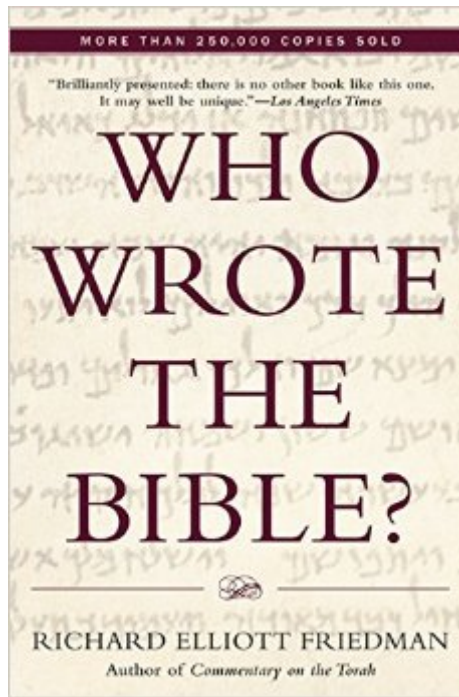


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Who Wrote The Bible?



Synopsis

The contemporary classic the New York Times Book Review called "a thought-provoking [and] perceptive guide," *Who Wrote the Bible?* by Richard E. Friedman is a fascinating, intellectual, yet highly readable analysis and investigation into the authorship of the Old Testament. The author of *Commentary on the Torah*, Friedman delves deeply into the history of the Bible in a scholarly work that is as exciting and surprising as a good detective novel. *Who Wrote the Bible?* is enlightening, riveting, an important contribution to religious literature, and as the Los Angeles Times aptly observed in its rave review, "There is no other book like this one."

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Customer Reviews

I had read several books that purported to explain the origins of the Old Testament, but they tended to make assertions without explanations. Perhaps they were too advanced for me. This book, however, explains in great detail how it arrives at its conclusions. It is great fun to read parts of the book and ask yourself: Whodunit? For example, there's one place where you are compelled to predict who wrote about the Golden Calf incident. I picked J, but the author picked E. After he explained his decision, I had to admit that he was probably right and I was probably wrong. Not so good for my ego, but an enjoyable puzzle nonetheless. The author is careful not to overstate his case. In situations where he lacks sufficient evidence, he points this out. This level of caution makes the whole work much more credible. I greatly enjoyed the way he explained how the political reality of the ancient Near East created pressures to write (or compile) a particular KIND of book. Prior to

this, I knew that many Bible stories contained contradictions, but I didn't know why. What is interesting about this -- though this may be lost on literalists -- is that the analysis of the Bible in no way diminishes it. Indeed, by explaining the reasons for the contradictions (rather than simply explaining-away), this book greatly increases my respect for the Bible. I think everybody who claims to know the Bible should read this book. It's all very well to memorize chapter and verse, but if you don't know of the Bible's origins, you can hardly claim to understand all its implications.

Friedman keeps to a very narrow, but clearly defined, path in assessing biblical origins. He goes to some effort to restrict his thesis to identifying authors and their likely locations. The validity of events nor theology never enter the picture. Contention over inconsistencies in what has come down to us as "the" bible have raged for centuries. Scholars in the Middle Ages, he reminds us, readily noted how styles varied, accounts were duplicated and traditions conflicted. With a keen analytical eye enhanced by long experience and good scholarship, he teases a coherent picture from this confusing collection of tales. Although not all the material here is original - and how could it be? - Friedman's assemblage is soundly researched, very ably organised and presented. The fundamental issue rests on the division of the Hebrew-speaking peoples into the "dual kingdoms" of Israel and Judah. The result was the compilation of two "histories" with different styles and priorities. Each had a different focus and approach to what was meaningful. The later confusion resulted when this pair of accounts was amalgamated into a single document and promulgated as "the" book. Friedman strongly points out that this didn't invalidate the histories, it simply meant readers of it need to understand they are reading a parallel set of accounts. From the outset, Friedman dismisses the traditional view of Moses' authorship. There are too many implausibilities for that to have occurred - not the least of which is the description of Moses' death. Friedman contends the books are historical accounts recorded by scribes, probably court priests, of their respective kingdoms. Their style differences allow him to pin letter designations for identification - the now well-known E, J, D and P. The first two refer to how the deity was identified. The "D" is for "Deuteronomist", identified by stylistic traits, while the "P" relates to priestly genealogies. Friedman uses various highlighting techniques to demonstrate variances in the text style or content. This rather hotch-potch arrangement was later organised into the single volume by the "Redactor" [the "E" for "Editor" having already been assigned. Setting his thesis within a well-defined chronology, Friedman shows how the various authors had previously material to draw on producing their own accounts. With no possibility of retrieving the sequence, we have only the results passed down to us. This situation explains many of the inconsistencies, since Judaic scribes had different sources

