

Fundamental Questions in the Study of *Tanakh*

By Rav Amnon Bazak

Duplication and Contradiction (Part 1)

A. Background

The awareness that the Torah contains many instances of duplication, as well as contradictions between different sources, has always existed. *Chazal* address these phenomena in many places, and note them using expressions such as, "Two biblical verses contradict one another"; "one verse says... while another verse says...." The commentators broaden the discussion even further, and propose different explanations for the phenomena of repetition and contradiction in *Tanakh*, both in relation to contradictions between different textual units, and in relation to contradictions that occur within one single unit.^[1]

To illustrate the phenomenon, let us list some of the better-known contradictions.

1. The most famous would seem to be the two descriptions of the Creation, as set forth in chapter 1 and chapter 2 of *Bereishit*. Chapter 1 suggests that first the plants were created (verses 11-12), followed by animals (verses 20-25), and finally man – male and female together (verse 27). In chapter 2, by contrast, man is created first (verse 7), followed by vegetation (verses 8-9), with the text emphasizing that there was no point in creating plants prior to the appearance of man, and animals are created only in order to serve as a "helpmate" to man (verses 18-20). Woman, too, is created at a later stage, from one of Man's ribs (verses 21-23).

2. Duplications and contradictions of this sort continue throughout the narrative in *Bereishit*. The story of the Flood, for example, is built on a systematic duality: twice we are told that God sees the evil of man and decides to destroy mankind from upon the earth (verses 5-8; 9-13); twice God commands Noach to bring the animals into the Ark, and twice we are told that Noach does everything as God commands him (6:14-22; 7:1-5). Furthermore there is a direct contradiction concerning the number of animals that Noach is required to take. For he is told, "And of all the living things, of all flesh, **two of everything** shall you bring to the Ark" (6:19-20). However, just four verses later, Noach is told: "Of all the pure animals shall you take for yourself by **sevens**, male and female" (7:2).

3. At the end of *parashat Noach* we read that Terach led Avram, Sarai and Lot from Ur Kasdim, in the direction of Kena'an, but they stopped in Charan (11:31-32). Later on we read that they continued from Charan to Kena'an (12:5). But at the beginning of *parashat Lekh-lekha*, God commands Avram, "Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you" (12:1) – seemingly implying that Avraham was still in his birthplace and his father's house when God commanded him to go to Kena'an. This is also suggested by God's words in the Covenant between the Parts (*Berit bein HaBetarim*): "I am the Lord Who brought you forth from Ur Kasdim" (15:7).

4. The boundaries of the land, as stated at this Covenant between the Parts, are "from the River of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates" (ibid., 18), but two chapters later the boundaries are limited to "the land of Kena'an" (17:8), located between the great sea (Mediterranean) and the Jordan River (see [Bamidbar 34:1-13](#)).

5. God appears to Avraham and tells him that his son, Yitzchak, will be born in a year's time (17:15-19), and Avraham responds with laughter. In the next chapter, angels reveal themselves to Avraham and inform him that in a year's time a son will be born to him (18:10); this time it is Sara who laughs.

6. When Yaakov returns from Charan to Kena'an, he sends messengers to Esav, in Se'ir (32:3); at the end of their encounter Esav returns home to Se'ir (33:16). But in chapter 36 (verses 6-8) it seems that it is only after Yaakov's return to the land that Esav goes to Se'ir, in light of the impossibility of both of them living in the same area, owing to their respective wealth.

7. In the sale of Yosef, we read, "The **Midianites** sold him to Egypt, to Potifar, Pharaoh's chamberlain, the captain of the guard" (37:36), but further on we read, "And Potifar bought him... from the **Ishmaelites** who had brought him down there" (39:1).

8. The same phenomenon continues into *Shemot*. For instance, in the plague of blood, Moshe says, "Behold, I will smite with the staff that is in my hand upon the water that is in the River, and it shall turn into blood" ([Shemot 7:17](#)) – i.e., Moshe himself will strike the River with his staff. But two verses later God tells Moshe, "Say to Aharon: Take your staff and stretch your arm over the water of Egypt, over their streams, over their rivers, over their lakes, and over all their pools of water, and they shall be blood" – in other words, it is Aharon who strikes the water with his staff, and not only the Nile, but all bodies of water throughout Egypt, turn into blood.

