

The Importance of Knowing about “Strands” in the Bible

1. In order to understand texts, one needs to know something (the more the better) about who wrote them, why, on what occasion, for what purpose, what their ideas were, etc.
2. In Pentateuchal studies, the “documentary hypothesis” became very famous and dominant from the end of the 19th century. It is associated with the German Lutheran Julius Wellhausen and can be easily described as the hypothesis or theory of four sources in the Pentateuch, J E D and P.
3. The hypothesis has fallen into disfavor in recent years, but the brilliant Ronald Friedman, who studied under Frank Moore Cross (called by Hershel Shanks “the world’s greatest Bible scholar) at Harvard has “revived it.” Friedman’s contributions are valuable and that is why his book *Who Wrote the Bible?* is assigned reading.
4. Knowing about J, an early southern source (from Judah, from the time of Solomon) is of value since the tribe of Judah figures large in messianism. Knowing about E is valuable since E is a forerunner of D.
5. We focus on two principal sources, P and D. There is great scholarly consensus that these sources predominate in the Pentateuch, especially in its “final form,” with which we are principally concerned. P dominates in the Tetrateuch (Gen, Exod, Lev and Num); not all the Tetrateuch is P, however. For example, the famous “Golden Calf” episode in Exod 32 is markedly anti-Aaron = anti-P and has been traditionally attributed to E, though now D hands are recognized.
6. D obviously predominates in Deuteronomy. It is significant that D was allowed to have the last word in the Pentateuch (more or less: there are P strokes in Deut 34, the last chapter of the Torah), just as the whole Pentateuch begins with P texts (Gen 1) and places Leviticus (a very much P, and *not Levitical*, document) smack in the middle in an important position.
7. The ideas and vocabulary of P and D become quite recognizable as one studies the Pentateuch. The assigned Bible readings in this course are meant to illustrate principal P and D ideas. In some cases, important passages that are not P or D (for example, the Melchizedek passage in Gen 14, or the great blessings of Jacob in Gen 49) may also be discussed.
8. I have been influenced by Jewish scholars who do not agree with the Wellhausen school that P is a late (exilic or post-exilic, in reference of course to the Babylonian

Exile) source. But these and other scholars agree that the original ideas of P suffered an evolution stemming from the prophetic critique of an ethicless cult (animal sacrifices to appease the deity with social justice: see for example Amos 5:21-25; Micah 3:9-12; Hosea 4:4-10; Isaiah 28:7-8).

9. These Jewish scholars (the big names are Jacob Milgrom and Israel Knohl) and now their Gentile disciples (like David P Wright, the author of the comments to Leviticus and Numbers in the *New Oxford Annotated Bible. Third Edition*) speak of the “Holiness School” (H) as a development of P with ethical concerns. In many ways, H is similar to D. This will explain how the two schools, broadly speaking, P and D, were able to compromise and in many ways converge, especially in the Babylonian Exile (though significant tensions will remain). For example, the breakable Deuteronomic covenant (= contract) which requires a *new* covenant becomes very much an act of grace on the part of God which resembles the unconditional P eternal covenant (= promise), and the great D prophet Jeremiah can speak of both the new covenant (Jer 31:31-34) and of the eternal covenant (Jer 32:40; 50:5). Cf. Heb 8:8, 13; 9:15; 13:20, and “new and eternal covenant” in the consecration of the cup part of the Mass.

10. Crucial for an understanding of the Hebrew Bible and thus really also for the New Testament, and certainly for understanding the final form of the Pentateuch, is a good appreciation of the importance of the Babylonian Exile. This is where “Judaism” was born, or at least took the shape which would be so definite in the post-exilic period until and including the time of Christ and after. The two principal schools made the two principal contributions to understanding why Israel had gone into exile, why the Lord had allowed his temple to be destroyed by a pagan power and why his people had lost their inheritance in the Land he had promised.

11. For P, Yahweh had established an eternal order where everything was perfect. Ritual restored this. Most P writing does not look forward, but to this eternal state. D looks forward to conversion, to return, to salvation, and is thus “eschatological.” But this final state will be none other than a return to the beginning! And thus this is another way the two schools will converge. Not to mention that there are also eschatologists in the P school (see Stephen L. Cook, *Prophecy & Apocalypticism*, 1995).