

**“A JUDAISM THAT DOES NOT HIDE”:
CURRICULAR WARRANTS FOR THE TEACHING OF
THE DOCUMENTARY HYPOTHESIS IN COMMUNITY
JEWISH HIGH SCHOOLS**

SUSIE TANCHEL

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Brandeis University

Mandel Center
for Studies in Jewish Education

MS 049
P.O. Box 549110
Waltham, MA 02454-9110
www.brandeis.edu/mandel

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ABSTRACT

Is it advisable for a pluralistic Jewish high school to include the documentary hypothesis in its Bible curriculum? In this paper, the author—associate head of school and teacher of Bible at the Gann Academy in Waltham, MA—analyzes the curricular justifications for and her experience of teaching this approach to twelfth-grade students. Through examination of student work and interviews, she illustrates the benefits of and even the need for meaningful exposure to the documentary hypothesis before college and young adulthood, in an environment that supports students’ Jewish growth and identity formation.

INTRODUCTION

Delving into students’ hearts and minds is not only a teacher’s prerogative—it is her obligation. It is vital in order to determine if real learning is taking place. If our classes do not touch our students in any way, then what is the point? It is essential that teachers find ways to determine whether or not they are, in fact, challenging their students and opening their minds to new content and to varied possibilities for interpreting the material, which the students can consider while developing their own understandings. An important part of the complex educational process involves thoughtfully planning the curriculum through which to work towards these goals, and continually evaluating its impact.

While the justification of a particular curricular approach—in this case, teaching the documentary hypothesis in biblical scholarship—can take place at a theoretical level, it is far stronger when it is also grounded in a rich understanding of the actual experience of the students, especially in a subject area that is laden with theological and emotional weight. In what follows, I begin by providing some context for the challenges of teaching the documentary hypothesis, and examine selected writings from my students in order to understand their general experience—and especially the challenges they face—in learning this material. I then locate the teaching of the documentary hypothesis in the context of the particular institution (a pluralistic Jewish high school) in which I teach, and classify

Susie Tanchel is Associate Head of School and a teacher of Tanakh at Gann Academy in Waltham, MA. She received her Ph.D. in Near Eastern and Judaic Studies from Brandeis University in 2006.

student experience in terms of different student types, arguing that for all of the kinds of students I encounter, this curricular choice is defensible and indeed beneficial to their theological and intellectual growth. Finally, I address many of the challenges other educators raise—whether or not this is a “Jewish approach”, whether it is wise to raise so many intergroup tensions in a high school environment, and how much time to devote to this aspect of the curriculum—and outline how a developmental perspective, too, supports this curricular and pedagogic choice.

CHALLENGES IN EXPOSING STUDENTS TO THE DOCUMENTARY HYPOTHESIS

As part of the 12th-grade curriculum at Gann Academy-The New Jewish High School of Greater Boston in Waltham, MA, we teach the reigning scholarly theory of the Bible’s authorship, the documentary hypothesis, which posits that several individuals or authorial schools wrote the Torah over the period of several hundred years. This year of study follows three years in which students have focused on literary aspects of biblical texts and have studied a variety of texts with traditional Jewish commentaries. The skills that are taught in successive years are designed to build on one another with the goal of students interpreting texts themselves through a variety of methods, guided by insights from medieval and modern Jewish interpreters.

More specifically, in ninth grade, students are taught basic literary skills, including basic biblical Hebrew grammar. They also develop the intellectual habit of critically evaluating interpretations, which prepares them to assess the different methods and interpretations they will explore in the coming years. In tenth and eleventh grades, students are introduced to the works of medieval Jewish commentators (specifically Rashi, Rashbam, and Ibn Ezra), learning about each commentator’s methodology through selected examples and gaining skills for interpreting the commentator’s interpretations. In 12th grade, along with reading selected biblical texts, students critically assess secondary articles representing modern critical perspectives and contemporary traditional commentaries on the texts. This final year of study helps to prepare them for a mature engagement with the biblical text in college courses and other adult Jewish educational settings.

Given existing data on teaching the documentary hypothesis, we are well aware of the potentially significant impact of studying source criticism (which assumes the existence of and attempts to tease out the multiple, human authors of the biblical text) on our students’ developing Jewish identities. During the 1960s, the Melton Project began to train prospective teachers who would be using their new curriculum. Ruth Zielenziger, the director of the project, described how problematic it was for these teachers who had long been teaching in Conservative schools to accept the conclusions of the historical-critical method, despite the fact that this method is at the core of the Conservative movement’s approach to the Bible. Her main purpose, she recalls was “to move people from a literal reading of the Bible to an understanding of the Bible as the myth of Israel.”¹ She found, in retrospect that this was “a tall order” for the students, as they felt as if she “had pulled the rug from under their feet.”² Similarly, Gail Dorph introduces her study of fifteen prospective educators in Conservative

¹ Ruth Zielenziger, *A History of the Bible program of Melton Research Center* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1989), 112.

² *Ibid.*, 114.

Jewish institutions with a vignette of a young woman who is finding it challenging coming to terms with the idea that the Torah is a human product.³ This was confirmed by Dorph’s in-depth interviews in which each of the interviewees rejected the critical understanding of the composition of the text in favor of a more traditional view, seemingly as their only option for retaining their strong emotional relationship with the text.

This tension has not only been evident in programs within the Conservative movement. Many students in the DeLet (Day School Leadership Through Teaching) Program, a thirteen-month post-BA fellowship program that prepares day school teachers for the elementary grades, wrestle with this issue. I have also had similar experiences as a teacher in numerous adult education classes, such as Hebrew College’s Me’ah program. Based on these studies and my own teaching experiences, when I initially set out to teach the documentary hypothesis to high school students, I had every reason to believe that these students would have a similar response to their older counterparts.

