Introduction

Delving into students’ hearts and minds is not only a teacher’s prerogative—it is her obligation. 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 toward these goals, and continually evaluating its impact. Any analysis of the impact of a particular curricular approach depends on a rich understanding of the actual experience of students.

In this chapter, I examine and analyze the experiences of students at a pluralistic Jewish high school studying the documentary hypothesis in biblical scholarship as an approach to reading the biblical text. Because this is a subject area that is laden with theological and emotional weight, and because my students are exposed to the documentary hypothesis more extensively than their peers at other schools, I wanted to understand more intensively—and more intentionally—their experience of learning it. In what follows, I examine selected student writings in order to understand their experience—and especially the challenges they face—in learning and applying the documentary hypothesis. I locate my teaching of the documentary hypothesis in the context of the particular institution in which I work. I classify student experience in terms of different student types, and argue that for all of the kinds of students I encounter, this curricular choice is ultimately not only defensible but indeed beneficial to their theological and intellectual growth.
“A Judaism That Does Not Hide”

I conclude by addressing many of the challenges other educators might and do 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 twelfth-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 a 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 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 study 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. Twelfth-grade Tanakh classes begin with students talking and writing about their beliefs about the historicity, sacredness, and authority of biblical texts. Then they learn about the identifying characteristics, interests, and vocabulary of each of the five ancient sources and practice assigning particular sections of narrative and legal texts to one of them. Additionally, they learn different scholarly theories about the stages of composition of the Torah and critically assess these theories.
Previous research on teaching the documentary hypothesis highlights the potentially significant impact of studying source criticism (which assumes the existence of multiple, human authors of the biblical text and attempts to tease them out) on our students’ developing Jewish identities. During the 1960s, the Jewish Theological Seminary began to train prospective teachers who would be using their new curriculum. Ruth Zielenziger, the director of the Melton Curriculum Project at JTS, 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 Jewish institutions with a vignette about a young woman who finds coming to terms with the idea that the Torah is a human product challenging.³ This perspective is 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 MAT program at Brandeis University 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

¹ Ruth Zielenziger, A History of the Bible Program of Melton Research Center (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1989), 112.
² Ibid., 114.
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.
hypothesis to high school students, I had every reason to believe that these students would have a similar response to that of 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. But it can also help students feel a stronger connection to the text, as they find support for their long-held intuitive beliefs of human authorship, learn about the early history and development of their religion for the first time, find it easier to connect to the text as a whole when objectionable parts can be contextualized historically, and/or find their traditionalist religious commitments stronger after having engaged with theories of human authorship.

**Methodology**

I collected data during the 2002–2003 academic year from my twelfth grade Tanakh classes at Gann Academy, chiefly during the first four months of the school year, when I taught Genesis 1–2 and introduced students to the documentary hypothesis and the source critical method. In addition to videotaping my class and keeping a teacher’s journal, I copied students’ weekly journals, short and long academic papers, and reflective papers, and kept copies of all my assignments.

The main data sources were two final assignments: a paper consisting of applying the documentary hypothesis to a “new” text, Numbers 16 (students had studied this text with me in their ninth-grade course using a literary approach), and a short (one- to two-page), less academic assignment: “Please describe your thoughts, your feelings, and your reactions about having learned the documentary hypothesis.”

The data analysis was an iterative process. Upon my first reading, I was struck by how troubled every student still was by the material, even at the end of the unit. As I continued to examine the papers, I found
that despite their struggles, all of the students (across denominations and religious perspectives) still argued that learning the material was a beneficial experience.

I then formulated five different student types and looked for patterns among the students’ writings. I ultimately discovered that I only had evidence for four of the five types: I did not find any students who were halakhically observant, but did not maintain a traditional belief. In what follows I present the four remaining student types.

In the two years immediately following this class’s graduation from Gann, my database spontaneously increased as I received six unsolicited e-mails from former students who had been in my class in different years reflecting on their experiences in twelfth-grade Tanakh class; near the end of this chapter, I highlight two that were particularly instructive in their specificity and detail.

