moses, particularly with their experience of God and also with stories of the patriarchs that justify the relations of the Israelite tribes. The earlier myths are from the J text, which was strongly influenced by the religions of surrounding peoples, and some were included in the P text as a response to J. E might have known some or all of these myths, but he left them out of his text of the Bible, showing that he did not consider them important to the Israelite religion.

Some have speculated that E might have written versions of these earlier myths that RJE did not include, but this idea is not plausible. Since E's view of God is much less anthropomorphic than J's, there would undoubtedly have been many differences in their versions of these early myths, so RJE would probably have included some of the material from E. Much material from E is included in the stories of the patriarchs and of the exodus, so it is hard to believe that E wrote a version of the earlier myths and that nothing at all was included from it. It is far more plausible that E did not include these myths because he was focused on the Israelite religion, which was rooted in the patriarchs and Moses.

This fact is important because the creation myth has discredited the Bible. We now know that the different species of living organisms were not created in the beginning; they were formed by evolution and have changed over time. Fundamentalists who believe the entire Bible is literally true look foolish when they contradict the scientific consensus about evolution, but in fact, creation is not part of the E text, the text of the Bible that represents the religion of the earliest Israelite priests.

This fact also makes the E text unique. Every other early religion includes some sort of creation myth. We cannot help wondering why E is so different from other early religions, with no creation myth or other early myths, with a religion that is ethical as well as ritualistic, and with a God that is not anthropomorphic and cannot be represented by images.

## **Is the E Text Continuous?**

There are many gaps in the E text because RJE often preferred J's version of stories over E's, but what we have shows that the E text told a continuous and coherent story of the early history of Israel, extending from the time of Abraham and the other patriarchs through the exodus and wandering in the desert, to the death of Moses.

There are places where E interrupts the narrative to give information

about rituals or laws. For example, as the Israelites are about to leave Egypt, E gives a lengthy description of their Passover ritual;<sup>76</sup> and when Moses gives the law to the Israelites, the E text quotes the entire covenant code, an earlier document of the Mushite priests that states the law.<sup>77</sup> But these interruptions are exactly what we would expect from a priestly source who is telling this story to strengthen his people's religion. They do not mean that the E text lacks the integrity that we would expect from a document by a single author.

Yet there are a couple of possible exceptions to the continuity of the E text.

We have seen that E told the story of Moses breaking the tablets of the Ten Commandments when he saw the Israelites worshipping the golden calf, implicitly criticizing the golden calves that Jeroboam set up at the two religious centers he created in the northern kingdom of Israel. But, apart from this story, there is no other mention of the Ten Commandments in the E text. E describes Moses smashing the tablets but says nothing about his receiving the tablets or about his replacing the smashed tablets with new ones, and E does not include a text of the Ten Commandments.

This story also seems out of place in the E text, since it comes after the Israelites accept the covenant.<sup>78</sup> It seems more plausible that Moses would give the Israelites all the commandments, including the Covenant Code and the Ten Commandments, and then would ask them to accept the covenant.

It is possible that the original E text included the rest of the story of the Ten Commandments and the reason why they were given after Israel accepted the covenant but that RJE removed these stories because he preferred J's version of events. It is also possible that the story of the golden calf is a later addition.

Another passage in E is even more problematic:

NUM 12:1 And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married; for he had married a Cushite woman. <sup>2</sup>And they said: 'Hath the Lord indeed spoken only with Moses? hath He not spoken also with us?'

In response to their complaint,

NUM 12:5 ... the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud, and stood at the door of the Tent .... <sup>6</sup>And He said: 'Hear now My words: if there be a prophet among you, I the Lord do make Myself known unto him in a vision, I do speak with him in a dream. <sup>7</sup>My servant Moses is not so; he is trusted in all My house; <sup>8</sup>with him do I speak mouth to mouth, even manifestly....

As a punishment, Miriam becomes leprous and she is cured only after Moses prays for her and she is isolated for seven days.

This claim that God speaks only to Moses is typical of E, but, apart from this passage, the pillar of cloud appears only J. In J, the Israelites are led out

of Egypt by God in the form of a pillar of cloud in the day and a pillar of fire at night, but in E they are led by an angel (Ex. 23:20, Num. 20:16). In J, God comes down to the door of the tent of assembly repeatedly as a pillar of cloud, but in E He does not. God appearing to all the Israelites as a pillar of cloud is typical of J and contradicts E's belief that God appears directly only to Moses. This passage itself is self-contradictory: God speaks directly to Aaron and Miriam in order to tell them that He speaks directly only to Moses. This is the only place in E where God speaks directly to someone other than Moses, rather than appearing in a dream or a vision.