In my high school teaching experience, almost all students, regardless of denomination, have internalized some version of a belief in the Torah’s divine authorship at the core of their religious worldview. Consequently, learning source criticism can initially be controversial, provocative, even threatening, to students’ religious beliefs and practices. It requires them to confront the possibility that the Torah is the product of human writers, which frequently leads to their questioning the continuing sacredness, veracity, and authority of the text. Two quick anecdotes illustrate the spiritual landmines that this hypothesis and its implications set off for the students: A few years ago a student got up in my class and declared, “Ms. Tanchel, you are taking away my God.” Another student less dramatically, but equally emphatically, quietly asked me why she should still bother to keep the Sabbath if God did not write the Torah.

STUDENT VOICES

But when we turn to what students say in their writing on the topic, we find expression that is far more nuanced (though sometimes equally agonized), which offers additional insight into the ways that different students process the experience of learning the documentary hypothesis.

A traditionally observant young woman, Ayelet, writes:

It is difficult to come to terms with the ideas of the documentary hypothesis. The documentary hypothesis looks at the Tanach as a history book... There is no sacredness to the biblical text, but rather it is just like any other book. How can I use a history book to create a spiritual and religious connection to G-d?... Yet, sometimes the documentary hypothesis is very compelling... The explanations for the varied writing styles, repetition, and chronological errors are clarified by the acceptance of the documentary hypothesis. However, I still have not fully come to terms with the idea of a non-God crafted Torah. How can I use the writings of five random guys compiled together by another random person in my religious practice? There must be something more sacred and more holy in the Torah.

³ Gail Z. Dorph, “Conceptions and Preconceptions: A Study of Prospective Jewish Educators’ Knowledge and Beliefs about Torah” (Ph.D. dissertation, Jewish Theological Seminary, 1993), 1-5.

Ayelet is feeling troubled and torn by having learned the documentary hypothesis. She is trying to reconcile this new knowledge with her earlier understanding of the Torah as a unique book composed by God. Understanding the Torah as a book of human origin diminishes her sense of its sacredness. The Torah had once served as a religious document facilitating her connection to God, for believing that it was written by God it might have taught her about God or what God demanded of people, but now this was no longer possible. In Ayelet’s mind, learning about the characteristics, interests, biases and agendas of the different sources has reduced the Torah to a history book. Yet, repeatedly she goes back and forth between the merits and the disadvantages of the material. The theory offers her compelling answer to certain textual phenomena, which she names specifically. Thus, the problem she has with learning the documentary hypothesis is not that she does not accept the explanations it offers, but that she does.

Her acceptance of these conclusions leaves her with a Torah in which God has had no role. The idea that these authors are average people, that they do not have unique qualification or share a special connection to God, seems very disturbing to her. The seeming “randomness” of the individuals wipes out her sense of the holiness of the text and makes it challenging for her to use the text in her religious practice, for example reading liturgically from the Torah or offering a *d’var Torah*. Ayelet is wrestling to hold simultaneously the compelling parts of the documentary hypothesis and the holiness of the text. She ends with a statement of her certain belief, or perhaps now it is more of a wish that she is trying to persuade herself to believe, that the Torah is more sacred and more holy than the documentary hypothesis has led her to believe.

After an articulate and thoughtful summary of the documentary hypothesis and how he imagines the passing on of oral traditions and the evolution of the stories and laws over time, another student, David, writes:

Here’s the funny part: despite all my reasoning, there is still part of me that’s tugging in the other direction. I know I will never give a *d’var Torah* basing my ideas on this premise, I know I will never teach this hypothesis, and I know that when I teach my children the Torah, I will tell them all of the stories that I learned as a child about Torah Misinai and the authority of the Torah. As much as the logical side of me disagrees, my practice and my belief in how to lead a Jewish life will remain unchanged. It will be sort of weird believing one thing and teaching another, but it’s the only way I can make it work for me.

This student, and many others, seems to believe that the authority of the text stems from God’s authorship of it. That is to say, were the Torah to be a human composition, it would lose its authority. Despite what he knows and accepts logically, there is a strong (emotional) pull for him to reject or, maybe more precisely, to ignore this new information and compartmentalize it, in an effort to maintain his same religious practice. David is adamant that he will never use this knowledge when teaching Torah texts to others, perhaps out of desire to prevent others from experiencing the internal conflict he is. This response points to how uncomfortable the predicament is for him. The intellectual value of the information is overshadowed and outweighed by the havoc David thinks it would wreak on his and others’ religious lives.

I wonder whether his reluctance to integrate this material is due to an anxiety that doing so will necessarily negatively change his religious practice; at this point he can't seem to imagine a way to maintain his same practice, albeit with different motivations. He is self-reflective and acknowledges the conflict he is facing, and even that he might pay a price for it in feeling “weird,” but he knows of no other solution. Unlike some of his classmates, David does not allow for the possibility that as he grows older his thinking and thus his resolution might shift. The certainty with which he expresses himself throughout this paragraph might even hint at some desperation on his part to maintain the status quo. Believing in the conclusions of the documentary hypothesis has created such turmoil for David that he seems only able to manage it by proceeding as if he has never learned the material.

Josh, a student who is self-identified as science-oriented, also grapples with this material:

To me this experience was definitely worth it... The use of the documentary hypothesis integrated the science part of my brain with the Torah part of my brain. These past few weeks have showed me a method of interpreting the Torah that is almost refreshing... For me, this provided the Torah with a whole new dimension which I had not yet explored. Nonetheless, at this point I do not actually believe that the Torah was written by the five different schools. I have separated my theological beliefs from the study in class because I realize that more than anything else, the work in class is a learning process. It is meant to make us think in a different way and not to force us to believe in a certain philosophy. So while I thoroughly enjoy using the documentary hypothesis as a tool, the theological implications of it do not sit well with me. I am not at all upset by the use of this method; I am merely choosing to distinguish between the logical procedures used to analyze the text and the religious consequences that come with it.

Even this student, who is unabashed about the experience being worthwhile, still has no desire to embrace the findings of the hypothesis as it will create religious concerns, the details of which he chooses not to express. Though he does not explicate them; it is difficult enough for him to have to compartmentalize this newly acquired knowledge. He is left with not only a “science part” and a “Torah part”, but the Torah part is further sub-divided into documentary hypothesis and his theological beliefs. Josh repeatedly states in different words that the material itself does not upset him, but perhaps the repetition belies his point. What is clear, though, is that the experience of learning this material necessitates that he renders it an intellectual exercise; he cannot let it impact his theological beliefs. Josh sounds almost relieved about and seems to take refuge in the idea that he is not being told what to believe. Time will tell whether he will one day seek to integrate these ideas or will be content to live with the separations.

