Alongside these chronologically organized genealogies, chapter 10 constitutes a table of the nations of the world, tracing their origins to the three sons of Noah, following the flood. As we’ll observe, this “table of the nations” is distinct from the other two genealogies, inasmuch as it focuses on the origins of various ethnic and natural groups and their locations rather than marking elapsed time. It is these lists that give a universal scope to these chapters.

But it is the final chronological genealogy (following the story of the Tower of Babel) that clears the way for the Torah's story to become more focused, by spotlighting the life of a particular family. In fact, as we’ll see, the final verses of chapter 11 break with the strict chronological list of descendants that characterizes the majority of these verses and turns to the affairs of the family of Terah: “27 Now these are the descendants of Terah. Terah was the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran was the father of Lot. 28 Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans. 29 Abram and Nahor took wives; the name of Abram’s wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor’s wife was Milcah. She was the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah. 30 Now Sarai was barren; she had no child. 31 Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram’s wife, and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there.”

Chapter 10 laid out, in general terms, the descendants of Noah’s lines and the nations that form from it, and it specifies the region in which they settled. Here, however, we find the camera zooming in for the story of the development of a particular nation and the nations who come to surround it, each of which is alleged to be descended from this one family tree.

Next time, then, we’ll begin to take on these chapters to see how they set the stage for the story of Israel’s life.
By comparing the similarities in technique, we can understand the Torah as the product of an attempt to render account to a people of its history.

There is much in Van Seters’ argument to commend it. I particularly agree with his contention that form criticism and tradition history criticism cannot fulfill their promise to take us back to a level of collection and composition of the Torah’s narrative before the written text, and therefore we need to concentrate on the written narrative. Therefore, it is in the light of Van Seters proposal to compare the historiography of ancient Israel with that of the early Greek historians that we’ll examine how the Torah was written, even though I don't think there is any necessary direct dependence on Aegean historiographic patterns or vice-versa.

Next time we’ll begin in earnest our study of the Torah’s literature by turning to what scholars call “the Primeval History,” so named because it touches on events at the dawn of the world that are narrated in a much different way than the cycles of stories about the patriarchs in chapters 12-50, not to mention the rest of the Torah. This narrative is very much concerned with events on the world-wide stage rather than the exploits of national heroes. Accordingly, the actors in these chapters represent the ancestors of all humanity, and thus are portrayed as the mold for the general stock of humankind.

These 11 chapters comprise three blocks of stories. Chapters 1-4 narrate the creation of the world, followed by a story about the creation of the first man and woman, their expulsion from the idyllic garden made for them (due to their disobedience to a divine command), and conclude with the murder of the first couple’s younger son, Abel, by his older brother, Cain. The next narrative block is the story of the flood and its aftermath, in chapters 6-9. The final block is constituted by the short story about divine curtailment of human efforts at the tower of Babel through the imposition of diverse languages, which confused their efforts and prompted them to disperse throughout the world.

These three blocks of narrative, by themselves, cover a quite small period of time. The creation story of chapter one spans seven days, while the creation of the man and his wife, and the birth and mortal struggle between their sons obviously take place within a narrow band of years. The story of the flood is played out against the backdrop of a few months to just over a year, depending on which system of dates you follow. And the story of the Tower of Babel assumes a relatively brief period. And yet these narratives punctuate the passing of thousands of years. It is the two genealogies that impart the sense of the passing of large chunks of time.

The sense of passing millennia is provided by a pair of genealogies placed between narrative blocks, each of which enumerates the lengths individual lives and generations. Taken together, their scope extends from the time of Adam and Eve down to Abraham and Sara.
composition,” in which, after a digression, the author resumes the story line by repeating a phrase or formula from earlier in the narrative. Thus, at the conclusion of this digression about Abraham at Beer-sheba we find the author returning us to the main setting in the chapter’s final verse: “And Abraham resided as an alien many days in the land of the Philistines.” With this statement, the author subtly returns us to Philistine territory, thus incorporating the digression about Abraham’s journey to Beer-sheba into the narration of events around Gerar. This sort of “ring composition” doesn’t occur in the Torah as frequently as it does in Herodotus, but it is another parallel to the tacks taken by the early Greek historian.

