



Who Wrote the Bible?

Developed by
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Bergen County High School of
Judaic Studies

For more information about the IJE Community Hebrew High Schools project and this curriculum development initiative, please visit our website:

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Institute for Informal Jewish Education

Brandeis University
Community Hebrew High Schools Curriculum Development Initiative

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Introduction

This course was conceived by the Assistant Principal of the Bergen County High School of Jewish Studies (New Jersey), Rabbi Lori Forman-Jacobi. Rabbi Forman-Jacobi felt strongly that some of our older, more thoughtful students were beginning to struggle with important issues of faith, and that it would be worthwhile to expose these young men and women to different Jewish approaches to the Biblical text, avoiding simplistic answers to some very serious questions.

With the support of Fred Nagler, the Principal of the BCHSJS, and the help of Rabbi Forman-Jacobi, a basic structure of the course was outlined. It would cover the Torah texts that speak of revelation, what the Rabbis of the *Mishnah* and Talmud had to say about the issue, as well as the relevant literature of medieval and modern commentaries and thinkers.

This is the brief course description listed in the on-line catalogue (<http://bchsjs.org/>, “Class Descriptions” or “Additional Class Descriptions,” depending on whether the course is currently offered):

We will look at the text of the Torah itself, the Talmud, and other Jewish commentaries as well as contemporary thinkers and scholarship to answer this very big question: Who wrote the Bible? For students who are struggling with God’s authorship of the Bible, this class will provide an understanding of the diverse beliefs that Jews hold about God’s role in the writing of the Torah. Students will also have an opportunity to begin to formulate a clearer sense of what they believe.

This is the course description offered to students in the syllabus:

This course will answer this important question based on the evidence of texts and scholarship of the three parts of the Tanakh, our Hebrew Bible: The five books of the Torah, the Nevi’im (The Prophets) and the Ketuvim (The Writings). We will closely read Biblical texts and together, look at what scholars have said about this question, and come up with our own conclusions.

Have you wondered about big Jewish questions like this one? Are you inquisitive and open-minded? Are you willing to listen to views that may differ radically with your own? If so, you will find the work you do in this class invaluable as you sort out your own Judaism and your own Jewish identity.

The course was offered to older students (10th-12th grade). The class deals with somewhat advanced literary and historical concepts, appropriate to most students of this age. Even so, the teacher may find that some students who sign up for the class have a difficult time with non-concrete thinking and concepts. A teacher adept at scaffolding may be able to hold on to these students and make it possible for them to successfully complete the class. Finally, some students may not be ready to challenge they have been taught to believe yet. However, I have found that sometimes just saying “I know that this is difficult stuff because you probably have pretty strong beliefs — and that’s okay” is enough to allay the student’s fears and make it possible for him/her to remain in the class and complete the curriculum successfully.

At the BCHSJS, we looked to fill a class of 8-10 of our older students (in a total student body of about 300, grades 8-12). When seventeen students signed up for the class, and eleven completed it — in spite of the challenges outlined above — we knew that our perception was correct: the question of God’s communication to the Jewish People is on the minds of many thoughtful teens and adults, if not on their lips. As a side benefit, since the class depends on a balance of intimacy and numbers (i.e., a class small enough for the students to get to know and trust each other, but large enough to feel that there is a cross-section of different individuals), this class size proved ideal.

Crucial to the success of this class is the openness and attitude of the teacher. S/he must be willing to do a number of difficult things:

1. Be clear, honest, and comfortable with him/herself about what s/he believes and does not believe about “Who Wrote the Bible?”
2. Be open to validating students’ beliefs (or emerging questions) that may differ sharply with the teacher’s.
3. Be willing to investigate and consider all points of view presented in this course, even if they differ from the teacher’s.
4. Be able to present a great deal of material and thought in a concise and clear way.
Be able to present all points of view with bias or criticism.

Clearly, this is a difficult task for many, many people who define themselves as religious or observant, regardless of stream or ideology. And these are precisely the kind of people who are likely to teach in our Jewish supplementary High Schools. The most effective teacher will be strongly committed to finding an answer or answers to our question, even as s/he is open to giving our students support to find theirs.

One resource that the teacher may find helpful for him/herself is the symposium that originally appeared in *Commentary Magazine* in August 1966, and later in book form as *The Condition of Jewish Belief* (credited to the editors of *Commentary Magazine*; New York: Macmillan, 1969.) (<http://www.amazon.com/Condition-Jewish-Editors-Commentary-Magazine/dp/B000B5U81U>).

