



Who Wrote the Bible?

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Institute for Informal Jewish Education

Brandeis University
Community Hebrew High Schools Curriculum Development Initiative

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Who Wrote the Bible?

An IJE Curriculum written by Rabbi Gary Karlin

This course was suggested 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, I outlined a basic structure of the course. “Who Wrote the Bible?” 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 from the student 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), since it deals with somewhat advanced literary and historical concepts. Even so, you may find that some students who sign up for the class have a difficult time with non-concrete thinking and understanding some difficult 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 yet be ready to critically review what they may have been taught to believe. 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 ok” 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). We identified those students who we thought would benefit from the course, and encouraged them to enroll. 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 your openness and attitude. You must be willing to do a number of difficult things:

1. Be clear, honest, and comfortable with yourself about what you believe and do not believe about “Who Wrote the Bible?”
2. Be open to validating students’ beliefs (or emerging questions) that may differ sharply with yours.
3. Be willing to investigate and consider all points of view presented in this course, even if they differ from yours.
4. Be able to present a great deal of material and thought in a concise and clear way.
5. 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 you may find helpful 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. You should always remember that your students are not deciding once-and-for-all where they stand, but that this course may help them get to where they’re going with a little less confusion and difficulty. I also believe 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.”

In conclusion, let us return to an earlier question: Why teach this material at all? Is it not the job of the Jewish educator to encourage faith, and not to challenge it? Perhaps the physician’s charge, “*Primum non nocere* — first, do no harm” is good advice for Jewish educators, too.

This curriculum follows the view of Socrates, that “the unexamined life is not worth living for man” (*Apology* 38a). And if not the Jewish school and Jewish teacher, then who? Authority of the Bible versus human autonomy is a central question that Western Jews grapple with. We cannot afford to avoid it. In 1934 (1991 JPS), Mordecai Kaplan wrote in *Judaism as a Civilization*:

The scientific habit of mind is not compatible with the view that knowledge of God is based on man’s experience of God’s supernatural self-revelation.... The historical approach to the study of the Bible starts out with the hypothesis that the Torah, or Pentateuch, cannot be regarded as literally dictated by God.... Furthermore, with the desuetude of belief in the supernatural origin of the Torah, the very ground is removed from the entire structure of rabbinic thought, since it is only on the assumption of such origin that rabbinism was justified in drawing numerous inferences from the minutest variations in the text. (pp. 44-45)

If it is no longer enough to be Jewish and do Jewish because “God said so,” than why be Jewish and do

Jewish? “Without God’s revelation, however we understand it, God would be irrelevant to the human enterprise, and Judaism would be purely a matter of peoplehood and culture alone” (Neil Gillman, *Sacred Fragments*, p.1). Fred Nagler articulated the need for this class succinctly:

The students are looking at different points of uncertainty. Its good to know that there are good people — observant people and non-observant people — who have different points of view. Not everything has to be straightforward. They [the students] are going to be exposed to a lot of different things in life. To be exposed to this ... that’s what learning is about. You can’t accept or reject until you are exposed to different opinions.

Thinking deeply about revelation is central to coming to a durable Jewish faith, a faith that can be the foundation of a lifetime of Jewish identity, observance and meaning. Of course, I have no evidence to support this last point. Just call it a hunch.

For and About Students

This curriculum is a product of my teaching over two years at the BCHSJS. Our school is more academically oriented than most. While students are free to choose any courses they desire (there is no core curriculum or required classes), most classes use texts or textbooks, many have writing activities, and all conclude with a final exam or other summary assessment. Teachers in schools that do not have this academic structure should modify the activities in this curriculum as appropriate. For teachers in schools where handouts or written exercises are appropriate, the student handout pages of this curriculum can be photocopied, collated, and distributed to the students at the beginning of the course as a textbook.

In three classes of *Who Wrote the Bible?* in two schools, students asked the teacher consistently, “So who *did* write the Bible?” I steadfastly refused to answer definitively, much to the annoyance of some of my students. But I also gave the reason: the class is not about learning a dogma, but about learning how we can come to an answer for ourselves. Some questions have a clear answer. Rashi lived in France, not Poland. The Book of Devarim/Deuteronomy is the fifth book of the Torah, not the first. But who wrote the Bible? If the teacher were to answer this question definitively, even stating that this is a personal answer, some students would defer, even subtly or unconsciously, to the expertise and authority of the teacher. (I did, however, answer this question at the end of the last class session.)

Some students will support their views by stating “Because that’s what I think.” Once student wrote at the end of the course that she prefers “making my own assumptions on who wrote the Bible” and was not interested in this sort of learning. It is important to state and restate to the students that this is a class on critical thinking, on openness to new understandings. Such learning is risky. It challenges our students to always ask “why?” We can have the opinions and beliefs that we chose, but “Because that’s what I think” is not support. The ability to reflect and come to thoughtful positions in our opinions and beliefs is a valuable skill that can be transferred from this course to many other areas of life and learning.

A Note of Explanation: Why is this class called “Who Wrote the Bible?”?