9. At the time of the Exodus, Moshe tells Bnei Yisrael, "No man shall emerge from the door of his house until the morning" (12:22), suggesting that the Exodus takes place the next day. But a few verses later we read, "[Pharaoh] called for Moshe and Aharon by night, and he said: Arise and get out from among my people... and the Egyptians urged the people to hurry, that they might send them out of the land... for they were driven out of Egypt, and could not delay, nor had they prepared themselves any provisions" (31-39). This tells us that they left by night – as supported by the verse in [Devarim \(16:1\)](#), "For in the month of spring the Lord your God brought you out of Egypt by night."

10. These sorts of contradictions are to be found in legal units, too. In the laws concerning a Hebrew servant, in *parashat Mishpatim*, we read that a servant who does not wish to go free in the seventh year has his ear pierced by his master, with an awl, and then "he shall serve him forever" ([Shemot 21:6](#)). As Rashbam explains (*ad loc.*), "The literal meaning is – all the days of his life, as it says in the Book of *Shmuel*, 'And he shall remain there forever' ([Shmuel I 1:22](#))." This is also suggested in *parashat Re'eh*: "You shall take the awl and put it through his ear, to the door, and he shall be your servant forever" ([Devarim 15:17](#)). In *parashat Behar*, by contrast, the Torah rules out the possibility of a Hebrew servant serving beyond the Jubilee year: "Until the Jubilee year he shall work with you... for they are My servants, those whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as bondsmen" ([Vayikra 25:40-42](#)).

11. In the commandment of *Shemitta*, the Sabbatical year, we read in *Shemot* that the produce of the land is meant for consumption by the poor: "But in the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat, and what they leave, the beasts of the field shall eat" ([Shemot 23:11](#)). In *Vayikra*, however, we read that the essence of the *Shemittayear* is to allow everyone to eat of the produce

freely: "And the Shabbat produce of the land shall be for you for food, and for your servants, and for your maidservants, and for your hired workers, and for the stranger who sojourns with you. And for your cattle, and for the beasts in your land shall all its produce be, for food" ([Vayikra 25:6-7](#)).

12. Especially prominent are the seeming contradictions between *Devarim* and the preceding Books – both in terms of the narrative and in details of halakha. Chapter 1 of *Devarim* begins with a description of the appointment of the judges (verses 9-18), and it differs in several significant respects from the narrative in *Shemot* ch.18. In *Devarim*, the appointment of the judges is depicted as Moshe's own initiative, with no mention of Yitro, who in *Shemot* persuades Moshe to appoint judges. Furthermore in *Shemot* it is Moshe who selects the judges, while in *Devarim* he appeals to the people to choose them, etc.

13. Further on in chapter 1 of *Devarim*, Moshe recounts the episode of the spies, and here again, the account is quite different from the one recorded in *parashat Shelach*. The most glaring difference is that while in *parashat Shelach* the initiative of appointing spies comes from God, in *Devarim* it is the people who request this scouting mission. There are also many other differences, concerning the purpose of the mission, the question of whether the conclusion drawn from the mission is stated by the spies or by the people, Yehoshua's role, and more.

14. In chapter 2 we read of the Children of Israel's approach to Edom, and the warning they are given in advance that they will not be able to enter the land of Edom; they will be permitted only to purchase food and water from them (verses 5-6), as actually happens (verse 29). In *Bamidbar*, chapter 20, we read that the Children of Israel wanted to journey through the land of Edom, and Edom refused, not permitting even the purchase of food and water.

15. Likewise there are differences in descriptions of what happened in the episode of the golden calf: *Shemot*, chapter 32, describes how immediately after God tells Moshe of His intention to wipe out the nation, Moshe begs and pleads and succeeds in annulling this decree. In *Devarim* chapter 9 by contrast, Moshe descends the mountain with the feeling that the fate of the nation has been sealed; only afterwards does he ascend to God and ask that He annul the decree.

16. In the halakhic realm we find, for example, the well-known differences between Shabbat in the Ten Commandments as they appear in [Shemot \(20:8-11\)](#) and in [Devarim \(5:12-15\)](#). The discrepancy goes beyond the opening command ("Remember" vs. "Observe"), extending to the reason behind the mitzva. *Shemot* emphasizes the context of the man-God relationship: "For in six days God made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; therefore God blessed the Shabbat day and sanctified it." *Devarim* emphasizes the social context: "And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out of there, with a strong hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commands you to observe the day of Shabbat."