In this regard it is important to remember that the high school years are a time of experimentation. Our teens are actively exploring all the options that the Jewish and wider civilization presents them: religious, social, familial, intellectual, spiritual, sexual, ethical and ethnic. The teacher should always remember that his/her students are not deciding once-and-for-all where they stand, but that this course may help them get to where they are going with a little less confusion and difficulty. The author also believes that by studying this curriculum the student will be more likely to find their place in the Jewish community and tradition as they grow to adulthood, and not feel excluded because they have arrived at “the wrong answers.”

Of course, the author has no evidence to support this last point. Just call it a hunch.

Topic/Subject Area: Bible
of Sessions: 14
Length of each session: 50 minutes

PURPOSES AND GOALS OF THIS COURSE

INTENDED BEHAVIORAL OUTCOMES

- The students will be able to articulate the differences between Torah and *Tanakh*, and between “Written Torah” (“Torah she-bi’khav”) and “Oral Torah” (“Torah she-be’al peh”)
- The students will articulate how the questions addressed in this class have been asked since the Bible was written and canonized.
- The students will explain how and why different scholars have explained how the *Tanakh* came to be in its present form.
- The students will use terms including: internal evidence, external evidence, archeology, “Documentary Hypothesis,” theology, correctly.

UNDERSTANDINGS

- The students will understand the centrality of understanding how the *Tanakh* came to be in its present form to Jewish life, expression, and identity.
- The students will see themselves as part of an ongoing discussion of how they believe the *Tanakh* came to be.
- The students will understand the diversity of answers to our guiding question, and how the answers have changed over time.
- The students will understand and be able to articulate their own beliefs, including how God figures in their understanding of Torah and Judaism, and explain how they arrived at them.

Syllabus

Session	Topic	Questions of Meaning / Understanding	Texts and Material
#1	Where are you now?	Why did you take this course? What are your goals? What do you believe?	Lined paper and #10 envelopes (distributed one per student)
#2	What's this one?	Framing the issue: Why ask the question "Who wrote the Bible?"	Photocopied organizer (Historical vs. Textual vs. Theological) Photocopies of Exodus 20 from <i>Humash Etz Hayim</i> or <i>JPS-TC/Exodus</i> (focus on verse 15)
#3	The Josianic Reform, Part 1	What does the Bible itself say about the Torah? <i>Part One: An Introduction to the History of Israelite Monarchy and introduction to the rule of King Josiah.</i>	Photocopied organizer on the historical background of King Josiah.
#4	The Josianic Reform, Part 2	What does the Bible itself say about the Torah? <i>Part Two: A close look at the rule of King Josiah and its implications.</i>	Copies of 2 Kings 22-23
#5	What Did the Rabbis Say?, Part 1	What do the Rabbis of the Talmud say about the Torah? <i>Part One: Was the Torah given as a complete document?</i>	Photocopied organizer on B. Talmud Gittin 60a
#6-7	What Did the Rabbis Say?, Part 2	What do the Rabbis of the Talmud say about the Torah? <i>Part Two: What is the "Oral Torah" and what is its relationship to the "Written Torah"?</i>	Photocopied organizer on P. Talmud Shekalim 6.1, B. Talmud Menahot 29b
#8	Medieval Commentators	What do the medieval commentators say about the Torah?	Photocopy of Abraham Ibn Ezra and Bonfils on Deuteronomy 34.1,6

#9	The Documentary Hypothesis, Part 1	The Documentary Hypothesis <i>Part One: What are the basic features of the Hypothesis, and why is it a “hypothesis”?</i>	Photocopied chart on J, E, P, D and R (from R. E. Friedman)
# 10	The Documentary Hypothesis, Part 2	The Documentary Hypothesis <i>Part Two: Testing the Documentary Hypothesis — A comparison of the first two chapters of Genesis.</i>	Photocopied text of Genesis chapters 1 & 2 (side-by-side layout)
#11	Contemporary Jewish Thinkers, Part 1	How do contemporary Jewish thinkers answer the question “Who wrote the Bible?” <i>Part One: Rabbi Norman Lamm and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel</i>	Four-page handout, including pictures, texts, and guiding questions
#12	Contemporary Jewish Thinkers, Part 2	How do contemporary Jewish thinkers answer the question “Who wrote the Bible?” <i>Part Two: Franz Rosenzweig and Rabbi Mordechai M. Kaplan</i>	Six page handout, including pictures, excerpts from <i>Encyclopedia Judaica</i> article on Franz Rosenzweig, Kaplan’s <i>Judaism as a Civilization</i> , Neil Gillman’s <i>Sacred Fragments</i> and guiding questions.
#13	Contemporary Jewish Thinkers, Part 3	How do contemporary Jewish thinkers answer the question “Who wrote the Bible?” <i>Part Three: Debate or Guest Speakers</i>	Handouts from lessons 11-12
#14	Summary session: “Getting personal”	What do you believe?	Return sealed envelopes to students. Optional Final Exam