Moreover, argues Van Seters, the very features that inspired the development of the Documentary Hypothesis can better be understood by comparison to the likes of Herodotus. Those pesky doublets and triplets that led to attributing variant stories to distinct documents have parallels in Herodotus, who often relates different versions of the same story, sometimes with the notice that he was presenting these multiple versions together with his judgment about which version was more likely, but sometimes relating them without comment. With Herodotus there is no question about the conflation of sources; it is simply a matter of the author utilizing different versions of stories.

It is in comparisons such as these, argues Van Seters, that we are on the surest ground in discovering how the Torah was written.

Does this mean that Van Seters wants nothing to do with the classic sources of the Documentary History? He certainly sees no need to retain E as an independent entity. However, the primary narrative of Genesis-Numbers he designates as “J,” much as Von Rad designated his primary source as “J.”

The reason Van Seters feels compelled to designate the primary layer of the Torah as “J” is that he acknowledges that, in contrast to Herodotus, Genesis-Numbers shows signs of being written by more than just one writer. In particular, Van Seters concedes there is good reason that the material traditionally designated as “Priestly” (i.e. “P”) has been seen as distinct from the material attributed to J (& E). However, as we have already observed, P does not form a narrative of its own. In all of its occurrences it is highly dependent on the J narrative. This, to Van Seters (as well as other scholars), indicates that what has been called “P” is not a document blended with others, but a series of supplements to J’s narrative, sometimes integrated into J’s narrative, at other times forming an independent unit, as in the case of the first chapter of Genesis. In any case, P represents a reworking of the primary narrative according to the special concerns of the priestly caste.

So for Van Seters, Genesis through Numbers is not the result of a poorly executed scissors-and-paste job, but the product of an attempt to write a history of Israel’s origins. Furthermore, the method in writing this history is best perceived through comparison with the work of another early writer of history, Herodotus.
When we look at the genre of the Torah as it stands, it is primarily a narrative; but more than that, it presents an extended narrative in chronological sequence, and thus a history. As such, we must compare it to history writing in the ancient world. However, as we have seen, none of the cultures of the ANE produced anything like the histories of the Bible. In fact, the closest analogues to those histories are the early histories of Greece, such as the one penned by Herodotus. While Van Seters backs away from suggesting direct influence, he suggests that a comparison of the two examples of history writing can clarify historiography in the Torah. And he points to a significant list of similarities between the two sets of written histories.

Most prominent is that both Herodotus and the biblical histories, including that of the Torah, use a paratactic style of narration. What that means is that they tend to relate stories one after the other without securing a solid tie between them. As an example, let’s notice a series of stories in Genesis 21, the first of which (vv. 8-20) relates the expulsion of Hagar and her son Ishmael after the birth of Isaac. The next story tells of an attempt by Abimelech, king of Gerar, to secure Abraham’s promise that he would not swindle or harm him. Abraham agrees. That story is connected with the preceding one only by the general phrase, “at that time.” More noteworthy, however, is the way the next story, about a dispute Abraham had with some of Abimelech’s men over ownership of a well, is introduced quite abruptly: “When Abraham complained to Abimelech about a well of water that Abimelech’s servants had seized, Abimelech said....” And the connection is much more abrupt still, since the Hebrew has simply "And Abraham complained to Abimelech" (The NRSV's "When Abraham complained" shields the English reader from the abruptness of the connection.)

The two incidents are linked as interactions between the same people – Abraham and Abimelech – and yet they seem to be accounts of two separate events, placed side by side. Even more jarring, however, is the final two verse notice, butted up against the two preceding stories, that reports: “Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beer-sheba, and called there on the name of the LORD.” Here is Gerar, in the territory that would belong to the Philistines. Here, on the other hand, is Beer-sheba, 16.5 miles away, no small journey on foot.

It’s not just the distance involved that is peculiar, but the question of what setting up a cult site by planting a tree and worshipping in Beer-sheba has to do with the preceding story. And yet it is reported in direct connection with the interactions with Abimelech. The point is not that the narrator is a flawed story-teller. Rather, it’s that he uses the same method of assembling stories we find in Herodotus. They are placed side-by-side with little or no connection drawn between them – paratactic narration.

But in this very scene the author does something else we find in Herodotus: he incorporates digressions from his narrative by a technique sometimes called “ring
later the Isaac stories were worked into that combination. The phrases used to cement these stories to one another have to do with promises made to the patriarchs about offspring and a land of their own.

Once the story of the patriarchs had been formed by uniting these various cycles under the theme of promises to the patriarchs, they were linked with the unit of the primeval history and that of the story of the Exodus from Egypt, and ultimately joined with the other units.

