

Lecture 6: A Closer Look at the Flood Story.

Reading: Richard E. Friedman, at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/bible/flood.html> (be certain to click on “launch interactive” about halfway down); reread Genesis 6-9 (can you see the seams?).

Topics:

- Why did the animals die? (What about fish?)
- “Pure” and “impure” animals (7:2; 8:20) - cf. Leviticus 11:47.
- On the prohibition of eating blood (9:4), cf. Leviticus 17:10-14.
- Are you convinced by Friedman’s analysis? Do you see two versions of the same story woven together? or, perhaps, a narrator who, for his own stylistic reasons, goes back and forth in his story-telling?
- Should pious believers continue to send expeditions to Mt. Ararat in Armenia to search for remains of Noah’s ark?

	Modern Bible Scholars (MBS)	Traditionalists
Working assumption	The Torah should be read like any other text.	The Torah is a unitary composition.
Contradictions and inconsistencies;	Evidence of “seams” between sources.	Require interpretation; contradictions and inconsistencies are only apparent, not real.
different names of God (YHWH vs. Elohim)	Evidence of different sources (“J” vs. “P” or “E”).	Synonymous; focus on different qualities of God.
Sources	Sources can be reconstructed; in the case of the flood narrative, “J” and “P”.	There are no sources; “J” and “P” are figments of the imagination.
Sources	The date and social location of the sources are debated by scholars, but can be reconstructed.	There are no sources.
The Torah as we have it	Put together by a “redactor,” but the work of the redactor has not obliterated the evidence for multiple sources.	There was no redactor; no evidence of multiple sources.
The flood story Genesis 6-8	Two distinct parallel stories stitched together to create a single narrative.	One organic unitary composition.

[The following pages were prepared by the teaching fellows to accompany the debate which is part of Lecture 6]

Lecture 6: Notes for the Debate

Introduction (Documentary Hypothesis): When we look closely at the flood story, we discover that the story has a very surprising history. Originally, there were two separate flood stories, written down at different times on two different scrolls. Each of these stories--one composed by an author we call J (for Yahwist) and another composed by an author we call P (for Priestly author)--was considered a sacred book, but each had a different flood narrative. Later, a third person, whom we call the redactor (R), decided to combine these two narratives. Although the stories contradicted each other, R felt he (probably not she) could not change them because of their sacred status. How do we know this?

1. **Repetitions:** The story as we have it repeats itself awkwardly, but when we separate the story into two sources, this awkward style disappears.
 - a. God commands Noah to get into the ark twice.

P	J
"... you shall enter the ark ..." (6:18)	
	"Go into the ark ..." (7:1)

- b. God commands Noah to gather animals twice.

P	J
"Of all that lives, of all flesh, you shall take two of each into the ark ..." (6:19)	
	"Of every clean animal take seven pairs ... every animal that is not clean two ..." (7:2)

- c. Noah follows God's commands--to get into the ark and gather animals--twice.

P	J
"Noah did so; just as God commanded him (Hebrew: according to all that God commanded him) so he did)." (6:22)	
	"And Noah did just as the LORD commanded him (Hebrew: according to all that the LORD commanded him)." (7:5)

- d. Other repetitions: God "sees" human wickedness twice (6:12 [P]; 6:5 [J]), God states his intention to destroy mankind twice (6:13 [P]; 6:7 [J]), the reason Noah is spared is stated twice (6:9 [P] 6:8; 7:1 [J]), God announces a coming flood twice (6:12 [P], 7:4 [J]), the beginning of rain is described twice (7:11 [P]; 7:12 [J]), the death of animals is mentioned twice (7:21 [P], 7:22 [J]), the end of rain is described twice (8:2 [P] 8:2 [J]), the recession of the waters is described twice (8:3 [P]; 8:3 [J]), the completely dry earth is described twice (8:14 [P]; 8:13 [J]), God promises not to send a similar

judgment again twice (9:11; 9:15 [P]; 8:21-21 [J]).

We see this in no other major literature.

I would agree completely that from a modern standpoint these repetitions are problematic aesthetically. No good modern author will repeat herself/himself nearly so often. But is it fair to judge an ancient text by such standards--a text that was undoubtedly written to please a different aesthetic sensibility? More particularly, it is counter-intuitive to conclude from the repetitions themselves that their origin must be in separate documents. According to your model, Gen 1.1-2.4 is all ONE document, yet it is one of the most obnoxiously repetitious portions of the whole Bible! *God said blah blah blah, and then blah blah blah happened. And then it was morning, and then it was evening. God saw that it was good.* Are these monotonous examples from a putative *single* source somehow less repetitive than what you quote above about God *telling* Noah that he would someday go into the ark, and then God *commanding* Noah to go into the ark?

Elsewhere repetition is understood by MBS-s to be a sign that disparate passages are part of the same source, not as here, a sign of the conflation of two different sources. Consider, Gen 1.26-27 next to Gen 5:1-2. The DH understands both of these to be P. Yet, it repeats the same content with slightly different wording. According to your logic ought Gen 5.1-2 not be YET ANOTHER source, because it repeats information already given, not a continuation of a first one? The criterion of "repetition" as an indication of difference sources is inconsistently applied--sometimes it is an example of the continuity of sources and other times it is of discontinuity. What is the controlling principle?

