

Every stand-up comedian, speaker, or preacher knows that the best way to get an audience's attention is to tell a good story. If the story is funny, that's even better. A little sin and sex? Better still. That is why writers from Homer, Aesop, and the other Greeks right through Shakespeare and up to modern Hollywood have always dressed up their "messages" with great stories.

A good story makes us perk up our ears and pay closer attention. As the great American newspaperman Joseph Pulitzer is supposed to have said, "First fill the pews. Then preach."

That is one reason why the Bible is still around. It is full of great stories. And not just the simplistic "Virtue" tales many of us remember from Sunday school. The Hebrew prophets often cloaked their messages in stories. And Jesus certainly relied upon parables and short stories to teach.

But nowhere is the truth of the Bible being a great story more evident than in its opening book. Here is an entire account of the beginning of human civilization and God's unique relationship with humanity reduced to a series of fascinating narratives. This "miniseries" is filled with all the cliff-hanging action and humor that we expect from television or the movies. The stories are poignant, funny, compelling—and not a little troubling. On one hand, there is faith, goodness in the face of evil, and obedience to God. But on the other hand, there is betrayal, trickery, thieving, incest, and murder. These aren't the simplistic moralizing Sunday school tales of a bunch of "goody-goodies" who are well behaved and did exactly what God told them to do. And what God told them to do wasn't always so nice in the first place. That's one reason to believe that these characters were all real: if you were going to make up stories about your ancestors, you would not have them behave the way this bunch in Genesis does.

The English title Genesis is derived from the Greek words *Genesis kosmou* ("origin of the cosmos"). The Jews, who know each of the five books composing their Torah by the opening words or first significant word in the book, call it *Bereshith*—"In the beginning." Readers who return to Genesis after an absence may be

surprised to discover that it is a much different story from the one they may dimly recall from childhood.

Genesis covers time, from the the beginning of the world through early human history and the rise of civilization to the establishment of God's special relationship with the Patriarchs, Matriarchs, and people of Israel—told through the compelling stories of Abraham and Sarah; Isaac, Rebekah, and their twin sons, Esau and Jacob, and Jacob's wives and family, the chief member of which was Joseph. It ends with the death of Joseph and the Israelite sojourn in Egypt, setting the stage for Exodus.

#### BIBLICAL VOICES

And God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth." (Gen. 1:26 KJV)

#### *Why are there two Creations in Genesis?*

One of the most sudden and shocking surprises to readers who might be vaguely familiar with the biblical Creation story but have never read the Bible is that there are actually two Creations in Genesis. Separate and unequal, They differ in style, order, facts, details—in fact, about the only thing they share is that God appears in both of them.

Version One begins comfortably with the well-known "In the beginning." Out of nothingness, and simply by speaking, God creates an orderly world and humanity. In this first Creation, which begins in the first chapter of Genesis, it takes God six days to create the heavens and earth, then come the animals, and finally, man and woman are created simultaneously, as apparent equals in "God's image." After a hard week at the office, God decides to

put "his" feet up and take a day off—instituting the first sabbath. There is no mention of Eden, Adam, or Eve.

The second version of Creation—beginning in Genesis 2:4—is set in the Garden of Eden. It makes no mention of the number of days God took to accomplish this heavy lifting, and the order of creation is different from the first account. In the first, God had created "heaven and earth." This time, he creates "the earth and the heavens." More significant, in the second version, man is created before the trees and other animals. The other big difference in this second Creation is that man is created first and then woman is created out of man.

### THE TWO CREATIONS

For centuries, people have taken the Chinese menu approach to the story of the Creation in Genesis. Choosing some from Version A and some from Version B, they have heaped together two different and conflicting stories to make a colorful but mismatched platter. The first account of the Creation is found in Genesis 1:1–2:3; the second Creation account is in Genesis 2:4–25. Side by side, they are clearly two different stories featuring substantially different details.

#### VERSION A

"In the Beginning when God created the *heavens and the earth* . . ."