While Rendtorff rejects the idea of documents, he nevertheless speaks of a Priestly thread of language, which he isolates particularly in the phrases that link the stories together. In his judgment, P supplied the series of interconnections that bring unity to the whole, thereby imposing its own spin on the story of Israel.

Rendtorff suggests that the doublet and triplet stories are not evidence of multiple sources, but are simply attributable to the use of stock plots by storytellers who produced the various cycles of stories. E.g. there are three stories of a patriarch feigning that his wife was his sister because this was a common storyteller’s plot and was incorporated into each of the independently developing narratives about Abraham, Jacob and Isaac.

Thus, for Rendtorff, the key to how the Torah was composed is not the combination of four documents, but the growth of stories that eventually became joined according to an overarching theme supplied by P and then were attached to other units of narrative.

Another current major alternative to the Documentary Hypothesis is that of John Van Seters, who argues that form criticism and tradition history criticism present a false hope. Even though they promise insight into a stage of development prior to the Torah as we have it, any notion of how traditions were handed down in ancient Israel amounts to speculation, since we have no access to the oral traditions themselves. Indeed, a major flaw of tradition-history criticism, asserts Van Seters, is that it assumes that the simpler and more streamlined a tradition, the earlier it is. But this doesn’t stack up with the evidence of how literature develops – it’s not always from simple stories to more complex ones. And so to impose that assumption on the traditions we find in the Torah offers a promise of uncovering the prior history of the stories that cannot be realized. We simply cannot know anything about the prior history of the stories in the Torah.

Similarly, while we can discriminate between different types of stories, we cannot achieve much by speculating about which forms were earliest or what sorts of settings a particular story type was most at home in. Moreover, the assumption that the written form of the story reflects its oral form is just that – an assumption. Again, we don’t have access to the shape of the stories as they were handed down orally. Consequently, we need to concern ourselves with the written form of the Torah we have in front of us.
A more logical conclusion is that the Joseph story was written by a single author. And thus, contended Whybray, the unique novella about Joseph raises questions about the Documentary Hypothesis, since the Joseph novella is not simply a compilation of sources.

While Von Rad’s hypothesis about the development of the Torah’s narrative has largely been set aside because research has shown his core confessions to be more likely late summaries of the Torah’s plot than blueprints for constructing it, his speculation about the development of clusters of stories that were used to construct the larger narrative has yielded one of two major current alternatives for conceiving the process that produced the Torah.

One of Von Rad’s students, Rolf Rendtorff, has teased out what he sees as implicit in his mentor’s thinking, but which was obscured even from him by the dominance of the Documentary Hypothesis.

Rendtorff notes that the Torah is made up of narrative units (such as the Joseph story), each of which has its own characteristics and stands on its own. The first of these is what scholars call the Primeval History in Genesis 1-11: the creation of the world and humans, the eating of the forbidden fruit, the flood, the destruction of the Tower of Babel and the consequent dispersion of the people throughout the earth. There is but minimal linkage between those stories and the next unit, the patriarchal stories about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. The book of Exodus opens with a brief mention of Joseph, but then its first 15 chapters concentrate on the story of the deliverance from Egypt, with minimal references back to the themes of the stories of the patriarchs. Chapters 16-18 begin telling the story of Israel’s journey through the wilderness, although that account is soon interrupted, only to be resumed again in Numbers 11-20. The major interruption to that story of the wilderness journey is Exodus 19-24, which tells of the people’s sojourn at Mt. Sinai, Moses’ trips up and down the mountain, and the commandments the people receive from the LORD.

Rendtorff explores how these distinct literary units are best to be accounted for, contending that the place to start is with the building blocks of each narrative rather than the assumption that each resulted from a combination of four sources. Focusing on the stories of the Patriarchs and using form criticism to distinguish different types of stories, he concludes that this narrative is a composite of stories originally collected in three sets: a cycle of stories about Abraham, one about Jacob and a third about Isaac, with the Joseph story standing on its own, as Von Rad had shown. Each of these cycles had its own distinctive character, revealing its independent development prior to becoming part of the larger narrative.

Moreover, the types of phrases used to bond the Abraham and Jacob cycles together are of a different type than those used to integrate the Isaac stories with them, thus suggesting that the Abraham and Jacob cycles were united first and then
cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

Von Rad noted that such confessions are reported in scenes of worship and so concluded that they originated at cult sites. And yet, Von Rad did not consider the Torah the product of the religious establishment, but a work by an independent author he identified as “J.” However, Von Rad did not mean by “J” the same thing as the original proponents of the Documentary Hypothesis. For him, “J” designated an author of superb skill who took the themes of those confessions and interwove them with stories handed down by the tribes, creating a masterful blueprint of Israel’s life.