**Student Voices**

Two quick anecdotes illustrate the spiritual landmines that the documentary hypothesis and its implications can set off for students. A few years ago, one 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 on another occasion why she should still bother to observe Shabbat if God did not write the Torah.

These are two somewhat extreme examples taken from many conversations with students during our immersion in studying the documentary hypothesis. Student writing demonstrates the wider and more nuanced (though sometimes equally agonized) range of student expression as the students processed their experience of learning about and applying 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 chrono-
logical 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.

Ayelet is torn, trying to reconcile her new knowledge of the documentary hypothesis with her earlier understanding of the Torah as a unique book composed by God. Understanding the Torah as a book of human origin for now diminishes her sense of its sacredness. She had thought of the Torah as a religious document facilitating her connection to God, but basing this viewpoint on divine authorship alone is no longer possible. Learning about the characteristics, interests, biases, and agendas of the different sources has in a sense reduced the Torah to a history book, written by average, “random” people, without a unique qualification or a special connection to God. This is disturbing to her, and for now undermines the place of the Torah text in her religious practice.

Ayelet is looking for a way to simultaneously hold the compelling parts of the documentary hypothesis and the holiness of the text, repeatedly going back and forth between the merits and the disadvantages of the new material, and ending with a statement of her certain belief—perhaps a wish to believe—that the Torah is more sacred and more holy than the documentary hypothesis has led her to believe. Since the documentary hypothesis clearly offers her compelling explanations of textual phenomena that she names specifically, we might say that the problem she has is not that she does not accept the explanations it offers, but that she does.

Another student, David, offers 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. He then 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, like 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 reason for him to reject or ignore this new information, to compartmentalize it in an effort to maintain his religious practice. David is adamant that he will never use this knowledge when teaching Torah texts to others. The intellectual value of the information is overshadowed and outweighed by the way it threatens his and others’ religious lives. He acknowledges the conflict he is facing—“believing one thing and teaching another”—but he knows of no other acceptable solution.

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, has no desire at this point to embrace any religious conse-
quences of the documentary hypothesis. It is difficult enough for him to have to compartmentalize this newly acquired knowledge. Josh repeatedly states in different words that the material itself does not upset him, but one wonders if he doth protest too much. What is clear, though, is that his experience of learning this material necessitates that he render it an intellectual exercise, rather than allowing it to have an impact on his theological beliefs. He takes refuge in the idea that he is not being told what to believe.

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 Samantha’s frequent objections to the material, it is surprising to learn that what was fueling her distress was not a deeply held belief in the Torah’s divine authorship, but something quite different: her newfound clarity that neither the documentary hypothesis nor divine authorship captures her beliefs about the Torah’s origin. Yet despite the difficulty of the experience, she is clearly 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 human beings wrote the Torah can find 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 has consistently believed that the Torah is a human product, learning evidence to support this claim—an occurrence that might be expected to inspire feelings of pride and satisfaction—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 in the Torah’s divine authorship, but in light of having learned this new material has shifted her position. She makes very clear that this has not reduced
the importance or meaning of the Torah for her and that it remains a repository of morals and ideas. Yet she still feels that accepting the documentary hypothesis—not “[having] a problem” with it—somehow reflects badly on the strength of her religious faith. 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 apparent that teaching the documentary hypothesis is a potentially provocative and daunting learning experience. Many students are comfortable with learning the material as an intellectual exercise, but find it challenging to maintain a plausible understanding of the Torah’s sacredness that can coexist with viewing it through the eyes of source criticism. Their writings demonstrate a range of preliminary responses to that challenge and the internal conflicts that it raises.

Teaching the Documentary Hypothesis at Gann Academy

The students’ voices in the preceding section sharpen the question of whether to teach the documentary hypothesis in Jewish day schools. But we are not trying to answer the question in general here. Instead, we also have to attend to the specific context or milieu in which this teaching took place, namely, Gann Academy. A core part of Gann’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 [that] provides a welcome forum for grappling with fundamental religious questions and strengthening individual Jewish identities.” Given these goals, the school could not
properly shy away from teaching critical ideas that provide a ripe opportunity and fertile ground for realizing the pluralism of the school and grappling with fundamental religious questions.