Originally, I thought to call this class “Who Wrote the Torah?” After all, it is the Torah, not the rest of the Hebrew Bible, the *Nevi'im* (the “Prophets”) and the *Ketuvim* (the “Writings”) that forms the heart of Jewish practice and literature. The Torah is usually accepted as the oldest, the most authoritative document, the foundation of all later Jewish literature. The Torah is the only part of the Bible that tradition claims to be the most direct communication from God, that is, the “word of God” through the purest form of prophecy and the paradigmatic prophet, Moses.

Richard Elliot Friedman, the eminent Biblical scholar at the University of California, San Diego, faced a similar problem when he wrote a book and also called it *Who Wrote the Bible?* (I was not consciously following Friedman’s example, and that book, while recommended for the teacher and the advanced student, is *not* a textbook for this course.) In part, I sought to keep things simple and transferable; if we can begin to answer this question with respect to the five books of the Torah, then we can certainly start to understand the origins of the rest of the Bible. Mostly, I sought to provide a clear working title for this course that any high school student, regardless of background, would be able to understand.

The origins of the Torah are complicated and not fully understood. This is the subject of Lessons 9-11 (“The Documentary Hypothesis”) in this curriculum. Inclusion in what is today called the Tanakh, that is, the Torah plus the *Nevi'im* (the “Prophets,” the second part of the Bible) and the *Ketuvim* (the “Writings,” the third part of the Bible) was gradual. The content of the *Ketuvim* was clearly fixed later than the *Nevi'im* (Prophets), which was canonized later than the Torah. The fixing of a three-part Tanakh probably took place before the 2nd century BCE. Interestingly, by referring to the Hebrew Bible using the a simple acronym “Tanakh,” composed of the first letter of the three parts of the Hebrew Bible, we are emphasizing that the “book” is not necessarily a unified whole, but rather a collection of very different works.

But it is really the Torah, the first part of the Tanakh, that we are interested in. As I mentioned earlier, the focus of Jewish life and learning has traditionally been on the Torah, that is, the first five books of our Bible. An important point in the fixing of the authority of the Torah (here the book of Devarim/Deuteronomy) is its discovery and implementation by King Josiah in the 7th century BCE (see Lessons 3 and 4 in this curriculum). Another important point is Ezra's public reading and dedication of the Torah in Jerusalem in about 444 BCE. This is roughly the time of the *Anshei Keneset HaGedolah*, the “Men of the Great Assembly,” to whom the Talmud ascribes the canonization of the Bible. Many scholars claim that final form of the three parts of the Tanakh came later. For more information, I recommend that you read the Encyclopedia Judaica article on the “Bible” in volume 4, especially pages 817-823.

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	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

Suggested Background Sources

1. David L. Lieber, ed., *Humash Etz Hayim (travel-sized edition)*. (New York and Philadelphia: The Rabbinical Assembly, The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, and The Jewish Publication Society, 2004), p. 449.
2. Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary — Exodus (vol. 2)*. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), p.115.
3. Richard Elliot Friedman, *The Bible with Sources Revealed: A New View into the Five Books of Moses*. (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2003).
4. Elliot Dorff, *Conservative Judaism: Our Ancestors to our Descendents*. (New York: The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, 1985). There are various editions and reprints of this book, and the page numbers vary widely. Students should read the pages on revelation and authority, focusing on the two-page chart of thinkers and their theological positions.
5. Stephen Schwarzschild, “Franz Rosenzweig,” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 14, pp. 299-303 (Jerusalem: Keter).
6. Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (1981, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society; pp. 39-40) (originally published in 1934 by The Macmillan Company).
7. Neil Gillman, *Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew* (1990, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society; pp. 17-18).
8. Richard E. Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (1987/1997, New York: Harper San Francisco).
9. Various authors, “Bible,” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 4, pp. 814-969 (Jerusalem: Keter).

Session 1, Who Wrote the Bible?

'Where are you now?'

I. Teacher's Preparation

UNIT QUESTIONS OF MEANING:

- What does it mean or what can it mean when we are taught that the Torah was given or revealed by God to the people of Israel?
- Why has this question been important to Jews throughout the ages?
- Why is this question important to you?

Teacher's Guide

I. Teacher's Preparation

There are at least four wider goals of this first lesson:

1. To lay out the parameters of the class;
2. To articulate some of the reasons why the central question that this class seeks to answer, "Who wrote the Bible?" is important to the Jewish people as a whole throughout the ages;
3. To articulate some of the reasons why the central question that this class seeks to answer is important to the Jews sitting in this room now, i.e., the students;
4. To start to create a "safe and open classroom environment," i.e., to set a basic ground rule of the class that the class is not going to impose any set of dogmatic answers to our question, and that each student has an equal place in the class irrespective of their personal beliefs. You should inform the students that the nature of our discussions will inevitably engender much passion, but that attacks on other students positions or persons will not be tolerated. There is a fine line between a challenge and an assault, and you must be the final judge of where that line is. This class must be a place where we can all try out and express ideas without fear of disrespect. This is just as much a class for students who are certain in what they do and want to challenge their faith, as it is a class for students who are confused or working out their beliefs: "Why am I Jewish?" "Who is God?" "Why should I observe *mitzvot*?" "What do I believe?"