This is, however, a very different model for the composition of the Torah than offered by the Documentary Hypothesis. The Documentary Hypothesis came to the Torah from the outside and asked how one explains the doublets and triplets, inconsistencies and differences in themes, and answered with a theory about documents whose stories were dismantled and rearranged in new constellations. By contrast, Von Rad looked for the core of the Torah around which the whole is organized. After isolating that, he elaborated an understanding of how his literary genius, “J,” integrated other stories into a narrative, shaping them to fit the basic plot given by the core confessions. That amounts to a very different theory of the composition of the Torah than the Documentary Hypothesis

That’s not to say that Von Rad consciously provided an alternative. In fact, he overtly supported the Documentary Hypothesis and assumed that his approach was just another way of getting at the process that produced J, E and P. For him, J was simply the premiere assemblage of such traditions and stories.

One other part of Von Rad’s research, not integrally tied to his research on the origin of the Torah, has had a profound impact on Pentateuchal studies and we need to be aware of it. In an essay written in 1953, Von Rad drew attention to the uniqueness of the story of Joseph in Genesis 37-50. Earlier, Gunkel had noted its singularity and categorized it as a novella, a short story written for the entertainment of the readership. What Von Rad offered that was unique, however, was a detailed assessment of its artistry and its concern for interests outside the patriarch’s land, the theme that dominated the other chapters of Genesis. In short, von Rad provided grounds for setting these chapters apart as a distinct unit.

Fifteen years after that essay appeared, another scholar (Whybray) spelled out the implication of that study. Whybray argued, in essence, that while two authors working together might produce a literary gem like the Joseph story, it is harder to imagine how two novels could be blended to form one superb novel such as this.
and explore what could be known of life in Israel in its earliest days, as well as to ascertain how the traditions from those days were fashioned and passed on. In Gunkel’s view, the process of composing the Torah involved joining these early, independent stories into a narrative.

But far from challenging the Documentary Hypothesis, Gunkel subscribed to it and assumed that his investigation dovetailed with its notion of sources. In retrospect, however, his research adopted a different model of the Torah’s origins than the Documentary Hypothesis. On the one hand, it understood the sources the result of a lengthy period of story-telling rather than compositions by writers from scratch. On the other hand, as an explanation of the Torah’s roots, it does not require the notion of sources like J, E, D and P. Without realizing it, Gunkel had created an alternative way of explaining the origins of the Torah’s narrative: the formation of narratives from orally transmitted stories, so that it is possible to conceive of the Torah arising from the combination of fragments, what's known as a fragmentary hypothesis. (A fragmentary hypothesis was, in fact, one of the options for explaining the composition of the Torah that had been entertained by scholars before the Documentary Hypothesis became widely accepted.)

While few drew this implication, a new method that grew out of form criticism, called tradition history criticism, served to deepen the perception that the “sources had sources,” that they were not simply the product of four authors. As Nelson tells you, tradition history is the study of how stories were modified as they were passed down, so as to express the ideas important to the culture preserving them. Thus, for example, the sets of legends about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob accumulated characteristics over time. In this approach it is not the earliest form of the story that is central – as in form criticism – but how the stories took on new shapes over time.

In effect, much of 20th century scholarship backed away from attempting to pin down to which of the sources each story in the Torah belonged, so that those interested in pursuing that question often worked in isolation from those employing form and tradition-history methods. And yet, all groups assumed that their efforts were part of a unified study.

Around the middle of the 20th century, however, a German scholar named Gerhard Von Rad became frustrated with source criticism’s inability to decide on criteria for assigning each of the stories to a source. And so he began exploring how the various stories/ traditions in the Torah became attached to one another. He identified as the center from which the whole Pentateuch developed this confession in Deuteronomy 26.5-9 (and a few others like it): “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we
Those are two examples of forms in our society and the sorts of situations we know them to function in.

Gunkel applied such analysis to the individual stories of the Torah, under the assumption that its stories originated in the storytelling of the tribes that came to compose Israel. In fact, Gunkel was driven by the perception that the stories uncovered in the recently discovered remains of other societies of the ANE showed that many of the stories in the Pentateuch had antecedents and parallels. And thus, Gunkel concluded that an honest assessment of the Torah’s origins must evaluate its stories on the same basis that stories of other ANE societies were being evaluated and must observe commonalities between them.