Samantha, a vociferous opponent to the hypothesis, ponders her experience:

Obviously from my reactions in class, I completely disagree with Wellhausen's opinion. I am, however, glad we learned about it in class. Next year, in college, I am certain that the documentary hypothesis will confront me again—whether it be by a friend or in a biblical studies class—and I am glad that I learned about it before in a comfortable environment... I

don't think I ever actually believed that G-d wrote the Torah and I think this was at the root of my problem with the documentary hypothesis—it gave me an alternative. A couple of days ago someone asked me what I was learning about in my Tanach class. I told him that I was learning about a hypothesis that I didn't believe in. When he asked me what I did believe in, I couldn't answer. I just said, “not this.” But what I would have said a month ago no longer came out of my mouth. I learned what I don't believe in and realize that what I did believe is no longer what I do believe.

Given her frequent objections to the material, it is surprising to read her revelation that what was fueling her distress was not a deeply held belief in God writing the Torah, but something quite different. It is unclear whether Samantha means she wished she had that belief, or that she didn't want to be pushed to realize she didn't. In any case, learning this approach brought to light her lack of conviction, and this state of confusion makes her feel so ill at ease that she had gone to great lengths to avoid it. But what is clear is that despite the difficulty of the experience, she is grateful to have confronted this material in high school (if for no other reason than to be prepared for confronting it in a less “comfortable” environment). Moreover, while she remains unclear on what she does actually believe about the authorship and authority of the Torah, she is now working on serious theological questions that were previously hidden from consciousness.

Even the rare student who comes into class believing that people wrote the Torah finds the experience of learning the documentary hypothesis uncomfortable. Steven reflects on his experience of finding compelling evidence to support the theory:

I can't remember a time when I believed that God wrote the Torah...One might think that I would have been elated when I thought I found more evidence that God didn't write the Torah. After all, it was simply proving my hypothesis. Yet, I didn't feel happy or proud... It was almost as if I didn't really want to definitely prove that it was definitely humans who wrote the Torah...”

It is striking that even for a student who for as long as he can remember has believed that the Torah is a human product, learning evidence to support this claim, an occurrence that would regularly inspire feelings of pride and excitement, in this instance evokes only regret.

Finally, even for the student who accepts the documentary hypothesis, the matter is not a simple one. Amy writes:

I have grown up with the idea that the Torah is from Sinai and that God/Moshe wrote it, but if someone proves this to be otherwise so be it...I also don't think that the documentary hypothesis makes the Torah any less valuable and meaningful. Just because there were different authors of the Torah doesn't mean that our morals or the ideas behind the Torah aren't still there. We exist as a people and with our tradition even if God did not write the Torah. My problem is that I feel like I should have a problem with the documentary hypothesis. The fact that I don't makes me think that my faith in tradition and religion

isn't strong enough so I am willing to change my ideas without a second thought. I know this sounds silly, but it's true...The documentary hypothesis is not a theological problem for me, and that does not mean that my faith is weaker. I believe in both because that is the only thing that can work for me. I believe that logic applies to text, even if it is a religious text.

Amy is a very rare student because she grew up believing that God wrote the Torah, but in light of having learned this new material, her position has shifted. She makes very clear that this has not reduced the importance or meaning of the Torah for her and it remains a repository of morals and traditions. Yet she still feels guilty for accepting the finding of the documentary hypothesis and seems to believe that she owes someone or something to maintain a mainstream religious position that includes rejecting the documentary hypothesis. Amy is concerned that her acceptance of the idea that the Torah is a human composition is indicative of her faith not being strong enough. She seems to be trying to determine for herself just how strong she considers her own faith. She wants to persuade herself of its strength for then she will be able to justify her stance toward the subject matter.

From these students' writings, it is readily apparent that teaching the documentary hypothesis is a provocative and daunting learning experience. Though comfortable with learning the material as an intellectual exercise, many students seem reluctant to give up completely their belief in God's authorship of the Torah. Even for those for whom this is not the case, the learning of source criticism creates an uncomfortable internal conflict. They struggle mightily with how to integrate this material into their religious experience and wonder about the far-reaching implication of doing so. These include concerns about the continued sacredness of the text.

TEACHING THE DOCUMENTARY HYPOTHESIS AT GANN ACADEMY

Given how challenging and even unsettling it is for students to learn the documentary hypothesis, a question arises: why is it part of the curriculum? Joseph Schwab, renowned philosopher of education, laid out four educational commonplaces to consider when making any curricular choice: the environment, the teacher, the subject matter and the students. Undoubtedly, they all play a crucial role in decision-making at Gann Academy. But despite the importance of each of the four commonplaces, and the fact that they intersect in many ways, my attention here is chiefly to the environment and to the learners—that is, how a diverse body of students in the particular context of Gann Academy relate to the specific content of the documentary hypothesis.

A core part of Gann Academy's mission is to be a pluralistic community—that is, to be a place in which different beliefs and opinions are not only actively valued, respected, and celebrated, but are also challenged and questioned. Applying the method of source criticism to the biblical text helps students to discover the multi-vocal and layered nature of the Torah itself. This underscores the existence of diversity in ancient Israel and thereby illuminates a historical precedent for the pluralism that surrounds the students in their current educational setting.

Gann's mission statement also states that the school strives to create “an atmosphere of mutual respect [which] provides a welcome forum for grappling with fundamental religious questions and

strengthening individual Jewish identities.” Given these goals, the school cannot shy away from teaching critical ideas that provide a ripe opportunity and fertile ground for realizing the pluralism of the school and to grapple with fundamental religious questions.

What follows are some of the commitments that underlie Gann Academy’s academic program,⁴ which I will then discuss as they apply to the choice to teach source criticism. I do not intend to present here a full-blown argument for each of Gann’s commitments, but rather to show that the rhetorical positions the school takes can be aligned with the teaching of source criticism in a straightforward fashion.