SELECTION OF TEXTS:

- *The Condition of Jewish Belief* (New York: Macmillan, 1967)
- Elliot Dorff, *Conservative Judaism: Our Ancestors to our Descendants*. (New York: The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, 1985).

OBJECTIVES/INTEDED OUTCOMES:**1. What will the students *do*?**

- The students will write a short statement of belief.
- The students will discuss:
 - Why is the question “Who wrote the Bible?” important?
 - What do I believe right now?
 - Why did I choose this course?

2. The students *will be able to*:

- Articulate questions they have about the class to understand the goals of the course.
- Articulate their present beliefs about who wrote the Bible.
- Explain how they arrived at their beliefs or indicate that they are not sure how they arrived at their beliefs.

3. The students *will understand*:

- Their personal goals for the class.
- Where they are now in answering the questions “Who wrote the Bible?” and “Why is this important to me?”

SELECTION OF TEXTS:

The two texts chosen are ones that I have found personally helpful. *The Condition of Jewish Belief* presents a very wide variety of responses to our question, while the book by Elliot Dorff is helpful for systematically laying out answers to the question as found in the widest spectrum of the Jewish community — from Reform to Reconstructionist to Conservative to Orthodox. The edition indicated is an early version; you may find a later revision with different pagination

ASSESSMENT OF INTENDED OUTCOMES:

1. You should continually monitor the students' questions and comments, and assess:
 - If the students understand the scope and goals of the course;
 - If the students are comfortable with the subject of the class.
2. You will not see the written statements of students, but can assess if the students are comfortable writing their statements.

ASSESSMENT OF INTENDED OUTCOMES:

Based on this assessment, you should try to help the students be more comfortable with what may be for many a challenging and personally difficult course.

II. The Lesson Plan

A. SET INDUCTION/MOTIVATION (10 min.):

1. Hand out an envelope (#10, business size) at the beginning of class, lined paper, and a pen or pencil.
2. Ask the students to write a short statement answering the questions: “Who wrote the Torah? How do you think the Torah came to be?” Be sure to explain that you will NOT look at what they have written.
3. When they finish writing, the students should seal their answers in their envelope.
4. Collect sealed responses, and remind the students that you will NOT look at what they have written and you will give them back their own envelope on the last class session.

B. DISCUSSION (30–40 min.):

1. Introduction: tell the students that in this course we will try to answer the question, “Who wrote the Bible?” First however, we need to ask ourselves why this question is important for Jews to answer.
2. Ask the students “Why is this question important?” and discuss.
3. If you choose to use the textbook (Dorff), distribute it at the end of this part of the lesson.

II. The Lesson Plan

INDUCTION/MOTIVATION:

It is important to do the envelope exercise at the beginning of the class. You may choose to do this after distributing textbooks and giving general parameters of the course but still before any other activities. The reason for doing it at the beginning is in order to get the students’ uncolored responses. Make sure that any latecomers to the class write up their answers and seal them in envelopes as soon as they join the group.

Tell the students that neither you nor anyone else will look at their responses, but do not tell them why you are asking them to do this until you’ve collected the envelopes.

DISCUSSION:

The answers may touch on the issue of the authority of the Torah, the place of God in Judaism and the text, and on why the stories, laws, etc. are important.

This discussion is important for setting both the academic and the personal contexts of the course, so you should allow time for additional questions as appropriate, including possibly, “Why did you chose this class?” “What have you been taught by your religious or day school teachers in the past about this topic?” “Do you know what your parents believe about who wrote the Bible?” and so on.

C. CLOSURE (5–10 min.):

1. Remind the students that we will look at the question “Who wrote the Bible?” more deeply in the coming weeks from many perspectives, and this will help them think this important issue through.
2. Tell the students that this class will also help them evaluate how their views and beliefs change over time, with learning more about the issue.
3. Emphasize that this will be a challenging class, only in part from an academic point of view, but especially since it will challenge all the students to think things through, and for many, leave safe and untested assumptions behind.
 - a. Reassure the students that the class will be stimulating, the instructor will be supportive, and the outcome could very well be important to how the students views themselves as ‘religious’, Jewish (young) adults.
 - b. Compliment the students on choosing a challenge that can be unsettling: *kol ha-kavod* to you who have chosen to undertake it.
4. Preview of next lesson: We will start to understand why so many Jews — scholars and laypeople — have trouble with the view that God literally wrote the Torah.

CLOSURE:

It is important to close (and open) each class for the first few sessions with reassurances that the class’ study is valuable, constructive, and uncomfortable at times.

One important issue that needs to be addressed is the level of self-disclosure that you will share with the students. This is something of a judgment call, but you should balance sharing your own thinking and growth over time to encourage the students, with disclosure of a specific theology, to ensure that the students do not model your ideas consciously or unconsciously.

This point in the lesson is also an opportunity for you to tell the students something about your background on the subject and why you are excited about teaching this class, without indicating the answers you have found or the beliefs that you personally hold.