than those in Israel. They also, apparently, had different agendas to follow. Almost from the beginning, for example, there are differences in the roles of Moses and Aaron. Friedman lists other variations with their probable origins. Friedman's book is the best current example of what has become known as the "Documentary Hypothesis". This phrase stands in contrast with the idea of "divine origins" of the collection. As examples of historical literature, the books of the Hebrew Bible merit serious investigation and analysis. Friedman, picking up from French and German studies of the past two centuries, has performed a significant task. He writes well, doesn't engage in idle speculation, and, perhaps most important, condemns none. The authors he discusses were products of their time. He recognises that, keeping the authors clearly within their contemporary context. An excellent book, worthy of anybody's attention. [stephen a. haines - Ottawa, Canada]

Richard Elliott Friedman's *Who Wrote the Bible* has a lot going for it. It is probably the clearest guide for the lay reader to the "Documentary Hypothesis" -- the notion that the Torah, the Five Books of Moses, were not written all at one time but assembled from at least four major sources composed at different times and under different circumstances. This idea, which was first proposed in late eighteenth century France and developed by Julius Wellhausen in the nineteenth century, allows one to see the religious traditions of ancient Israel as historically evolving from a nature cult, through centralized worship and sacrifice, to a text-based ethical religion. Friedman tells the story of the composition of the Torah with great clarity and verve, in a way that a reader lacking Hebrew can understand. Occasionally I find Friedman's exposition to be marred by what might be called "special pleading." Friedman will have a novel idea and will present it in a way that seems quite convincing, but since he doesn't really present the alternatives other scholars have considered, I sometimes feel he is pulling a fast one on the less learned reader. He has a theory, for example, that the E document (composed in the Northern Kingdom around the 9th century BC) was written by a priest at the old site of Shiloh, in the tribal area of Ephraim. He supports this by the Golden Calf episode in Exodus 32-34. This text attacks Aaron, and so, he argues, it couldn't have been written in the southern kingdom of Judah, where the priesthood was descended from Aaron. But it also presents idolatry in terms of a Golden Calf, and the Calf was the symbol Jeroboam used in place of the Cherub in the alternative temples he set up in the North at Dan and Bethel. Friedman argues that a priest of Shiloh would have no ties to Aaron, and would be jealous of the successful priesthood in Bethel, and so would have precisely the ideology required to write the story that way. That works, though, ONLY if the story is all of one piece written by a single narrator. But many scholars think (on the basis of linguistic evidence) that this part of Exodus was put together by an editor who was

combining the narratives from the J (southern) and E (northern) traditions after the destruction of the northern kingdom by Assyria. If that is the case, you don't have to imagine an alienated priest from Shiloh at all. The connivance of Aaron in rebellion and idolatry could be from the E (northern) document, and the Golden Calf symbol could be from the J (southern) document, skillfully edited together by the JE editor. Hypotheses should be as simple and plausible as they can be. I'm from New York, and when I hear hoofbeats outside my window, I think "horses" (there's a riding stable down the block). I don't think "buffalo." Sometimes I think Friedman hears too many buffalo.

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