Over the course of "six days" God creates:

1. Light, then Day and Night
2. The Sky, separating the "waters from the waters"
3. The dry land is separated from the waters—Earth and Seas—and vegetation and trees
4. Sun, moon, stars, and seasons
5. Living creatures of the sky and sea: birds, sea monsters, fish
6. Living things of the earth: cattle, creeping things, wild animals. And lastly, mankind. Male and female are created together, both in God's image.

And on the seventh day, God finished and rested, blessing the seventh day. He also blesses the male and female, telling them to "be fruitful, multiply," and recommends a vegetarian diet. God concludes: "It was very good."

#### VERSION B

"In *the day* that the Lord God made the *earth and the heavens* . . ."

God creates man from the dust of the ground.

He plants a Garden in Eden and puts the man there.

In the Garden is a Tree of Life and a Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Man cannot eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil or else he will die.

God creates every animal and bird to be man's helper. The man names them all. But the man doesn't find a suitable partner from among the animals. God steps in and puts the man to sleep, takes out one of his ribs, and makes woman from the rib of man. Naked together, "they become one flesh," but "they felt no shame." God doesn't mention if that was very good; neither do Adam or Eve.

This is the where the "J versus P" version of biblical events discussed in Part One of this book first comes into focus.

The first of the Creation stories, found in Genesis 1, is attributed to P, the Priestly writer. God creates the heavens and the earth out of nothingness—a "void." On six successive days, P describes the Creator neatly making the universe, setting up shop on earth, and finally getting around to making people. In the words of the King James Version:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; *male and female created he them.* (Gen. 1:27; emphasis added)

Most recent translations of the Bible, such as the New Revised Standard Version, make the point that the “man” in this verse was meant to encompass all humanity, rather than a single individual:

So God created humankind in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:27)

Clearly, in the first Creation account, there is no differentiating between male and female. There is no Eden. No forbidden tree. No women out of a man's rib. No submission of women. God creates both sexes at the same time, both “in his image.”

Of course, this first Creation account raises all sorts of troubling questions on its own—even without a competing version in the next chapter. Who is this “us” that God mentions when he says, “Let us make man in our image”? So far, the Creation hasn't included anyone else. Is it the regal “us”? Or is it the three-part God (Father, Son, and Holy Ghost) of Christianity? Or is God speaking to the Heavenly hosts, all those angels, cherubim, and seraphim who work with God but get no credit line? And if mankind is created in God's image, does that mean we look like God? And would that image be black or white? European, Chinese, or Eskimo? If man and woman are created together, both can't literally be made in God's “image,” can they? And if God says this Creation is good, why does it go so bad? Of course, questions like these have puzzled philosophers and religious thinkers for centuries, filling libraries with discourses on the nature of God and Creation.

Certainly, those problems are vexing enough. But Genesis 2 complicates matters as the Creation story is retold with significant changes. In this version, attributed to J, God creates earth and the heavens and then makes Adam “from the dust of the ground.” He sets Adam down in Eden, where there are trees that are pleasing to the sight and good for food, as well as the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. After that, God makes

the animals and birds to keep man company. Seeing that Adam is still lonely, God makes woman out of one of Adam's ribs. In this account, there is no mention of how many days this took and when—or if—God rested.

First of all, a brief Hebrew lesson. The word “Adam” is derived from the Hebrew word for “man” in the collective sense, as in humanity or mankind. It is also related to the Hebrew word *adamah*, which means “ground” or “earth.” In other words, the author of this part of Genesis was engaging in wordplay. *Adam*, man, came from *adamah*, the ground. Puns, acrostics, and cryptics are all used widely throughout the Hebrew Bible. In later books, for instance, the name of a rival god, Baal, is changed to Baal-zebub, which meant “lord of the dung.” And many personal names in Hebrew scriptures, such as Abraham (“father of multitudes”), had some significance. Such wordplay was a highly valued poetic device in Hebrew writing.