1. Students are nurtured and challenged to develop the capacity of cognitive pluralism. From our perspective cognitive pluralism means the ability to understand, hold, and grapple with multiple, even contradictory, interpretations and perspectives.

Learning the method of source criticism strengthens students’ capacity for cognitive pluralism. When the students participate in class discussions on topics such as the sacredness, history, authority and authorship of Torah they have to consider multiple and contradictory perspectives on these issues. In addition, when students learn about the documentary hypothesis they have to wrestle to integrate their new understandings of the origin of the Torah, which likely contradicts their pre-existing knowledge.

2. Learning is most effective when it engages students’ present passions, connects them with fundamental questions and concerns, challenges them to develop new interests, and pushes them to take advantage of new opportunities and possibilities.

Discussing the origin and authority of the text taps into some of the students’ basic questions about their religious past, engages (or arouses) students’ love for Torah study, and challenges them to reflect on their beliefs and relationship to Jewish sacred texts. This can all lead to a new interest in biblical studies.

3. In educating our students we are aware that we need to engage the whole student and thus our curriculum takes into account the intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual aspects of our learners.

Learning the documentary hypothesis and source criticism involves more than just the student’s intellect. It is an educational endeavor that simultaneously engages the student’s intellect, emotions, and spirituality. When the student discusses the history of the Torah, it is not simply an intellectual issue; it connects with the student’s beliefs about God and Judaism to which she is likely emotionally attached.

4. We respect our students as interpreters and thinkers and encourage an environment of dialectical think-

⁴ This is from part of Gann Academy’s self-study report that Gann faculty members wrote as part of the accreditation process, 12.

ing and discussion. We desire our students to become critical enquirers of truth. The skill of logical disputation in the uncovering of truth between seemingly contradictory ideas creates a strong community of learners who come to appreciate the ideas of the past and the challenges of the present.

Learning the documentary hypothesis will develop students’ interpretive repertoire, as it provides them with a new way in which to make sense of a text. In addition, conversations about the history of the composition of the Torah will expose the students to people’s diverse beliefs about their shared Jewish heritage. Through this public and communal struggling, the learners build a stronger classroom community in which students do not just tolerate one another’s views, but also respectfully challenge them.

5. Text-based learning is a central and crucial part of our curriculum. It is important that students appreciate primary and secondary sources not merely as depositories of information, but as issuing challenges that must be met through disciplined study. Our goal is to teach students to enter into a dialogue with the texts, that is, to ask different sorts of questions of the texts, to interpret them through a variety of methods, and to critically assess the opinions they contain.

Text-based learning is a core value of Gann Academy. By learning the source critical method, students learn to ask a new set of questions of the texts, and a new method for making meaning of the texts, which they can then assess.

STUDENT TYPES AND THE DOCUMENTARY HYPOTHESIS

Gann Academy’s student body comprises students from all the major denominations—Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist—as well as unaffiliated students. Yet when it comes to considering the idea that people wrote the Torah, denomination does not seem to be the predictive or strong factor for how a given student will initially react. In a classification of the different types of students, it is more fruitful to create a map of the students, or student types, considering the categories of belief and practice. I will offer curricular warrants for the teaching of the documentary hypothesis for each of these students types (beyond those warrants that emerge from the general mission of Gann Academy).

1. *Alienated student*: One might think that (almost) all students innately care about Jewish texts, but this is far from the case. This type of student is alienated and disconnected from the study of Torah. He does not feel compelled by the traditional methods he has learned thus far and feels that there is no value in learning biblical texts. Having rejected them, he knows no way of relating to the sacred texts of his community.

The source-critical approach can provide a way to engage this type of student. Offering him a new way to study and make meaning of texts can make the process intriguing and exciting for him. With this approach, students can derive additional meanings from the text, and explain discrepancies in the text in a more persuasive manner. Additionally, this method can provide students with a possible explanation for passages that are offensive to a modern person’s sensibilities. In short, learning this method can make the Bible more

palatable or easier to connect with. In the words of Jeff:

The documentary hypothesis has rekindled my interest in the study of Tanakh. It had died down during the last couple of years for various reasons...but being taught the documentary hypothesis has once again opened my mind to Tanakh, and now, I cannot seem to get enough of it. I haven't been able to quench my desire to know more...

2. *Student who is not halakhically observant, but maintains traditional beliefs*: There is a disconnect between this type of student's beliefs and practices. She maintains traditional beliefs about the origin and composition of the text, but does not observe any traditional practices. Any time a teacher sees a learner believing one thing and doing another, it is a ripe opportunity for conversation and an examination of the student's beliefs. Perhaps the student is holding onto beliefs she thinks she is supposed to have, or maybe the student simply has not questioned or reflected upon the beliefs she formed in her early years. The critical approach may alleviate this dissonance, as it offers the student a new way to make meaning of Torah texts. But the goal is not necessarily to make the student more consistent, but rather to compel her to begin to reflect on her unquestioned, potentially ossified beliefs. Studying the documentary hypothesis affords an opportunity for this student to get clearer on the reasons behind her belief. One student, Ariel, writes:

This Tanach class has affected me, and my ideas and beliefs have been challenged—something that I had never expected because I am not a religious or observant Jew. I couldn't understand why I would be so annoyed with the idea that God didn't write the Torah. And then it finally it hit me. The fact that G-d might not have written the Torah did not bother me—but the implication that this could have on the way that I viewed Judaism bothered me a lot. I had never really thought about the authorship of the Torah...Even though I have my doubts about the documentary hypothesis, I am also excited to see the new way that we can understand the Torah by studying it with the documentary hypothesis. It is going to be a new way to look at the text and I am looking forward to seeing what new information can be learned. This is the first time that I think I will be treating the Torah as a historical document...