Accordingly, Gunkel probed the Torah’s stories for clues of the forms they took in their oral stage. And he attempted to locate these various forms in the types of social settings where they would have been at home. E.g., if we have a set of Torah stories labeled A-L, stories A, H and K might take the form of a legend about a heroic ancestor who secured the future of the tribe by overcoming a dangerous situation. Such a story would likely have been told in meetings of a tribe when they recounted their origins.

On the other hand, stories C, G, J and L might exhibit the form of an etiology, a story intent on explaining how a certain phenomenon came to be. E.g. one etiological story might tell how the first fire came to be built, while another might tell how it came to be that fish live in the water rather than on land. Such etiological stories were common in the ANE and, as we shall see, are found in the Torah. They would have been told by those seeking to account for the phenomena of daily life, whether the source of features in the physical world, the origins of kingship (as in the Sumerian King List), or why an animal exhibits certain behaviors.

One particular type of etiological story that is quite prominent is called a “cult foundation story” and tells of the establishment of a worship site in the name of a particular deity. (E.g., the story of Jacob sleeping at a site as he fled from Esau, having a dream of a ladder extending between heaven and earth, and thus naming the place "Beth-el," "house of God," is a cult foundation story.) Such stories would have been told and passed down at the particular worship site, because they established its pedigree, so to speak. Eventually such “cult foundations stories” from throughout Israel were gathered by the authors of the sources and utilized in creating their narratives.

Finally, a couple of the stories might take the form of a folk tale, which differs from a legend by being about a nameless character and his/her activities, whereas a legend concerns the exploits of a well-known ancestor, particularly a king or patriarch. The folk tale would have arisen in social settings where entertainment was the chief goal.

Gunkel attempted to use this method of form criticism to get behind the stories
nothing like a full-blown narrative. Accordingly, to assert that there was once a complete P narrative is speculative.

The assumption of coherence is a problem for the hypothesis as a whole. Recall what the hypothesis posits: that behind the sometimes jumbled narratives of the Torah stand literary sources that were coherent pieces of literature which were taken apart and reassembled in something of a scissors and paste approach by the Torah’s editors. In the case of the flood story, for example, the hypothesis contends that the various dates and details derive from two different but coherent accounts of the flood that were intertwined.

But this assumption raises a question akin to the one about whether ancient authors were as averse to doublets as we suppose: namely, if the editors who combined the putative documents were not concerned to resolve difficulties in the resultant stories, why assume that J and P were any more concerned to present a coherent narrative? We have to be careful about imposing the criterion of coherence as if it were a self-evident principle of narration. While certainly the different date systems we found in the flood narrative raise the legitimate question of how to account for them, it is questionable whether on the larger plane of the Torah – we can use lack of coherence as a criterion for distinguishing sources.

Another weighty challenge that has been raised regarding the assertions of the Documentary Hypothesis has to do with what is meant by documents? Those who forged the hypothesis in the 19th century assumed the sources were written by authors similar to the way a modern author would produce a story. And yet, since we lack the actual sources involved, it is highly speculative to speak of them as “documents.”

In fact, shortly after the documentary hypothesis jelled, a new area of research opened that called into question the assumption that the sources were narratives constructed by a single author. The turn of the 20th century saw a growing interest in oral traditions, the ways (what were termed) preliterate societies handed down their stories. One of the tools developed in such study, and brought to bear on the Torah by a scholar named Herman Gunkel, was form criticism, about which Nelson informs you. Gunkel posited that the stories utilized by the sources had been told and retold prior to being written down; they were not simply constructed by the authors of the sources. Moreover, those stories were passed down in set forms, each of which functioned in a particular social situation.

The concept of forms is a sound one. E.g., you know that a story beginning with the words, “Once upon a time” and locates its action in “a land far away” is a fairytale written for the entertainment of children. Equally, you know that a piece calling for “a self-motivated Lead Operator to work with our super mini computer while supervising and directing work of 2 operators” is extracted from the want ads and has the function of notifying qualified persons of an employment opportunity.
the divine names – which, granted, is not the sole criterion the hypothesis uses –
one would need to speak of three sources here, although (in fact) no one does.