Another significant aspect of these stories is that they were not entirely original. Both the first Creation account, in which God speaks and the world is made, and the second Creation account, starring Adam and Eve, share similarities to other creation myths of the ancient Near East. The very idea that God could “create” simply by speaking was not exclusive to the ancient Israelites. The myths of Mesopotamia and Egypt, the two great civilizations that bracketed the land of the Israelites, also celebrated the concept of a “divine word.” In other words, the ancient Israelites drew upon commonly held beliefs about the Creation, ancient folklore that came from the lands and people that had the most impact on the ancient Near East. That basic fact will be repeated often throughout Genesis. The difference was that in Genesis it was shaped into an account of a special relationship between the Israelite God and humanity that had no precedent. The ancient nature gods, whose behavior was more human than divine, were transformed by the Israelites into a personal God with a very clear and rigid moral code. This God was going to make these people his favorites—but they had to toe a very sharp line of good behavior. Or

leather scraps, a massive ancient jigsaw puzzle with no picture to work from, has stirred controversy. Set against the politics and intrigue of recent Middle East wars and history, the work proceeded in secret and very slowly. Too slowly for some critics, who saw a giant conspiracy to keep the world from learning some extraordinary truth. But even from the earliest days of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, as news of their contents trickled out, it was clear that these ancient scrolls included some of the oldest known texts of the Hebrew Bible ever found.

Written in both Hebrew and Aramaic—a Syrian language closely related to Hebrew, and the language spoken by Jesus—more than two hundred biblical documents have been found; some are almost complete, others are in fragments. The scrolls contain at least a portion of every book of the Hebrew Bible, except the book of Esther. Among the scrolls is a complete “book” of Isaiah, composed of seventeen separate pieces of leather stitched together to form a roll nearly twenty-five feet long. Sophisticated dating techniques have proven that some of these scrolls were written nearly three hundred years before Jesus was born. Others came from Jesus’ own lifetime, a turbulent period in ancient Palestine when Rome controlled a contentious, rebellious Jewish people.

Besides these bits and pieces of the Bible, the scrolls also contained other ancient books that are not in our Bibles. There was also a great deal of information about the people who had copied and hidden these scrolls away in these Qumran caves. Known as the “Essenes,” they were part of a Jewish sect, some of whom rejected mainstream Jewish life in Jerusalem for a monklike, celibate existence. A communal group, the Qumran Essenes adhered to strict regulations as they prepared for Judgment Day, like the Jedi Knights of *Star Wars*, awaiting a final battle between good and evil, the forces of light and dark.

The Dead Sea Scrolls make two facts clear. By the time Jesus was born, an official list, or “canon,” of Hebrew books in the Bible had not yet been set. And while these old books are very similar

to the Hebrew scriptures as they are known today, there were slightly different versions of some of these ancient Hebrew texts. While the scrolls from Qumran offer fascinating information about the Hebrew text of the Bible and life in first-century Palestine, they leave another big, tantalizing question unresolved.

### *Who wrote the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament?*

A few years ago in the New York City subway system, there was a poster for a stenography school that read: “If U cn rd ths, u cn get a gd jb.”

This subway advertisement achieved instant legend status in New York. Good for late-night comedians’ laughs, it was also obscenely parodied on numerous T-shirts.

But now try this word puzzle—

“Mgn rdng ths bk wtht vwls. Sn’t tht dffclt t cmprhd? Myb ftr whl y old fl n sm f th blnks nd fgr t mst f t. Ftr ll, ts smpl nglsh. Bt nw, mgn ts prt f n ncnt lngg tht hs fln nt dss vr svrl cntrs. Tht s hw th Bbl nc pprd.”

Would you like to “buy a vowel” as they say on the popular *Wheel of Fortune* game show? You might get this:

“Imagine reading this book without vowels. Isn’t that difficult to comprehend? Maybe after a while you could fill in some of the blanks and figure out most of it. After all, it’s simple English. But now, imagine it’s part of an ancient language that has fallen into disuse over several centuries. That is how the Bible once appeared.”

When commencing a new year of classes in Hebrew, a famous university professor was said to tell his students, “Gentlemen, this is the language which God spoke.” The Hebrew alphabet comprises twenty-two letters, all of them consonants, a concept we find difficult to grasp. In fact, Semitic languages like Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic are still generally written without any vowels, although a system of dots and dashes above and below the line of writing

has been added in recent times. In other words, readers of classical Hebrew, versed in its oral traditions, had to provide the vowel sounds from memory. The Greeks, who borrowed the basic twenty-two-letter alphabet used in Hebrew and Phoenician, added five new letters at the end of their alphabet—so the Greeks get credit for inventing the vowel system.