17. In the units describing the Pesach sacrifice there are likewise discrepancies between *Devarim* and the previous Books. As an example, in *Shemot* chapter 12, we read concerning the animal to be used as the sacrifice, "You shall take it from the sheep or from the goats" (verse 5), and concerning the form in

which it is to be eaten – "You shall not eat of it raw, nor boiled at all in water" (verse 9). In *Devarim* chapter 16, concerning the animal we read, "You shall offer a Pesach to the Lord your God, of the flock and of the herd (cattle)" (verse 2), and as to the form: "There you shall offer the Pesach... and you shall cook it and eat it in the place which the Lord your God will choose" (verses 6-7).

18. As another example, concerning a Hebrew maidservant we read in *Sefer Shemot*, "She shall not go out as the slaves go out" (21:7). The plain meaning is that she is not automatically freed when a Hebrew servant would be – "after six years" (Rashbam, ad loc.), as mentioned in the previous verse. In *Sefer Devarim*, however, we find: "If your brother, a Hebrew man or Hebrew woman is sold to you, he shall serve you for six years, and in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you" ([Devarim 15:12](#)).

The above are just several examples of the phenomenon under discussion here. These examples have been debated over the generations and various explanations have been proposed. However, in many instances the solutions are less than satisfactory, since they interpret the text in a manner that does not sit well with the plain meaning; one who seeks to understand the literal meaning of the text has trouble reconciling the various explanations with the plain meaning. For instance, we mentioned above the textual description of Avraham journeying with Terach, his father, until they reach Charan, and the continuation of his journey to Kena'an; and the contrasting revelation in which God calls upon him to leave "your land and your birthplace and your father's house," implying that this command came while he was still in Ur Kasdim, as in fact is made explicit later when his journey is recalled in [Bereishit 15:7](#). The commentators offer various ways of resolving this contradiction, but the difficulty seems to remain. Rashi (12:2) writes,

"But did he not leave there already, with his father, and come as far as Charan? Rather, this is what God told him: Distance yourself even further from there, and leave your father's house."

On the plain level of the text, it is difficult to interpret the command "*lekh lekha*" (literally, "go for yourself") to mean "distance yourself even further" – especially in light of the fact that a similar command appears in the context of the *Akeida* (the story of the Binding of Isaac) at [Bereishit 22:2](#), where the plain meaning is again to leave the place where he is right now, and not to "distance himself even further." For this reason, Ibn Ezra and Radak explain that this command was indeed given to Avraham in Ur Kasdim, and the verse in fact is meant in the sense of the past perfect tense – that God "had commanded" Avraham. However, this too presents difficulties, if for no other reason than that the formulation of the verse gives no hint of this chronological ordering.^[2] Other commentaries give rise to other questions.^[3]

The same perplexity arises in the halakhic realm. Concerning the Hebrew servant, we noted above the contradiction between "and he shall serve him forever (*le-olam*)" in *parashat Mishpatim*, and the mandatory release in the Jubilee year, as mentioned in *parashat Behar*. *Chazal's* solution to the contradiction is to conclude that, "'Forever' means 'for as long as there is until the Jubilee'" ([Kiddushin 21b](#)). However, this is difficult to reconcile with the literal level of the text, as noted by Rashbam, whom we quoted above. The expression "*le-olam*" appears dozens of times in *Tanakh*, and it always means "forever." For instance, "You shall not seek their peace and their welfare

all the days of your life, forever" ([Devarim 23:7](#)); "And I said, I shall never break My covenant with you" ([Shoftim 2:1](#)). Why, then, would the Torah use an expression whose meaning is clear, in view of its other appearances, rather than simply stating "until the Jubilee year"?

Aside from the unsatisfactory nature of the solutions to the various contradictions, there is a more fundamental difficulty that arises in view of the sheer number of such contradictions. If a scholar, focusing on the plain meaning of the text, encounters such a great number of contradictions, requiring such a great variety of solutions and explanations, he cannot help but ask himself why the *Tanakh* is written in this way. Would it not be more appropriate that the text be written in an organized, smooth style devoid of repetition and contradiction? Indeed, as the study of the biblical text spread, it became necessary to address this phenomenon from a broader and more all-encompassing perspective.

