

Daniel Kirzane
2 February 2026 / 15 Shvat 5786
Parashat Yitro
Wexner Alumni Institute, Itasca, IL

The Complexity of Revelation: Four Sources at Sinai

Parashat Yitro features a dramatic (and confusing!) account of God's Revelation at Sinai. A careful reading of the Torah actually reveals four distinct accounts of what happened on Sinai, and appreciating their differences helps us recognize the sacredness of the compiled whole.

Stating the Case

Baruch Schwartz¹

Why is the story so inconsistent and discontinuous? Why were the laws given in stages? Why not convey them all to the people at one time, either on the mountaintop or in the Tabernacle? Why do the laws given at these separate stages duplicate and contradict each other in hundreds of particulars? These and similar questions have plagued readers for thousands of years, and traditional commentators have done their best to suggest harmonizing answers to them. The source-critical theory of the composition of the Torah, also known as the documentary hypothesis, is a modern attempt to answer these questions.



Har Sinai II by Yoram Raanan

¹ “What Really Happened at Mount Sinai? Four Answers to One Question,” *Bible Review* (13.05), Oct. 1997, p. 25. Republished under the same name at thetorah.com/article/what-really-happened-at-mount-sinai.

Sinai/Horeb According to the Four Sources²

J (Yahwist)	E (Elohist)	P (Priestly)	D (Deuteronomist)
Exodus 19:2a, 9b-16α, 18, 20-25;	Exodus 19:2b-9a, 16αβ-17, 19;	Exodus 19:1;	Deuteronomy 4:10-20;
	20:1-23:33;		5:1-30;
24:1-2, 9-11α;	24:3-8, 11bβ-15, 18b;	24.16-18a;	9:8-21, 25-10:5;
		25:1-31:17;	and note 28:69.
	31:18α, b;	31:18αβ	
32:26-29*;	32:1-25, 30-35;		(See also Deut. 18:16-17.)
33:1-3, 12-23;	33:4-11;		
34:2-3, 4**, 5-16, 27	34:1, 4**, 28	34:29-35;	
		35:1-Numbers 10:28	
* These 4 verses are out of place.			
** only וַיִּשְׁכַּם through סִינַי	** except וַיִּשְׁכַּם through סִינַי		

² Baruch Schwartz's 1997 essay (see previous note) has contributed greatly to scholarly investigation of the documentary divisions of Sinai/Horeb material. The division I propose here largely aligns with Schwartz's original scheme. According to Benjamin Sommer, *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT: 2015), there is considerable scholarly consensus on many of the source divisions (see pp. 46 and 53).

I follow Jeffrey Stackert in identifying Ex. 19:1 as P and 19:2a as J (see *A Prophet Like Moses: Prophecy, Law, and Israelite Religion* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2014), p. 75). Similarly, I agree with Stackert in attributing Ex. 19:16α to J (*ibid.*). (Stackert assigns to E Exodus 19:2b and 19:16αβ–17, suggesting through the process of elimination that Ex. 19:2a and 19:16α belongs to J.) I differ from Stackert as he divides Ex. 19:18, assigning 18αβ and 18bβ to E and, presumably 18αα and 18bα to J; the syntax of v. 18 makes this reading difficult, in my view. Stackert assigns only Ex. 24:15a to E, though I agree with Schwartz and Sommer that all of Ex. 24:15 belongs to E (see Sommer, *Revelation* p. 46): The cloud over the mountain (15b) explains in E the people's inability to see Moses and their concern for his return; and the cloud's cover does not align with the clear view of God's form in J.

Sommer and Schwartz assign Ex. 33:1-5 to J, attributing 33:6-11 to E (*ibid.*). However, I agree with Joel Baden that Ex. 33:4-11 belongs to E (see Baden, "On Exodus 33,1-11," ZAW 124. Bd., S. 329-340).

Ex. 34:17-26 seems to be a post-compilational insertion.