Now back to the fill-in-the-blanks puzzle. Imagine that the ancient scrolls and parchments on which this mysterious passage was found are falling apart. They are written from right to left, the opposite of what most Europeans and Americans are accustomed to reading. Complicating the fact that the vowels have been left out, these scrolls are filled with the names of obscure people about whom there are no other references in history. Anyone reading these scrolls knows the text had been hand-copied after centuries of being orally transmitted from one generation to the next, just as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were. And they also know that, over the centuries, older versions of the scrolls have been lost or destroyed. All in all, it is a very confusing puzzle.

With all these difficulties to consider, is it any wonder that people are confused by what the Bible says? Or that a good many people dismiss the Bible as little more than a very elaborate set of myths, like those of the ancient Greeks or King Arthur's Round Table? Now you have some sense of what we're up against when we talk about understanding who wrote the Bible. As Winston Churchill said about Russia in 1939: "It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma."

Many readers of the Bible still possess the "Divine Light Bulb" notion of the Bible's composition. In this scenario, a man was sitting in his tent in the Sinai desert, when suddenly, in a glorious flash, the entire text of the Scriptures started flowing onto parchment or papyrus. Or perhaps it was whispered into his ear by an unseen spirit—Cosmic Dictation. Or the words were whirled out of some heavenly flames and carved into stone the way it was done for Charlton Heston in *The Ten Commandments*. As the Gershwins put it so succinctly, "It ain't necessarily so."

The history of the Holy Scriptures that modern Jews and Christians study is a fantastic story in itself, a tale out of an Indiana Jones movie. It is still unfolding with each new archaeological dig and discovery of an ancient scroll. Once armed with little more than pith helmets, pick and shovel, and a magnifying glass, modern researchers are now aided by satellite photographs, spectrosopes, and infrared readers that can date and analyze old parchments. Astonishing discoveries during the past few decades of great libraries of ancient writing have added immensely to our knowledge of biblical times and languages. And with the help of linguistic computers and instant communications links to vast worldwide libraries, scholars continue to unravel the secrets of the Bible.

Yet, while the depth of our knowledge grows, the answer to a basic and extraordinary question largely remains a mystery: Who wrote the Bible?

In spite of tremendous strides in scholarship and research dedicated to this question, the fact remains: no one really knows. And we will probably never know, short of some archaeological find of earthshaking significance. But it is safe to say that the King James Version familiar to most English-speaking Christians and all the other versions loading down the bookstore shelves are only recent links near the end of a long chain of troubled, sometimes badly garbled, and often conflicting translations.

This is the first blow to the plausibility of *The Bible Code*, the publishing sensation that claims that the Bible contains a systematic code that, when unscrambled, has predicted world events of the past, present, and future. The authors of that book claimed to use a version of biblical text that is "the original version of the Old Testament, the Bible as it was first written," and that there is "a universally accepted original Hebrew text." No such text exists. The Old Testament or Hebrew Bible exists in a variety of forms, all reflecting different translations over the past few centuries.

Questionable Bible codes aside, these various translations over the centuries have shaped perceptions of the Bible and what peo-

ple believe it says. It still comes as a surprise to some English speakers that the Bible was not written in English—or to German speakers that it was not written in German. But research into ancient manuscripts, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the discovery of other ancient libraries have provided many more clues about the people who did write the Bible.

First, researchers have learned that some of what appears in the most ancient sections of the Bible, including some of the stories in Genesis, was probably “borrowed” from other more ancient civilizations, particularly those of Egypt and Babylon. Various aspects of the Laws that God gives to Moses in Exodus are similar to Babylonian laws known as the Code of Hammurabi, which is a few centuries older than the Bible. The story of the infant Moses set afloat in a basket is similar to the Mesopotamian legend of an ancient king named Sargon. Some of the wisdom found in the biblical Proverbs sounds remarkably like the sayings of an Egyptian sage named Amen-em-ope who lived around the time of Solomon, the ostensible author of Proverbs. In other words, the authors of the Bible, like writers before and since, were not above liberal borrowing, or what modern writers call “fair use.”