What follows are some of the commitments that underlie Gann Academy’s academic program, which I will then discuss as they apply specifically 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 align 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 students participate in class discussions on topics such as the sacredness, history, authority, and authorship of the Torah, they have to consider multiple and contradictory perspectives on these issues. In addition, when learning 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.

4 This is from Gann Academy’s self-study, composed by Gann faculty members as part of its accreditation process.
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 as we have seen 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 thinking 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 develops students’ repertoire for interpretation and inquiry. In addition, conversations about the history of the composition of the Torah exposes 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 simply 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 being 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.

By learning the source critical method, students are prepared to engage with a broad scholarly conversation about the meaning of the texts.
And more generally, the engagement with source criticism broadens the range of questions that they can bring to bear, by acknowledging and welcoming questions that assume human authorship, that reflect genuine interest in the history of the text, and that are attuned to potential contradictions within the text. Source criticism provides a new method for making meaning of the texts, while also cultivating the capacity for critical assessment.

**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 human beings wrote the Torah, denomination does not seem to be a predictor 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 student types with respect to the categories of belief and practice as below. I will offer curricular warrants for the teaching of the documentary hypothesis for each of these student types in turn (beyond those warrants that, as we saw above, 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 find meaning in texts can make the process intriguing and exciting for him. With this approach, students can derive additional meanings from the text, and explain textual discrepancies 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. Jeff writes as follows:

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 for this type of student between 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 God 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 documentary 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 enthuse 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. Anna, an 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

While my argument to this point has been grounded in the particular experience of teaching at Gann Academy, and has relied on Gann’s particular mission and responses from Gann students, I would like to argue that the teaching of source criticism ought to be a part of all com-
munity, especially explicitly pluralistic, Jewish high schools. At present, I am aware of no other community high school that invests the necessary time to teaching the history of the five different schools of thought that produced the Pentateuch, as well as some of the actual methods of source criticism. 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.” When discussing modern methods of interpretation, these schools chiefly 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.” Students, the argument goes, would be better served by making sense of the text as a whole, in accordance 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 property” of as many learners as possible, so that they actively engage

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5 This is based on phone interviews and e-mail correspondences with heads of Judaic Studies or Bible teachers in eight community high schools in North America. While most of these schools do not teach the documentary hypothesis or source criticism at all, two of them study the assumptions of source criticism, but do not ask their students to practice applying them to texts.

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

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

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.9

Given the fraught 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 think about texts in a new way. Students learn about concepts such as myth and 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.”10 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 source critical curriculum, they are more likely to begin developing adult versions of their beliefs.

In addition, while it is accurate that Jews have not historically read texts in this way, it is also true that certain commentators were already moving in this direction. Ibn Ezra is the most well known example of this, as he hinted in various places (see, for example, his comments on Deuteronomy 1:2; 34:1) that Moses did not write the Pentateuch.11 Moreover, Jewish textual commentators have a history of bringing their

11 Ibn Ezra, seemingly purposely, did not express his belief in a straightforward fashion. Nahum Sarna states, in “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.
knowledge from the secular world to bear on their study of religious texts. 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 halakha, and the Rambam, who sought to reconcile the Bible with current scientific knowledge.

But what is most significant to note is that what gets classified as “a Jewish position” is always changing, as old traditions evolve and new traditions emerge. Most of the students at Gann, as at other pluralistic Jewish high schools, come from movements other than Orthodoxy, and the Reconstructionist, Reform, and Conservative movements all embrace the notion that human beings 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 sacred responsibility of pluralistic Jewish high schools to represent and 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 understand many ideas expressed in books that are found in the pews and libraries of the synagogues they attend.

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. More specifically, they are concerned that teaching this material might create tensions between Orthodox and non-Orthodox students and foster a contentious class-

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12 In Hellenistic times, Jews used methods of establishing and interpreting texts that were parallel to the Greek 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.