1a. God's first "command" to Noah to enter the ark (6:18) is actually part of longer narrative sequence in which God lays out what he is going to do; sort of like how a pilot talks about his flight plan before takeoff. (The argument of MBS here is tantamount to saying that the pilot discussing his flight plan is no different than the flight itself.) Noah's entering the ark is just part of God's larger plan, which He discloses to Noah before the calamity begins (using an indicative verb). The actual command (with attendant verb) comes in 7:1. The same goes for (1b) with regard to the collecting of the various animals.

1c. According to Rashi, the same verb may be used in both verses, but each describes a separate action. In the first verse, it describes Noah assembling the ark, while in the second verse, it describes Noah entering the ark.

2. **Contradictions:** The story as we have it contains a number of contradictions, but when we separate the story into two sources, the contradictions disappear.

a. Dates and Time Periods

P	J
Flood begins: 2 nd month, 17 th day (7:11)	
	Rain falls for 40 days (7:12)
Flood increases for 150 days (7:18)	
Flood finishes: 7 th month, 17 th day (8:3-4)	
The waters recede enough for the mountains to be visible: 10 th month, 1 st day (8:5)	
	At the end of 40 days, Noah opens window of ark (8:6)

Notice in particular that we have two different accounts of how long the rain lasted (described using “floodgates of the sky” in P and described as “rain” in J):

P	J
	“The rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights.” (7:11)
“And when the waters had swelled on the earth one hundred and fifty days . . . the floodgates of the sky were stopped up . . .” (7:24; 8:2)	
	“ . . . and the rain from the sky was held back 8:2”

b. Animals

P	J
“And of all that lives, of all flesh, you shall take two of each into the ark . . .” (6:19)	
	“Of every clean animal you shall take seven pairs, males and their mates, and of every animal that is not clean, two, a male and its mate” (7:2)
“Of the clean animals, of the animals that are not clean, of the birds, and of everything that creeps on the ground, two of each, male and female, came to Noah into the ark, as God had commanded Noah.” (7:8-9)	
“They came to Noah into the ark, two each of all flesh in which there was the breath of life (7:15)	

I'll admit that the concatenation of numbers here regarding the duration of the Flood is confusing. But the examples you have offered cannot properly be understood as contradictions. A contradiction is: *the car is blue. the car is red.* These are clearly not the same car. In example A you are not describing a contradiction. Anybody who's ever seen a flood, knows that "flood" and "rain" are not coterminous. The start of rain in a particular location has little to do with when flooding starts in that location. Similarly, it is not as though flooding immediately subsides as soon as rain stops falling. When the southern Mississippi or Ohio Rivers flood after an afternoon of heavy rainfall somewhere upriver, it can take days and weeks for the waters to subside. That is what these putative sources are describing with their "contradictory" numbers. The duration of rainfall and the duration of the flood.

Regarding the numbers and kinds of each animal, is it not better to assume that there is a clarification here, not a contradiction? Since most wild animals are "unclean" does it not make sense to generalize the instruction as "one pair of each kind" and then in the less common case of clean animals fit for sacrifice to provide further clarification that seven of each clean pair be preserved in the ark. This was also a necessity, because as soon as Noah left the Ark, he made a sacrifice--which would have obliterated one of the mating pairs. (This is also Rashi's solution.)

The extent of these "contradictions" is greatly overstated, and even if we were to permit them, positing four disparate and yet largely parallel original sources mysteriously interwoven by a hypothetical editor hardly requires a much greater suspension of disbelief than the assumption of narrative integrity.

The picture here is complicated for Rashi. On the one hand, the text presents a very complex timeline; on the other hand, Rashi is beholden to an ancient Jewish teaching that it was one full 365 day year from the first rainfall to Noah's exit from the ark. To achieve this count and to , Rashi employs all of the dates and time periods mentioned in the text and harmonizes them into one whole. (See [this website](#) for more info.)

Flood begins	Year 600 : 2 nd month, 17 th day (7:11)
Rainfall	40 days (7:11)
Flood increases for	150 days (7:18)
Noah opens the window	40 days later (8:6)
Three dispatches of the dove	21 days (7 days between each dove)
Noah sees the saturated ground	Year 601: 1st month, 1st day (57 days later)
Flood ends	Year 601 : 2 nd month, 27 th day (8:14; 57 days later)