The beginning of the actual process of writing down what Jews call the Tanakh and what Christians call the Old Testament dates back more than three thousand years to approximately 1000 BCE. The actual process of writing down the Scriptures followed an oral tradition that goes back at least another thousand years.

The oldest of the Hebrew scriptures are the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. In Jewish tradition, these five are called the “Torah” (“Law” or “Teaching”). They are also known as both the “Five Books of Moses” and, in Greek, the “Pentateuch” (“five scrolls”). For a very, very long time, it was assumed that Moses himself had written the five books of the Torah. While many devout Jews and Christians still hold to that belief, a majority of scholars and theologians accept that the Five Books of Moses were transmitted orally for centuries before being set down on scrolls beginning

some time after 1000 BCE—approximately the time that King David and Solomon are traditionally thought to have ruled Israel. This writing process was not completed until about 400 BCE.

### *Didn't Moses write the Torah?*

For centuries Moses was accepted as the author of the five books of Torah that are traditionally called the Books of Moses. The Torah stated that Moses wrote down what he was told, so this was not simply a scholar's opinion but an unquestioned matter of faith for both Jews and Christians. Some editions of the Bible still assert that Moses was the author of Genesis, and there are earnest believers who hold that as an article of faith.

In the past, daring to question that “fact” took guts—and more than a little “chutzpah.” When an eleventh-century scholar pointed out that a list of kings mentioned in the Torah lived long after Moses died, he was called “Isaac the Blunderer” and his books were burned. Better his books burned than himself, Isaac undoubtedly mused. Four hundred years later, in the fifteenth century, new critics were raising awkward questions. Like: How could Moses write about his own death? Wasn't it odd that he called himself the “humblest man on earth”? A truly humble man wouldn't say such a thing. Besides recording his own death, Moses couldn't know of other later events that are mentioned in the Torah, like the long list of kings from nearby Edom who lived after Moses died. Traditional scholars tried to argue that Moses was a prophet, so he knew who those future kings would be. Others said that Joshua, Moses' successor, had merely tacked on a few lines after Moses died or that a later prophet updated the writings of Moses. But their arguments didn't stop the questions.

By the seventeenth century, as Europe entered the era of the Enlightenment, when rational thought and scientific observations were elevated over blind faith, other scholars began to question the authorship of Moses. A French priest who raised questions

about Moses was arrested and forced to recant his views. In the grand tradition of the Roman Catholic church, his writing was banned and burned. The English translator of a book that claimed that the Torah was not the work of Moses also had to recant—which he did in 1688, “shortly before his release from the Tower,” as Richard Elliott Friedman wryly notes in *Who Wrote the Bible?*, a comprehensive study of Torah authorship. The official church resisted these questions about Moses for the same reason it always does: to ask questions raises doubts. But their power rested on unquestioning belief. Let some troublemakers start asking about Moses, and before you know it they’ll be asking why women can’t be priests!

What these generations of scholars all noted was that the Books of Moses, in which the Laws of God had been laid out, contained contradictions in time, place, and numbers of things, and names that couldn’t possibly belong in the time of Moses. Why were there duplicate versions of so many Bible stories, versions that did not always agree? Why, for instance, does Genesis open with two different versions of the Creation? Even more troubling, there were different names for God. If God had dictated these scriptures to Moses, why hadn’t God used the same name all the time? Why did Moses—who had spoken to God—use so many different names for God? And finally, how could Moses write, at the end of Deuteronomy: “Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord’s command”? (Deut. 34:5)

These and other troubling questions raised by the mystery of Moses just wouldn’t go away. And as the Enlightenment and Protestant Reformation chipped away at the pervasive power of the Church of Rome, the questions were asked by more and more people. No longer could church leaders explain away the numerous differences in style or the contradictions and anachronisms contained in the Torah as the “Word of God,” take it or leave it. As generations of scholars pursued this mystery, it became clearer that Moses was *not* the book’s author. They might be the Books

of Moses, but they were not the Books *by* Moses. Equally important was the mounting evidence that the books attributed to Moses were composed at very different historical times. To many serious scholars, it seemed apparent that more than one author was at work. On many of these points, honest people still disagree. The difference is no one is being burned for heresy any longer.