13 See Rashbam’s comments to Gen. 1:5 and Exod. 21:1 and 22:6.

room environment, which is difficult for a teacher to handle and often unproductive pedagogically. Teaching is already a complex 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 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. A healthy amount and healthy 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 will likely experience tension, yet in a community high school students learn how to create a Sabbath experience in which there is room for contrasting beliefs and practices. This same habit of mind 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 even if it is important to teach students about the documentary hypothesis, their exposure need not be as extensive as it is at Gann. At one school, for example, twelfth-grade students are expected as part of independent research papers to read selected modern critical commentaries, so that they will have some experience reading and critiquing scholars’ ideas. The hope behind this approach is that later in life, when students hear comments about how human beings wrote the Torah, they will not be caught totally 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 to providing students with opportunities to explicitly wrestle with the religious issues caused by studying the material. Students, for example, can explore their feelings through writing journal entries or short papers, as well as by 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. While this might be easier for teachers, as they do not have to deal with the potentially destabilizing consequences of the material, the students are not well served by this approach.

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

Jewish community high schools that choose not to teach the documentary hypothesis run the risk of teaching “sacred texts without a philosophical attitude”—that is, teaching in a way that does not provide their students with the opportunity to appreciate the non-literal nature of the texts.15 When they do so, Israel Scheffler argues, beliefs about the Bible are

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

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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 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.16

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**

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.17 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”18 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, by 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.19 According to Erikson, they are also situated in the pe-

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16 Ibid.
period of social development in which they are dealing with questions of identity.  

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). At this stage, their beliefs are part of a tacit, unexamined system. 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. The precipitation of this 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 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. It is thus a productive time for 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 is then part of what moves them onto the next stage of religious development.

Fowler describes the power of this movement, 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.” In his opinion, this move is optimally

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22 Ibid., 161, 167.
23 Ibid., 173.
24 Ibid., 181.
25 Ibid., 274.
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.²⁶

It is invaluable for this faith questioning to happen when 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, they will soon encounter this approach either in a religious or a secular setting, in their synagogues or universities.

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 attend often offer thriving academic Jewish studies programs in which the acceptance of the documentary hypothesis is commonplace. It is, ultimately, not only unrealistic but also counterproductive to shield students from this theory. More positively, teaching the documentary hypothesis can open up for community Jewish high school students—on the cusp of their graduation—the scholarly world of Jewish studies, which they can continue to explore during their college years.

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 [the previous name for Gann Academy] 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

²⁶ Ibid., 182.
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.

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, the pedagogical strategies are different, as is the surrounding context. Thus, a former student reflected on what the opportunities to grapple with this material meant to him:

Our 12th 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 12th 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.

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 versus 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.
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. For these reasons, a Jewish high school is the ideal environment for first encountering this challenging information. It is educators’ responsibility to help students tackle these questions and process the inevitable challenges in the midst of supportive Jewish communities.

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 offers Tanakh teachers a profound curricular opportunity to engage their students in a dialogue around key biblical and religious issues, including the author-
ship and origin of the Torah. These conversations will elevate biblical texts, in the words of Israel Scheffler, beyond dogma or mere fairy tales. Without confronting the documentary hypothesis or source criticism more generally, students are easily left with naïve conceptions—or worse, discard Jewish sacred texts and find them irrelevant, 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. If these questions are met with defensive silence or inattention, the curricular material that students learn may not be incorporated into their thinking but instead kept segregated in their minds, useful for the purposes of a ceremonial occasion or the classroom. They too easily learn implicitly that the material is not worthy of serious thought. Instead students’ questions should be nurtured, entertained—even provoked—and responded to meaningfully. Students should have the opportunity to consider the status and authority of biblical texts in an environment that encourages and 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.

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,

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

29 Scheffler, “Supplement to the Concept of the Educated Person,” 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.

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

31 Scheffler, “Supplement to the Concept of the Educated Person,” 223.
“A Judaism That Does Not Hide”

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.