- i.
- 3. **Different Terminology.** When use the contradictions and repetitions to isolate separate sources, we find that the separate sources we have isolated also have distinct terminology. This fact that these differences in terminology fit perfectly with the evidence of repetitions and contradictions further confirms our hypothesis.
 - a. **Names for God**
 - i. P: Elohim (“God”)
 - ii.J: YHWH (“LORD”)
 - b. **Other**
 - i. P: “expired”
 - ii.J: “died”
- 4. **Consistency with Sources Elsewhere.**
 - a. **Names of God.** According to Exodus 6:3, a text written by P, the name YHWH was not revealed to mankind until the time of Moses. Thus, it makes sense that P does not use the name YHWH in this account, since this is long before Moses. J, on the other hand, uses the name YHWH from the very beginning of his narrative (Gen 2).
 - b. **Animals.** According to J, sacrifices were performed since creation. Thus, J’s narrative has seven pairs of pure animals in the ark and concludes with a sacrifice. According to P, sacrifices were only authorized in the time of Moses. Thus, P’s narrative has only one pair of each animal in the ark.
 - c. **Depiction of God:** In J God is anthropomorphic and anthropopathic, just like in Genesis 2: He shuts the door on the ark, feels regret, and smells the odor of the sacrifice. In P, God is not depicted in these ways, but instead is more separate from creation.
 - d. **Dates, Measurements.** Throughout the Torah, P tends to give precise dates and detailed measurements. Thus, it makes senses that P includes gives a detailed dating scheme for the flood and detailed instructions for the building of the ark. J, on the other hand, tends to use round numbers and rarely includes long lists of detailed measurements. Thus, it makes sense that J uses the round numbers of “7” and “40” and does not have precise instructions for the ark.
 - e. **Conception of the Universe.** In P, the sky is a “firmament,” a solid disk with a heavenly ocean above it. Thus, P describes rain as the opening of the “floodgates of heaven.” J, on the other hand, never describes such a firmament and simply describes rain as “rain.”

Regarding the names used for the deity of Israel, you are misleading when you say that your hypothetical P uses “Elohim” *God* and that your hypothetical J uses “Yahweh” *LORD*. In fact, J uses Yahweh-Elohim, *LORD GOD*, a combination of the two, not simply one exclusively. Yet you rightly note that there is a difference here, some kind of change. But are there not myriad other places in the Hebrew Bible in which there is free and seemingly meaningless variation between the divine names? For instance in Jonah 4 we find within a span of four verses:

Jonah 4.4: And the LORD said, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

Jonah 4.6: The LORD God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush.

Jonah 4.7: But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the bush, so that it withered.

Applying your fragmentarian principles ought we not then attributed each of these actions to different hypothetical sources or perhaps to different deities all together?

Likewise, concerning your observation about the initial revelation of the divine name, Yahweh. In your P source you claim this occurs first in Exodus 6:3. It says there that Yahweh was the deity formerly known as El-Shaddai, *God Almighty* or perhaps *God of the (Two?) Mountains*. If we are to buy into the idea that this is a distinct source, would it not make sense to define the corpus attributed to this “source” according to the very principle it establishes there? Namely, before Ex 6:3 only those scant few places that refer to the deity of Israel as El-Shaddai should be considered part of the source. Should Ex 6:3 represent a line from a distinct source, would it not make better sense for this source’s earlier references to God to use the term the “source” itself says it used for God in times gone by?

As an aside, let’s look at how we address our venerable lecturer. If you were to address him, you would call him “Professor Cohen,” “Professor,” or, heaven forbid, “Dr. Cohen.” Behind his back, you might call him “Cohen,” or perhaps even “Shaye.” That there are so many ways to address Professor Cohen does not mean that he has split personalities. And if Professor Cohen has that many names, imagine how many names belong to God!

God’s different names certainly bothered Rashi and other ancient commentators. But they found a very elegant way to make sure that the text stayed unified and harmonious. Elohim and YHWH each refer to distinct aspects of God’s character. Elohim emphasizes God’s power of divine judgment, while YHWH underscores God’s mercy. (But this dichotomy is difficult to maintain, and a number of examples in the Flood narrative illustrate this. See, e.g., YHWH said, “I will blot out from the earth the men whom I created” (6:7) – this sounds a lot like a judging and vengeful God than a merciful one. Elohim is likewise associated with God’s mercy at the end of the narrative: “Elohim remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark, and God caused a wind to blow across the earth, and the waters subsided” (8:1). Rashi struggles here with Elohim appearing to take on a compassionate side; his comment on this verse – Elohim is, indeed, the attribute of God’s justice, but due to Noah’s prayer, He became compassionate.)

Conclusion (Documentary Hypothesis): While any one of the pieces of evidence by itself might not make for a convincing case, the manner in which so many pieces of evidence all point toward the same conclusion makes the documentary hypothesis very compelling.

The evidence compounded by advocates of this theory is stretched beyond the limits of rational and intuitive interpretation. The repetitions, contradictions and tensions enumerated are overplayed and sloppily analyzed, and the basic principles extracted from the evidence are not applied consistently. These repetition and contradiction can both be signs of continuity and discontinuity among these imaginary sources depending on the whims and particular purposes of the interpreter. Surely, there is a better way to read!

For a traditionalist reader like Rashi, the text is only problematic if it hasn't been explained adequately. If the words of the Torah are omnisignificant, there can be no contradictions, doublets, inconsistencies, or editorial sources. Any indication that the latter exist is to the detriment of the interpreter.