### *If not Moses, then who?*

Imagine taking apart an intricately woven tapestry and trying to figure out where each strand of thread came from, who had woven the cloth, and what they were thinking when they wove it. This is the seemingly impossible task that lay in front of biblical scholars trying to establish authorship of the Bible. As these scholars unraveled the threads of the Hebrew scriptures, they could see that very different strands had been woven together to tell the story. Often, these strands made references to events that happened much later than the events being described. Like the clock in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, there were obvious anachronisms. Empires that didn’t exist when Moses was alive were mentioned. A king of the Philistines was said to be around hundreds of years before the Philistines moved into the neighborhood. Camels were described in use before they were actually domesticated. In other words, it seemed obvious that some writers composed this material long after the events they described and added “details” that would be meaningful to the people they were addressing.

There are still many literalists who faithfully assert that the Bible is the “Word of God,” dictated verbatim to “divinely chosen” individuals. However, most scholars now agree that there were at least four or five main authors, or groups of authors, of the Hebrew scriptures. They believe that they were composed over a long time, stretching from sometime around 1000 to 400 BCE. The idea that the Torah evolved from a combination of various sources

is formally known as the "Documentary Hypothesis." This thinking gained such weight that, by 1943, even the Vatican under Pope Pius XII acknowledged it was time to solve these questions.

Today, the idea is widely accepted and taught by leading religious schools, including the divinity schools at Harvard and Yale, the Union Theological Seminary, and both the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Hebrew Union College. The precise identity of who wrote these books is an unsolved—and most likely an unsolvable—mystery, barring an archaeological find of the most revolutionary sort. But the principal "authors" have been given "names" and are identified by five letters of the alphabet: J, E, D, P, and R.

- **J** The oldest—and perhaps most celebrated—of these presumed authors is known as "J" from the German word *Jahwe*, the source of the word "Jehovah," another mistranslation now written in English as "Yahweh." The biblical writer code-named J consistently calls the Israelite God "Yahweh."

In a controversial but bestselling book of biblical scholarship, *The Book of J*, author Harold Bloom argued that the Bible's J was actually a woman. Many other scholars dismiss Bloom's theory, and it remains a question that may never be resolved. Male or female, J probably lived sometime between 950 and 750 BCE, in Judah (another reason "he" is called J), the southern half of a divided Hebrew kingdom. J is the Hebrew Bible's best storyteller, more interesting, more humorous, and more human than the others. J's Yahweh interacts with man easily and directly. J told the more famous and most folkloric version of the two Creation accounts, which begins in Genesis 2. It is J's Yahweh, for instance, who is walking in the Garden of Eden in the "cool of the day" (Gen. 3: 8), a lovely poetic image, and discovers Adam and Eve hiding themselves, ashamed of their nakedness. J is also responsible for the "Song of Deborah," an epic poem in the book of Judges about a Jewish "woman warrior."

- **E** Close on J's heels is E, the *Elohists*, so called because this author preferred to use the word *Elohim* for God. Although

some scholars have placed E before or even contemporary with J, most think E came later, perhaps between 850 and 800 BCE. Most also agree that E is a much less colorful writer than J, and that E's contribution begins with the story of Abraham in Genesis 12. In the book of Judges, E tells a version of the Israelite heroine Deborah's story in prose (J's was a poetic version), and some of the details of the two accounts differ slightly.

- **D** The third Old Testament "author" is known as the "Deuteronomist," who most likely worked between 700 and 600 BCE and was responsible for large portions of the book of Deuteronomy. D is also thought to have shaped the later books of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, and Kings—the major "historical" works of Hebrew scripture that describe the Conquest of Canaan and the establishment of the kingdom of Israel. In Deuteronomy, D depicts Moses giving a series of speeches that urge Israel to follow the Torah, but the law Moses offers in this section represents a revision of the earlier law books. Richard Elliot Friedman makes a case that D is the prophet Jeremiah, who lived in Jerusalem around 627 BCE and died in Egypt sometime after 587 BCE.