3. *Student who is not halakhically observant and does not hold traditional beliefs*: Most likely this student has come from a public school and/or an unaffiliated home and has already considered that God did not write the Torah. Studying the documentary hypothesis offers this type of student an opportunity to find support for their understandings and to discover that it is an acceptable and accepted Jewish position. The new knowledge and method that this student will acquire can also make the study of biblical texts more interesting. Sarah writes:

Surprisingly enough, my theological beliefs matched with the idea of the documen-

tary hypothesis before I had even learned about it. It had always been hard for me to believe that the Torah was given at Sinai because of scientific evidence and the like, but I do believe in divine intervention. Just because the Torah wasn't given at Sinai doesn't mean that it is not holy. The fact that it has survived for this long, is the basis of religious life for the Jews, and is such an amazing piece of work is enough for me to consider it holy above all other texts...The Tanach in relation to the rest of the world just makes more sense when seen through the eyes of the documentary hypothesis. Belief in the documentary hypothesis, or ideas like it, does not diminish my faith and awe of God. In fact, it makes me understand God's role in Judaism more comprehensively. It would be one thing if God were just to give people the Torah, but if he were to enthrone them to write it, then his power and inspiration would have been extremely supreme. The idea that people would have written the Tanach would also teach me about the importance of people in the Jewish religion, and that I, too, can make a difference.

Steven writes:

I don't even know if God exists and I cannot remember a time when I believed that God wrote the Torah. I didn't experience a blow to my beliefs, therefore, by learning about the documentary hypothesis. What did occur was, my learning the specifics of the writing of the Torah clarified a theory that was previously somewhat vague in my mind. Previously I could say that I didn't think God wrote the Torah, but I wasn't sure how, when and why humans wrote it. Now that the process of the writing of the Torah is so visible, I am forced to grapple with what it means that the writers of the Torah differed in era, beliefs, and purpose.

4. *Student who is traditional in observance and belief*: Studying the documentary hypothesis affords the observant and traditional student, like all others, a chance to get clearer on what he believes in the context of other academic and cultural ideas about the composition, origin, and authority of Torah. Being challenged to think about and grapple with these ideas ultimately strengthens their religious identities and faith. No longer relying on pat answers, students go beyond stock and simplistic answers and develop more nuanced ones. Gila writes:

I wholeheartedly believe that the Torah is the word of God, that He dictated it for us...I know that I am personally affected by the fact that the Torah contains words spoken by God. My belief is that each word was carefully chosen to convey a specific intent. If the documentary hypothesis is correct, then this belief goes down the drain and all underlying meaning in the Torah is lost. I wouldn't even know what to make of a bible written by multiple people...It is somewhat disconcerting to be learning this theory in Tanach class. The documentary hypothesis certainly challenges my belief, and in the end I think it also strengthens them...Though this may be harsh, I feel that those who beliefs were changed as a result of learning the

documentary hypothesis can't complain, because if people's beliefs can't withstand being challenged, then their beliefs weren't strong enough to begin with.

Anna, another observant young woman, writes:

I am very uncertain in my opinion of the documentary hypothesis...Despite my doubts, uncertainties, and questions I still think that learning about the documentary hypothesis was a very, very beneficial experience. I would be very offended if someone rejected the possibility of Torah misinai without studying it thoroughly...I still strongly disagree with the people who said that teaching things like the documentary hypothesis to “good Jewish kids” is dangerous. My religious beliefs are strongly grounded and I wouldn't start changing them on a spur of the moment decision. I think that learning opposing views can only help us better understand our own. Besides, I'm sure the possibility of something like the documentary hypothesis occurs to everyone at some point, for most people by the time they are seniors in high school. No one is pressuring us to change our beliefs, only to learn about the beliefs of others.

SOURCE CRITICISM AS A JEWISH APPROACH

To be clear, I am not claiming that only this particular school, Gann Academy, should teach source criticism. It should be a part of all community, especially explicitly pluralistic, Jewish high schools. At present, no other community high school invests the time to teach the method of source criticism and the history of the five different schools of thought that produced the Pentateuch. Some choose instead “to examine the assumptions that are brought to the biblical text by traditional commentaries and comparing/contrasting these assumptions to those of modern academic scholars.”⁵ When discussing modern methods of interpretation, these schools focus their energies on literary criticism, which does not involve the same potential theological pitfalls.

One of the more frequent objections to teaching this material in any real depth, or at all, is that the conclusions of source criticism do not align with a traditional Jewish position and thus it is “somewhat irrelevant to a traditional Jewish understanding of the text.”⁶ Students, the argument goes, would be better served by making sense of the text as a whole, in accord with traditional Jewish interpretation. Students do not need to learn source criticism for Jews have been learning Torah, without this knowledge, in a variety of settings quite successfully for thousands of years.

However, teaching source criticism does not preclude the possibility of learning more traditional methods of Jewish interpretation; students should have many opportunities to read texts with each of these approaches. But one of our goals should be to excite as many students as possible about the study of the biblical texts, and traditional Jewish interpretation does not grab every student's interest. By offering many different methods to interpret texts, we can make biblical studies “the

⁵ Part of a letter from a head of Judaic Studies at a pluralistic high school in the northeastern US.

⁶ This is from a conversation with the aforementioned head of Judaic Studies.

property”⁷ of as many learners as possible, so that they actively engage with the texts, and offer their own interpretive contributions. In the words of William Ayers,

one of the main purposes of school is to open doors, open worlds, and open possibilities for each person to live life fully and well. Schools must provide students access to all the important literacies of our place and time, and it must help them develop the dispositions of mind that will allow them to be powerful in shaping and reshaping the future.⁸

Given the emotional nature of this material, there is almost no way for a student to maintain a passive relationship to the text. Thus, learning source criticism and processing its implications compel students to confront and to think about texts in a new way. Students learn about concepts such as myth and about how a myth is different from a historical report. This makes it possible for them to determine the “truths” of the text beyond historical fact, and what these “truths” might mean to them. Students are thereby “emancipated from the simple positivistic appreciation of the historical narratives as either truth or fabrication.”⁹ At Gann Academy, until twelfth grade students might have been able to maintain child-like attitudes with regard to the Bible, God, and Judaism, but as a result of being exposed to this curriculum, they are more likely to begin to develop adult versions of their beliefs, or at least to question their earlier ones.