How can this strange passage have been written? The most plausible explanation is that it was written later by someone who was a Mushite priest like E but who knew the combined JE text rather than the E text itself. The JE text has so many references to God coming down to the tent of assembly as a pillar of cloud that this later Mushite priest might have taken it for granted and assumed that it does not violate the principle that God speaks directly only to Moses.

The theory that this passage was written by a later author also explains why it says Moses had a Cushite wife, while all the other mentions of Moses' wife in the Torah say she was a Midianite. Many commentaries on the Bible, both scholarly and popular, say that this must have been Moses second wife: in addition to the wife he took in Midian, Moses must have married an African, since Cush was south of Ethiopia. But rather than meaning someone from Cush, Cushite could mean someone from Cushan, which is another name for Midian. We see that Cushan is the same as Midian in a poem in the book of Habakkuk: “HAB 3:7I see the tents of Cushan in affliction; The curtains of the land of Midian do tremble.” Ancient Hebrew poetry commonly repeats the same statement using different words, and in this case, the second half of the verse clearly repeats the first half by using “the curtains of Midian” to mean the same thing as “the tents of Cushan.” Since the rest of E uses the word “Midian” and was written before 722 BCE, and the other early use of Cushan to mean Midian is in the book of Habbakuk, written in the mid-to-late 600s BCE, it seems likely that Cushan was not used in early times to mean Midian and that this passage about Moses' Cushite wife was written later than most of E.

This theory that there was a second and later author of E would also explain E's story of Moses breaking the Ten Commandments. If this story was written by a later Mushite priest who knew the combined JE text, then it would fit right into JE's narrative of the Ten Commandments, which comes from J, explaining why the Ten Commandments are mentioned in this story but not mentioned anywhere else in E.

It would also explain why this story has an anthropomorphic view of God that is typical of J but not of E. In this story, God wants to destroy Israel and make a new nation just from Moses, but Moses convinces Him not to do this by saying that it would make people think badly of Him, appealing

to His vanity.<sup>79</sup> Nowhere else in the E text does God change his mind in this way, so it seems reasonable that this passage was written by a later Mushite priest who was influenced by J's stories about God changing his mind, which he had read as an integral part of the JE text.

Thus, it seems possible that a later Mushite priest modified the JE text and added a few passages—including these two passages, which are more hostile to Aaron and Miriam than anything else in the E text.

This possibility needs more discussion. For now, we can say that, apart from a few problematic passages that might have been added later, the E text seems to be a continuous narrative written by one person.

## J's Religion

J was a member of the court of Judah rather than being a priest. Because the kings of Judah made alliances with surrounding countries by taking wives from those countries, this court was multi-cultural, so J was influenced by the religions of other countries. J also tells us that Judah had three sons with a Canaanite woman,<sup>80</sup> which indicates that there was a considerable mixture of Canaanite ancestry in the tribe of Judah, so we would expect pagan influences in Judah's culture and religion even before they had a multi-cultural court.

As a result of these influences, J conflated the Israelite religion and other religions. Both E and P say that the God of Israel first revealed Himself to Abraham and the patriarchs as El and first revealed His real name, YHWH, to Moses. By contrast, J says that the worship of this God goes much further back in history: before the time of Noah, in the days of Adam's grandson Enosh, people began <sup>“GEN 4:26</sup>to call upon the name of the Lord [=YHWH].” J also speaks of the <sup>“GEN 31:53</sup>The God of Abraham, and the God of Nahor, the God of their father,” showing that she thinks Abraham continued his father's and family's religion, rather than making a decisive break with earlier religion, as he does in the E and P texts.

J begins her narrative with pre-Israelite myths, unlike E who begins with Abraham. Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the flood, and the tower of Babel are influenced by myths that are earlier than the patriarchs and that come from non-Israelite sources. Appendix 5 discusses possible sources of these myths.

J's religion does not have a moral element. J presents a version of the Ten Commandments that is purely ritualistic, with commandments such as “The feast of unleavened bread shalt thou keep” and “Thou shalt not seethe a kid in its mother's milk.”<sup>81</sup> She does not include the familiar moral commandments such as “Thou shalt not steal” and “Thou shalt not kill.” Apart from these ritualistic Ten Commandments, there are no Israelite religious texts incorporated in J, as there are in E and P.

In line with her amoral religion, J admires tricksters. When we considered