- **P** The texts credited to P, known as the Priestly author, include some of the most familiar words in western civilization—"In the beginning," the Creation account found in Genesis 1, and the first version of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1–17).

P's contribution was probably written sometime between 550 and 500 BCE. Highly concerned with the elaborate observances and duties of the ancient Jewish priesthood, P is responsible for nearly all of Leviticus. Dry and detail-obsessed, P was especially interested in codifying and justifying all of the ritual laws developed by the early Jewish priesthood, including the carefully worded descriptions of the Passover ritual, ordination ceremonies, the vestments of the high priest, and the sacred chest that held the Ten Commandments. P might as well have been called "L," because he is so concerned with the Law, but he is also often as long-winded and tedious as a lawyer.

- **R** In addition to these four "writers," or groups of writ-

ers, there was probably another individual or group responsible for creating the Pentateuch and some of the other early books of Israelite history as they now stand. In some respects, this was the most extraordinary feat. R was the *Redactor*, or editor, who took the four existing strands, and spliced them together, probably around 400 BCE. Like the others, R's identity is a mystery. No one even knows whether there was more than one Redactor. The work of the Redactor is fascinating because of the way so many different and even contradictory strands of scripture were woven together. But it also raises a beguiling question. Were there any parts that R edited out of the picture? That is a mystery that remains in the realm of speculation.

This is a vastly simplified overview of a question that scholars have puzzled over for more than a hundred years. Of course not everyone agrees with this multiple-author theory. Many "true believers" reject it entirely. And some who accept the theory dispute those who say that the "Documentary Hypothesis" suggests that the Bible is just a collection of fables stitched together to suit each man who did the stitching. Historian Paul Johnson strikes this note in *A History of the Jews*:

The Pentateuch is not therefore, a homogeneous work. But neither is it, as some scholars in the German critical tradition have argued, a deliberate falsification by priests, seeking to foist their self-interested religious beliefs on the people by attributing them to Moses and his age. . . . All the internal evidence shows that those who set down and conflated these writing, and the scribes who copied them . . . believed absolutely in the divine inspiration of the ancient texts and transcribed them with veneration and the highest possible standards of accuracy. (p. 89)

In other words, though, by about 400 BCE, the Pentateuch or Torah had arrived in something like the form we know it today. Some of these writers, compilers, or editors, particularly the three

later writers—D, P, and R—were also involved in composing other parts of the Hebrew scriptures. As for the other thirty-four books of the Hebrew Bible—the Prophets and the Writings—evidence of authorship is either shaky or a complete mystery. Many of the books show the handiwork of writers working at different times and in different historical circumstances. But it is safe to say that David didn't write all, or even most, of the Psalms of David. Solomon didn't write Proverbs or the Song of Solomon, and Isaiah didn't write Isaiah. These "books," again transmitted orally for generations, were not finally set down in something like their present form until about 400 BCE, long after Moses and David. Some were not considered "Holy Scripture" for many more years. It was only around 90 CE that the Jewish rabbis closed the book on what they considered the "official" list of their Bible.

### *Who were the Children of Israel?*

Why is there no evidence outside the Bible that such crucial personalities as Abraham or Moses existed? Why didn't the Israelites think to make sure that they kept track of which precise mountain was Mount Sinai of the Ten Commandments? Why does the Bible fail to mention the pyramids of Egypt, surely the most extraordinary structures then in existence?

These are bothersome questions for any thinking reader of the Bible. But they point to another underlying issue: most of us have no sense of the historical background of the Israelites and little idea as to who the people of the Hebrew Bible actually were. This brings us to a basic fact: it is nearly impossible to understand the writing and meaning of the Bible without understanding the history of the people who wrote it, the ancient Israelites. Of course, there are plenty of Hollywood images, which are practically useless. Most likely Samson didn't look like Victor Mature.

Who were these people, the first Jews? We use the words "Hebrew," "Jew," and "Israelite" almost interchangeably, but even