B. The Documentary Hypothesis^[4]

In 1753, a French doctor named Jean Astruc published a book in which he proposed a revolutionary explanation for the authorship of *Sefer Bereishit*. Astruc addressed the question of why God is mentioned by different Names – with special emphasis on the name Y-H-V-H and the name "Elo-him." He arrived at the conclusion that Moshe wrote the Torah by combining two distinct sources ("documents"), each of which referred to God by a different Name. This hypothesis served to resolve many of the contradictions in *Sefer Bereishit*, since these often arise between two units that refer to God by different Names. To return to some of the questions that we addressed at the outset: the contradictions between the first and second chapter of *Bereishit* are associated with the fact that chapter 1 speaks of "Elo-him," while chapter 2 speaks of "Hashem Elo-him." The repeated description of God's decision to bring the Flood likewise arises from the fact that the first unit attributes the decision to Hashem (Y-H-V-H), while the second unit speaks of "Elo-him." In the same way, the repeated command to bring the animals into the Ark, and confirmation of Noach's obedience, relates to the fact that the first time, the text reads, "And Noach did according to all that Elo-him commanded him; so he did" ([Bereishit 6:22](#)), while the second time we find, "And Noach did according to all that Hashem commanded him" (7:5). It may similarly be demonstrated that the contradiction concerning the number of animals to be taken in arises between the command by "Elo-him" to take two of each, and the command by Hashem to take "by sevens." And so on, in many other instances.

Astruc's theory opened the way for other biblical scholars, from his time until today. Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, considered the father of modern biblical criticism, extended Astruc's ideas to address the entire *Chumash*. Between 1780 and 1783 he developed a method of distinguishing the literary and thematic indications of separate sources, even where different Names of God did not appear in the text. He was also the first to propose that Moshe had not been the editor who joined the separate sources into a single work. His argument for attribution of a later date to the various sources rested on claims we addressed in the previous *shiurim*, concerning verses which appear to have been written at a later time than the events which they describe.

Over the years, the basic theory was developed and broadened further. Various scholars argued for the existence of additional sources, and tried to define and characterize the nature and style of the different sources out of which, according to their

view, the Torah had come to be constructed. The central question was how each source could be isolated, after which one could attempt to show how all the parts of the Torah belonging to that source connect to form a continuous text with a certain characteristic approach. At the same time, the scholars argued that the various documents reflect views which developed and changed over the course of many generations, such that the contradictions in the Biblical text arose from inter-generational differences of view. Some pointed to contradictions among the various textual units that use the name "Elo-him," and posited the existence of an additional source, which included the commandments pertaining to the priests (*kohanim*). In 1805, a German scholar Wilhelm de Wette published his theory that the Book of *Devarim* represented a separate source, composed during the period of King Yoshiyahu.^[5]

In 1878, Julius Wellhausen reformulated the documentary hypothesis, proposing four separate sources reflecting different stages in the evolution of Jewish faith. On the basis of de Wette's theory that *Devarim* had been composed during the period of King Yoshiyahu, Wellhausen proposed hypotheses as to the period in which each of the four sources had appeared:

1. The "J" source (reference to the first letter of the English transliteration of the Name Y-H-V-H which, according to Wellhausen, is the Name used for God in this source) is the most ancient, dating to the beginning of the period of the monarchy.

2. The "E" source (referring to the name "Elo-him"), which is slightly later (8th century B.C.E.), with pictorial descriptions of God and extensive attention to nature.

3. The "D" (Deuteronomist) source, consisting mainly of *Devarim*, and a major portion of the Books of the Early Prophets. This source, as noted, is dated to the period of Yoshiyahu, and serves as the basis for the dating of the other documents.

4. The "P" (priestly) source, including the chapters concerning the Mishkan in *Shemot* and major portions of *Vayikra*. This is the latest source, addressing detailed laws and the superior status of the priests, and having nothing to do with nature. Wellhausen regarded this source as having been composed as late as the Second Temple Period (6th century B.C.E.), when the faith of Israel had become more focused on details, and the priests formed the major religious leadership.

These four sources, according to the documentary hypothesis, were combined by a number of editors, until the final form of the Torah was achieved in the 5th century B.C.E.