In addition, while it is accurate that Jews have not historically read texts in this way, they did not have the kind of academic scholarship we do today. Nevertheless, certain commentators were already moving in that direction. Ibn Ezra is the most well known example of this, as he hinted in various places (see, for example, his comments on Deut 1:2; 34:1) that Moses did not write the Pentateuch.¹⁰ Moreover, Jews have a history of using their knowledge from the secular world and bringing it to bear on their study of religious texts.¹¹ Two noteworthy examples are the Rashbam, who was unafraid to interpret the biblical text literally, as he would any other text, even if the meaning contradicted *halakhab*,¹² and the Rambam, who sought to reconcile the Bible with accurate scientific knowledge.¹³

But what is most significant to note is that what gets classified as “a Jewish position” is changing,

⁷ Israel Scheffler, “The Concept of the Educated Person,” *Visions of Jewish Education*, eds. S. Fox, I. Scheffler, and D. Marom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 229.

⁸ William Ayers, *To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001), 61.

⁹ Greenberg, “On Teaching the Bible in Religious Schools,” *JE* 29 (1959), 238.

¹⁰ Ibn Ezra seemingly purposely did not express his belief in a straightforward fashion. Nahum Sarna states, “Ibn Ezra as Exegete,” in *Studies in Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2000), 153, that the commentator thought this information should stay in the hands of the elite. Ibn Ezra believed that those who knew it should remain silent; anyone who publicly doubted the Mosaic authorship of the Torah should be burned.

¹¹ In Hellenistic times, Jews used methods of establishing and interpreting that were parallel to Greeks ways of reading classic texts. For a discussion of this see Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism and Jewish Palestine* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1950), 47-82.

¹² See Rashbam’s comments to Gen. 1:5, Ex. 21:1, and 22:6.

¹³ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, translated by Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 327-328.

as old traditions are evolving and new traditions are being created. Most of the students in pluralistic Jewish high schools come from movements other than Orthodox, and the Reconstructionist, Reform, and Conservative movements all embrace the notion that people wrote or participated in the writing of the Torah as a core theological position and accept the basic conclusions of the documentary hypothesis. It is part of the mission and the sacred responsibility of pluralistic Jewish high schools to represent and to validate the positions of all the Jewish movements and thereby help as many students as possible feel connected to the material. Teaching only traditional understandings of the origins of the Torah risks isolating students from the philosophy of their movements, as well as rendering them without a framework to read and to understand many ideas expressed in books that are found in the pews and libraries of the synagogues they attend. Not responding to the claims of modernity risks ossifying Judaism and rendering it less relevant to the students.

EMBRACING TENSIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

Even if teaching source criticism can be justified by the nature of the school’s mission, the goal of religious growth for different types of students, and the evolution of what constitutes a Jewish approach, some educators legitimately worry about the effect of introducing volatile material into their school environment—and more specifically, that teaching this material might create tensions between orthodox and non-orthodox students and foster a contentious classroom environment, which is difficult for a teacher to handle. Teaching is already a complex and uncertain practice, and teaching provocative material that touches on students’ basic beliefs makes it all the more so.

But while this content does create tensions in the classroom between students, and thus makes the teacher’s job is made more challenging, these lively, tension-filled discussions are one of the marks of a pluralistic day school—and more generally, of an intellectual learning community. Negotiating differences and living with these tensions are part of the fabric of a pluralistic school; differences are to be acknowledged, challenged and dealt with rather than ignored. The underlying principle is that a healthy amount and type of tension leads to growth. By listening to and challenging one another, students become more aware of their own assumptions and beliefs, and begin to realize in what way those beliefs are satisfying and in what ways they are not.

In addition, this same concern about the creation of tension could be raised in relation to any matter of belief or practice. Students trying to figure out together how they will observe the Sabbath might create tensions, yet community high school students learn how to create a Sabbath experience in which there is room for contrasting beliefs and practices. This same intellectual habit should find its way into the classroom.

EXTENSIVE EXPOSURE TO THE DOCUMENTARY HYPOTHESIS

Finally, there are some educators who are not concerned about the untraditional character of the material, and who recognize the value of surfacing different views rather than trying to conceal them, but who would suggest that while it is important to teach students about the documentary hypothesis, their exposure need not be extensive. Students can be introduced to the general conclusions or assumptions of the documentary hypothesis, but they do not need to be taught to use this approach themselves. In this way, students have heard the ideas and have a general sense of the claim. At one

school, for example, twelfth-grade students are expected as part of independent research papers to read selected modern critical commentaries. In this way they will have some experience reading and critiquing certain scholars' ideas. Later in life, when they hear comments about how people wrote the Torah, they will not be caught totally off guard and unprepared. In addition, they will have had the opportunity, at least implicitly, to think about their reactions to the documentary hypothesis and to see, through the work of certain scholars, how source criticism works as a method for interpreting texts.

The potential implications of studying the documentary hypothesis are, however, far too religiously threatening to be treated so lightly. Learning this material can be a destabilizing religious experience for students. Teachers need to dedicate a significant amount of class time in class to providing students with opportunities to explicitly wrestle with the religious issues caused by studying the material.¹⁴ Students, for example, can explore their feelings through writing journal entries or short papers, as well as discussing their ideas and personal conflicts in class. Without these opportunities to process their experience, students are left with some potentially disturbing new information, and are given no assistance with handling the consequences of it. Certainly this is easier for teachers, as they do not have to deal with the potentially destabilizing consequences of the material, but the students are not well served.

Moreover, the documentary hypothesis and its conclusions can leave students quite confused if they are not given sufficient time to understand and to evaluate both the method of source criticism as a tool for biblical interpretation and the claims of scholars about a particular text. This requires a significant investment of time in order for students to understand the scholars' arguments sufficiently to apply the source critical method themselves.

Jewish community high schools would also do well to remember that in choosing not to teach the documentary hypothesis they might well be teaching “sacred texts without a philosophical attitude.” This is dangerous for, as Israel Scheffler argues, in doing so, we risk putting beliefs about the Bible

in danger of being received either as literal but incredible dogma, or as mere fairy tale, or as nonsense to be repeated with a pious incomprehension that will not survive adult reflection. Certainly there are degrees of sophistication that must be apportioned suitably to the levels of maturity of the pupils. But adult teachers need to be philosophically prepared to provide at least tentative explanations upon demand, to respond to serious questions as to

¹⁴ A former student reflected on what these opportunities meant to him, as he grappled with the new material he was learning.