What makes that complexity even more significant is that by doing a computer
search of the Torah to find where the compound YHWH Elohim occurs and
plotting the results, we find this compound title appears only sporadically until we
reach Deuteronomy, where it permeates the book. If we focus our attention for the
moment on the book of Genesis, we find that this compound title occurs in three
places: chapters 2-3 that we just noted, briefly in chapter 11, and then in chapters
24-28.

If we plot the use of YHWH Elohim in Genesis more precisely, the distribution
becomes even clearer. We find its 19 appearances in chapters 2-3, a single
occurrence at the end of chapter 9, a cluster of 6 occurrences in chapter 24, and
two more isolated occurrences in 27.20 and 28.13. When we compare with this
distribution the far more numerous places the Tetragrammaton occurs alone, it’s
clear that this compound name clusters in small groups, most striking of which is
chapters 2 & 3, where we find only the compound name.

Consequently, there is more going on with the divine names than simply J alone
using Tetragrammaton prior to Exodus. there is more complexity in the use of the
divine name than those who formulated the Documentary Hypothesis recognized.
As a matter of fact, there are cases where the Tetragrammaton appears in a passage
otherwise assigned to E. E.g., while scholars have, for a number of reasons,
generally attributed to E Genesis 22.1-14, the story of the divine command to
Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, towards the end of the passage the
Tetragrammaton appears three times.

As a result, the use of the Tetragrammaton as a criterion is more complex than
was assumed by those who formulated the Documentary Hypothesis. That's not to
say that the use of the divine name is entirely insignificant, nor is it to say that P
and J are not distinguishable, in part, by their different use of the Tetragrammaton;
but it has become less of a stable means of distinguishing E. In fact, most scholars
today either do not use “E” or (at best) retain it in deference to the hypothesis, but
only in the combination “J/E” to designate a single source. So the criterion of
"distinct" has become problematic for E.

Returning to our summary statement, the assertion that there once existed
complete documents is problematic for both E & J. Because only fragments of E
can be isolated, the assertion that it was originally a complete narrative is built on
the assumption that the sources of the stories must have told the complete story of
Israel’s origins. But why should we assume that E’s stories are remnants of a
complete narrative?

The assertion of a complete narrative in the case of P is equally problematic.
Stories attributable to P are also few and far between, so that they constitute
Lecture 16: Alternatives to the Documentary Hypothesis

History-telling in the Bible

Last session I outlined the answer formed by 19th and 20th century scholars to the question of how the Torah was composed, upon pondering its doublets and triplets of stories, as well as the groups of stories with shared motifs. The theory that won the day and that still finds adherents among many scholars today is the documentary hypothesis. And of course, now, having read Whybray, you know even more of the background to and developments of this hypothesis, as well as some of the prominent alternatives to it on the market today.

You'll recall the summary statement I gave for the hypothesis: “The Torah was woven from four distinct, complete and coherent literary documents.” While this hypothesis provided a compelling solution for most scholars for nearly a century, in the mid- to latter decades of the 20th century weighty questions arose that challenged each element of this formulation.

The assertion of four distinct documents has become especially problematic in the case of E, which the hypothesis presumes was largely parallel to J, although indistinguishable from it once both use the tetragrammaticon, beginning in Exodus.

Last time I noted that the assertion of four distinct documents has become a problem especially in the case of E, which was presumed to have been largely similar to J and, in any case, virtually impossible to distinguish from J once both begin using the Tetragrammaton. The fundamental problem I mentioned last time is that while E was largely considered to be formed of doublets of stories from J, it has become less clear why we must assume that a source could not have had more than one version of a story. Since whoever assembled the Torah in its final form evidently could tolerate variant stories in the same document, why must be insist that these divers stories go back to distinct sources? And as Whybray notes, Robert Alter and others have shown that some doublets may have literary functions.

Another weakness in the assumption of the distinctiveness of sources relates to the criterion of the use of the divine name. According to the Documentary Hypothesis, whereas both E and P refrain from using the Tetragrammaton until the era of Moses, J uses it liberally from the very start. Thus Genesis 1 uses only the generic Elohim, whereas in chapters 2-4 we find the Tetragrammaton used regularly. And yet, even in chapters 2-4 the data are more complex.

While chapter 1 does use Elohim exclusively, chapters 2-3, which narrate the creation of man and woman and their eating of the forbidden fruit, do not use the Tetragrammaton alone, but always (19x) in combination with Elohim. On the other hand, chapter 4, which tells the story of Abel’s murder of his brother, Cain, uses the tetragrammaton alone (9x). Consequently, judging simply by the use of