Source Summary

E – This is the “story we know.” With thunder and lightning, God speaks within hearing of the People of Israel. The content includes what we call the Ten Commandments (following Deut. 4:13 and 10:4) and the “Covenant Code” (Ex. 21-23, *Parashat Mishpatim*). The purpose of the public revelation of the Decalogue seems to be validating Moses: “I will come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after” (Ex. 19:9).³ Mosaic legislation is venerated above all else as Moses is Israel’s greatest prophet (Num. 12:6-8) and also their last true one (Deut. 34:10-12, which is an E text).⁴ This story includes the Golden Calf episode and describes the Tent of Meeting being established outside the camp.

D – This is mostly a retelling of the “story we know.” A key difference is that the Decalogue is cast as a covenant in and of itself (Deut. 4:13). As an inaugural legal pact between God and Israel, the Decalogue stands as a primary instance of divine communication. D generally recasts many of E’s laws, modeling the potential for prophetic legal innovation in future generations (see Deut. 18:15-22). The “day of assembly” (יום הַקָּהָל, Deut. 9:10, 10:4, 18:16) is a constitutional convention for the Israelites, laying the groundwork for the growth and development of religious laws (which, it should be mentioned, should not contradict those found in D).

J – Instead of lawgiving, this story emphasizes the accessibility of God. Moses along with Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders “saw the God of Israel” (Ex. 24:9); and subsequently, God acquiesces to “make all My goodness pass before you [Moses]” (Ex. 33:19). God insists on having an exclusive relationship with the People of Israel, whom God will personally lead to their home in the Promised Land (Ex. 33:14, 34:10-16).

³ See Stackert, *A Prophet Like Moses*, “E’s Decalogue is not a covenant. It is *not* law. It is instead a demonstration of prophecy that prepares the Israelites to accept the covenantal stipulations that Moses subsequently receives while alone on the mountain and then conveys to the Israelites (Exod 20:21; 24:3-8). In line with these events, the first words that Moses is to speak to the Israelites after receiving the laws are a confirmation of the prophetic demonstration that they experienced: ‘You have perceived that I have spoken to you from heaven!’ (Exod 20:22)” (78-79).

⁴ See Stackert, *A Prophet Like Moses*, “According to E, non-Mosaic prophets see visions and dreams. They also speak in riddles. Each of these prophetic modes E considers *obstructed*. E contrasts such obstructed modes of interaction with the divine—such *mediated mediations*—with Moses’s direct interactions with the deity” (112). Furthermore, “E hereby addresses its contemporary religious context. It acknowledges that other prophets exist but characterizes them as both unreliable and unnecessary in light of its alternative system of law and elders—a system that it claims was established already centuries prior” (116).

P – In this story, instead of laws, Moses receives blueprints. God’s presence (כְּבוֹד) appears on the mountain, and God appears to Israel as a consuming fire (Ex. 24:16-17). Moses ascends the mountain and receives instructions for building the Mishkan (Ex. 25-31). He descends transformed, his face shining with a divine light he reveals whenever speaking on behalf of God (Ex. 34:29-35). At his instruction, the Israelites build the Mishkan (Ex. 35-40), whereupon God dwells within (Ex. 40:34) and speaks the contents of the entire book of Leviticus and the start of Numbers. (The people first leave the region of the mountain in Num. 10:11-12, and the next episode will be the drama of the spies.) In this story, the main subjects of Revelation are the Mishkan and the priesthood; and the Tent of Meeting (unlike in E) is established at the center of the Israelite camp.

What Do We Make of Four Sources?

Benjamin Sommer⁵

For the original sources, what we learn about revelation and from revelation is set and unalterable—written in stone, if you will. But the redacted Torah relativizes the sources, replacing their clarity with cacophony. ... A reader of any one source has a specific picture of the revelation in her head, but a reader committed to accepting the whole witness of scripture cannot produce any such picture without doing damage to parts of the text or ignoring large swaths of it. ... The modern reader who accepts the Pentateuch as scripture while recognizing its artifactual nature embraces its importance and sanctity but cannot privilege any one source over others.

⁵ *Revelation and Authority*, 74.