According to Wellhausen's theory, the most ancient layer of Jewish faith was "natural religion," following which there came the moral monotheism of the prophets, and then the theocratic religion of the priests, which was the basis for the Pharisee and rabbinical Judaism that prevailed until the end of the Second Temple Period – a form of Judaism which, to his view, represented a backward step in terms of the development of ideas.^[6]

The documentary hypothesis therefore rested on two central pillars: a literary focus, addressing the contradictions in the text, and explaining them on the basis of a division into four separate documents;^[7] and a historical focus, which attempted to trace

the chronological development and appearance of the four documents, as well as to identify their authors.

Both of these pillars are not without their serious difficulties. In the next *shiur* we will address the historical focus, and thereafter we will treat the literary focus of the Documentary Hypothesis.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1] For the meantime we will concern ourselves with the phenomenon as it is to be found in the Torah. The phenomenon and the applicability of the solutions proposed in relation to the rest of *Tanakh* will be discussed in a later chapter.

[2] Hebrew grammar does not offer a fixed form for complex tenses such as the past perfect. Generally, when the biblical text seeks to convey the past perfect, the usual order of the verse is changed around so that the subject appears before the object. An example is the verse "And Adam had known (*ve-ha'adam yada*) (i.e., engaged in marital relations with) Chava, his wife" ([Bereishit 4:1](#)), where Rashi comments, "This was prior to the matter just discussed; it was before he sinned and was expelled from the Garden of Eden, and likewise the pregnancy and birth (preceded the sin and expulsion). If the verse had read, '*va-yeda ha-adam*,' it would mean that his children were born only after he was expelled." Similarly, we may point to the verse, "And God had revealed (*va-Hashem gala*) to Shmuel a day before Shaul's arrival..." ([Shmuel I 9:15](#)).

In the case of God's command to Avraham, too, according to the explanation of Ibn Ezra and Radak, the text should logically have read, "And God had said (*va-Hashem amar*) to Avram, 'Go forth from your land...'" Ramban points out another difficulty with understanding the verse in this way: If Avraham had indeed started out on his journey in response to God's command, then he should be depicted as the dominant figure on the journey. What we find, however, at the end of chapter 11, is that it is Terach who seems to be the main character: "And Terach took Avram, his son... to go to the land of Kena'an."

[3] Ramban, for example, rejecting the interpretations of Rashi and Ibn Ezra, argues that Avraham had not been born in Ur Kasdim at all, but rather in Charan. This forces him to explain verse 15:7 with reference to Avraham's miraculous deliverance from the fiery furnace. This direction of interpretation, quite uncharacteristic of Ramban, is based on a homiletic interpretation, and is difficult to reconcile with the plain meaning of the text.

[4] Much has been written on this subject. Some of the major reviews in Hebrew may be found in the following sources: M. Weinfeld, ed., "*Torah, Mechkar ha-Torah ba-Et ha-Chadasha*," *Biblical Encyclopedia* vol. 8, Jerusalem 5742; columns 495-507; Z. Weisman, *Mavo la-Mikra* (Open University series), Tel Aviv 5749, vol. 3 – unit 6, pp. 32-97; A. Rofe, *Mavo le-Sifrut ha-Mikra*, Jerusalem 5766, pp. 26-82; B.Y. Schwartz, "*Ha-Torah: Chameshet Chumasheiha ve-Arba Te'udoteiha*," in: Z. Telshir (ed.), *Sifrut ha-Mikra – Mevo'ot u-Mechkarim*, Jerusalem 5771, pp. 177-225. Similarly, much has been written in English on the Documentary Hypothesis; an excellent summary of the history and nature of it can be found in Joshua Berman's introduction to Umberto Cassuto's *The Documentary Hypothesis*, Jerusalem 2010.

^[5] King Josiah in English, who lived from 649 BCE until 609 BCE and whose reign is described in II *Melakhim*, chs. 22-23.

^[6] Wellhausen believed that the stories of the forefathers are myths and legends. While accepting the historical basis for the story of the Exodus and of the settlement in the Land of Israel, he argued that these narratives were written at a much later stage, and fictional elements were woven into these traditions.

^[7] It should be noted that although Wellhausen proposed four documents, he did not mean by this that every narrative or commandment in the Torah appears in four different versions. Many of the chapters belong to one source without any parallel in the others, and most instances of duplication and contradiction arise from two (or occasionally, three) parallel sources.