Our twelfth grade class had a two-fold mission: to teach biblical criticism, but also to teach knowledgeable and passionate Jews how to understand and relate to biblical criticism. This second aspect is missing in a university course. Anyone can teach biblical criticism, but only Jewish day schools have the opportunity to teach young Jewish adults how to make such methods fit into their Jewish lives. The environment of our twelfth grade class was a safe place where I was able to ask questions of the instructor, my peers and myself. I was confronted with very difficult material but was provided a forum in which to discuss how I felt about the material. I would say that we spent just as much time discussing how we felt about biblical criticism as actually learning what it was. And I can confidently say that these discussions are what helped me come to terms with what it is.

how this or that text is to be taken, even if such response consists only in further questions. Philosophy is in this sense no luxury but a vital necessity for cultural survival.¹⁵

Scheffler’s argument suggests that teachers who do not provide their students with developmentally appropriate opportunities to interpret biblical texts with the aid of modern methods, including source criticism, run the risks of their students either interpreting texts literally or dismissing them as irrelevant, as simple stories that cannot withstand adult analysis.

DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES

With all of this, it is of course still important to take into account the age of the learners to ensure that the material is taught in developmentally appropriate ways.¹⁶ Teachers have to be aware of what students at this age are in a position to learn, what ideas will be easy for them to learn, what will be more challenging for them, and what goals and anxieties will get in the way of their learning. Bruner’s contention that “intellectual activity anywhere is the same”¹⁷ does not take into account the qualitative differences between the cognitive processes of the child and the adult; children are not simply miniature adults. Piaget, in contrast, has described the different stages that children go through as they mature. By early adolescence, children begin to develop formal operational thinking in which they can generate methods of verifying and testing hypotheses.¹⁸ They are also perched at the period of social development in which Erikson has argued that students are dealing with questions of identity.¹⁹

During early adolescence (ages 11-14) the authority for a teenager’s beliefs resides principally with the authority figures, particularly parents, in her life (though in many cases they have been internalized to such an extent that they have become the learners’ own beliefs).²⁰ Their beliefs are at this stage part of a tacit, unexamined system.²¹ While some adults remain forever at this stage of religious development, most experience a disruption in late adolescence when they begin to realize the limits of literalism and/or they experience inconsistency between authority figures or a clash between an authority’s beliefs and their own experiences.²² The precipitation of the next stage is disorienting, as the learner can no longer rely on external sources of authority.

Learning the documentary hypothesis and the method of source criticism in twelfth grade is part of

¹⁵ Israel Scheffler, “Supplement to The Concept of the Educated Person: With Some Application to Jewish Education,” *Visions of Jewish Education*, eds. S. Fox, I. Scheffler, and D. Marom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 234.

¹⁶ Tyler, 37-38.

¹⁷ Bruner, 14.

¹⁸ Jean Piaget, *The Psychology of Intelligence* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1950), 87-158.

¹⁹ Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1968), 128-135.

²⁰ James Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), 157.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 161, 167.

²² *Ibid.*, 173.

a larger process that pushes the students to the next stage of religious development. As students are transitioning to the next stage, a process of demythologization occurs, as symbols lose some of their original meaning. There are however some gains as part of this process as well for having reflected upon the symbols, students develop and clarify new meanings.²³ It is thus a productive time for the students to learn the documentary hypothesis. In addition, in this stage the locus of faith switches from being externally motivated to being internally motivated and is thereby strengthened. Here again, learning the documentary hypothesis can help facilitate this switch, as students are compelled to figure out what they themselves believe. This learning will be part of what moves them onto the next stage of religious development.

Fowler describes the power of this movement as representing “a widening of vision and valuing, correlated with a parallel increase in the certainty and depth of selfhood, making for qualitative increases in intimacy with self-others-world.”²⁴ In his opinion, this move is optimally made in young adulthood – precisely the age of twelfth graders - as it involves the person individuating and differentiating her self (identity) and worldview from those of others.²⁵

Late adolescence (ages 16-20), then, is precisely the appropriate time for learning the documentary hypothesis and source criticism. At the same time as students are naturally re-evaluating their belief system and becoming more independent and differentiated from their parents, they will be studying provocative material, which raises questions about their beliefs. Having gained some emotional distance from authorities in their lives, these adolescents will have the space to question their religious conceptions and beliefs and to begin to define them for themselves.

It is essential that this faith questioning happen when the students are still in a supportive Jewish environment. Even if schools and families were able to shelter students during their high school years from learning about the documentary hypothesis, they will inevitably confront it elsewhere. The vast majority of the current and future communities in which these students participate accept the notion that the Torah is a compendium of writings from different schools of thoughts over a period of approximately four hundred years. Thus, our students will soon encounter this theory either in a religious or a secular setting, in their synagogues or in university settings.

Even within Modern Orthodoxy, there are many “Orthoprax” Jews—that is, Jews who practice Judaism following Orthodox Jewish law but do not share the traditional beliefs of the movement. In addition, source criticism has been and continues to be an important interpretive tool for a substantial group of serious Jewish scholars. Since the conclusions of the documentary hypothesis are a part of academic discourse, a student’s ability to understand these issues influences and increases his/her ability to participate in this discourse. The universities that the vast majority of our students will soon attend offer thriving academic Jewish studies program in which the acceptance of the

²³ *Ibid.*, 181.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 274.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 182.

documentary hypothesis is commonplace. It is, ultimately, not only unrealistic but also counterproductive to shield students from this theory.

I am not suggesting, however, that a twelfth-grade Tanakh class at a Jewish community high school, which teaches the documentary hypothesis and the method of source criticism, should resemble an introductory course to biblical literature in a secular university; quite the contrary. Though the Hebrew texts are the same in each setting,²⁶ the pedagogical strategies are different, as is the surrounding context. It is precisely the point that Jewish high schools, unlike universities, are institutions responsible for nurturing students' intellectual and spiritual lives and are interested in and dedicated to supporting students' continued serious Jewish commitment. The high school setting affords each student the opportunity to wrestle with this theory and its implications, and to talk about her reactions with teachers and peers, some of whom function as role models for grappling with important issues in sophisticated ways, and with whom she enjoys longstanding and potentially "safe" relationships. It is for this reason that this is the preeminent environment for first encountering this challenging information. It is our responsibility to help them tackle these questions and process the inevitable challenges in the midst of our supportive Jewish communities.

Finally, and more positively, teaching the documentary hypothesis might give students access to a world of scholarly inquiry, which can be personally and even religiously meaningful. If community Jewish high schools can show students the beauty, excitement and value of studying biblical texts with the method of source criticism, these students might actively choose to avail themselves of Judaic studies courses on the college level or attend Hillel events on college campuses where these ideas are present.

Samantha, now a junior in college, writes:

Learning the documentary hypothesis in 12th grade, discussing who wrote the Torah, and perhaps the entire approach of Bible study at The New Jewish High School prepared me for the secular world and the bible classes I have taken and will take on a college level. I have found that I am more open to new ideas and understandings of biblical texts and constantly questioning it. I am never afraid to suggest an interpretation that may go against traditional and/or my own religious belief. I have the ability to study the text not only as a religious and holy document, but also as a historical text. In a class about Ancient Israel, I was one of the only students who had even heard of the documentary hypothesis. Not only did it prepare me, but it has also sparked such a strong interest in my studies. I am double majoring in Religion and Politics and will be taking two bible classes next semester.

²⁶ This similarity though is not as meaningful as it might initially seem. After all, the lenses through which the texts are interpreted can be very different. For example, studying Exodus 3 through the lens of medieval Jewish exegesis or through the lens of form criticism will yield different foci and therefore different possible meanings of the text. While a Jewish exegete might focus on why God chose to appear in a burning bush, the form critic will compare Moses' call to prophecy with those of other prophets, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. In addition, while the Masoretic text is shared in the University and high school setting, in a college class the professor might suggest some textual emendations based on other textual witnesses, for example, the Septuagint. This would most likely not occur in a high school Tanakh class.

An e-mail from another former student, Jason, now a junior in college, highlights some of the benefits of teaching the documentary hypothesis while students are still in high school:

In our twelfth-grade Tanakh class at the New Jewish High School, we studied the Tanakh from an historical-critical perspective. I came to fully appreciate that experience only later on when I took a biblical studies course in college. During that course, my college friends struggled with the material far more than I did. I am confident in attributing my high level of comfort to the fact that I had previously been able to explore and learn about biblical authorship and related issues in the comfortable setting of a Jewish day school, when I was in high school...My college classmates were quite confused by the material we were learning and found no place within the class to discuss how they felt; the content of the class raised many personal religious issues for them, but there was no forum in which to discuss them.

CONCLUSION

It is readily apparent why teaching the documentary hypothesis, and thereby often challenging long-held and/or traditional beliefs, is such a charged topic, and why students can experience discomfort with it. This discomfort is justifiable and even important. The teaching of the documentary hypothesis and the method of source criticism offer Tanakh teachers a profound curricular opportunity to engage their students in a dialogue around key biblical and religious issues, including the authorship and origin of the Torah. These conversations will elevate biblical texts beyond dogma or mere fairy tales. Without confronting this material, students are left with naïve conceptions—or worse, they discard Jewish sacred texts and find them irrelevant, as the texts are unable to withstand serious intellectual inquiry. There is little long-term benefit to sheltering students and leaving them unprepared to deal with some of the religious issues they will continue to confront as they mature into adult members of the Jewish community.

Given all this, it is far riskier for Jewish high schools not to teach this material. Students naturally question the historicity, authorship, and authority of the text.²⁷ If these questions are met with the silence of defensiveness, the curricular material that the students are learning is not incorporated into the student’s thinking, but rather is kept in a segregated place solely for the purposes of a ceremonial occasion or the classroom. They implicitly learn that the material is not worthy of serious thought.²⁸ Instead students’ questions²⁹ should be nurtured, entertained, and responded to meaningfully. Students should have the opportunity to consider the status and authority of biblical texts in an environment which values their questions and treats them seriously, so that the knowledge will not be inert, learned only for the purpose of an examination, but will enter actively into the student’s perceptual engagement with the world.³⁰

²⁷ Greenberg, “On Teaching the Bible in Religious Schools,” 46 and my years of teaching experience.

²⁸ Scheffler, 230. In addition, if, in their twelve years of Jewish education students do not confront the idea that the Torah is a human product, once they are exposed to this idea, they might feel that they have been lied to.

²⁹ An example of a relevant question might be that if God did not write the text, what is the source of its continued value for the student?

³⁰ Scheffler, 225.

Jason, reflecting on his experience studying the documentary hypothesis at Gann Academy, writes:

I have actually become more observant since I first learned about biblical criticism. I would not go as far as saying that I have become more observant specifically because of learning biblical criticism, but I will say that reconciling biblical criticism with traditional Judaism has helped me build a stronger Judaism for myself. My new Judaism is a Judaism that does not hide from theories which could undermine it. Rather, it is a fearless and intellectually honest Judaism which accepts the realities we see as an intrinsic part of the overall Jewish experience and our overall human experience with God.

Despite the complexities involved, teaching the documentary hypothesis is, for all different types of students, a beneficial and even necessary part of the curriculum at a pluralistic Jewish high school. It offers students openings to continue crafting their own theologies, establishing their own relationship to Jewish sacred texts, and envisioning their own Jewish lives—and provides teachers with a fertile opportunity to learn more about the hearts and minds of their students. I hope more educators will take the opportunity both to help students wrestle with this approach to Tanakh and to evaluate the impact of their work.

This paper is one of a series of working papers on the teaching of Jewish studies, available for free download from the website of the Initiative on Bridging Scholarship and Pedagogy in Jewish Studies, a project of the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University.

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