

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Genesis

In Chapter Eight we spoke of an earlier consensus among scholars that identified four main sources of the Torah. One of these was the Yahwist, judged to be the theologian chiefly responsible for the Book of Genesis. He was called the Yahwist because he called God YHWH even before the revelation received by Moses. Some thought he composed his work during the reign of King Solomon (10th century BC). Solomon, according to this hypothesis, saw to it that the stories circulating in the various sanctuaries of Israel and Judah were committed to writing. It was his way of consolidating the union achieved by his father, David. We noted that, while this seemed an attractive hypothesis forty years ago, closer scrutiny of the texts by scholars have made it untenable. The economic and social conditions necessary to support a project of writing in any substantial way first occurred not in Judah, but in Israel, and not in the tenth century but in the latter part of the eighth century.

Genesis 12-50

No doubt there were stories handed down in the various tribal areas of ancestors such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. Some of these stories may even have found a written form. In any case when the refugees poured into Jerusalem after the fall of Samaria in 721BC, they would have brought their stories with them. This set up the possibility in Judah of combining the various originally independent stories into a combined picture of the origins of the Israelite people.

Some suggested that this may have happened during the reign of King Josiah (late seventh century BC) as part of his dream to take back the northern tribal areas and establish the kingdom promised by YHWH. In Genesis 12-50 we have an imaginary reconstruction of the Patriarchal Period, for the authors wanted their contemporaries to relate their experiences to that of their ancestors. The promise made by YHWH to the patriarch, was realised by Joshua. The northern kingdom had fallen. King Josiah was determined to win it back. What better motivation could he have than a sense of destiny that he was called to inherit the promise.

The patriarchal narrative seems to have been re-worked after the return from exile. A major problem facing the returning exiles is that those who had not gone into exile resented their return. The returning exiles wanted to reclaim their land – land that others had occupied in their absence thinking that they would never come back. The returning exiles identified closely with Moses and the people who had escaped from Egypt. Those who had stayed in the land identified with Abraham. A key reason for composing the Pentateuch was to form a united people. It was imperative that both groups come to see that the God who revealed Himself to Moses is the ‘God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’ (Exodus 3:6).

Another factor was their desire to demonstrate that the ancient traditions had an ongoing value for their contemporaries. They preserved the ancient material, not as museum pieces, but because they saw it as a revelation from God and they trusted that it could still guide them. They attempted to point this out in the way they told the stories and in the way they commented on the text.

They did not want their contemporaries to get caught up in nostalgia for the past. It was important that they live now in a way that was faithful to God and that would avoid the mistakes of the past for which they had paid such a high price.

In spite of many attempts it has proved impossible to establish a precise time in history that we can confidently call the period of the patriarchs. No clear historical links can be drawn from what we know about ancient migrations, from the nomadic lifestyle of the patriarchs, from the customs that we find in the stories, or from the place names or personal names in the accounts. All we can say is that the stories refer to a time prior to the tribes of Israel who lived in Canaan in the thirteenth century BC. The nineteenth century BC has been suggested.

We begin with the stories about Abraham. As we read these stories we should expect to find indications of the interests and concerns of the people who told and listened to these stories over hundreds of years of story-telling. It is likely that as single units some of these stories were committed to writing prior to the fall of Jerusalem and the exile. In which case they would express some of the interests and concerns of that period. However, our main interest here is in the post-exilic period when those responsible for the written text of Genesis that we have before us were including these stories.

All we know of Abraham is from the Bible text. There are no inscriptions, no documents outside the Bible, and no monuments that speak of him. Some of these stories may have inspired the people of Judah as they grew into a tribe, as they became a kingdom, as they found themselves caught between the aspirations of Egypt and the kingdoms of Mesopotamia, as they experienced the exile and were trying to rebuild after the exile. The stories of the patriarchs have continued to inspire the Jewish people ever since. They were also sacred to those Jews who became disciples of Jesus and, through them, they have continued to be treasured as stories of the origin of the Christian community. Similarly for the people of Islam some centuries later. We are invited to allow our imagination to be captured by these stories, in the hope that they may inspire us who 'share the faith of Abraham, the father of all of us' (Romans 4:16).

The stories that were handed down in the folklore and legends of Judah have been reshaped to present Abraham as a model for those who are to be obedient to the Torah. Ezekiel tells us that those who stayed behind in Judah during the exile thought the land should remain in their hands: 'the inhabitants of these waste places in the land of Israel keep saying, "Abraham was only one man, yet he got possession of the land; but we are many; the land is surely given us to possess"' (Ezekiel 33:24). The post-exilic authors want to show that Abraham is also the father of the returned exiles.

In reading these stories, we are in touch with the questions, the dreams, the hopes, the disappointments of post-exilic Judah. They have been through the destruction of their city and the terrible experience of exile. As they understood it, this was because they had broken the covenant made with Moses. It was important for them to remember that there was an older promise – an unconditional one given by God to the patriarchs: a promise made by God that transcended human fidelity or infidelity. Abraham believed it. So must they, for in their faith lay their hope.

Even though parts of the patriarchal stories may well be based on actual historical events, the aim of the writing was not to establish an archive of facts, but to remind the people of the old stories that were part of folklore and legend, and to inspire them to learn from the great people of their past. As we read these stories we should not think of ourselves as accumulating information about the distant past. Rather, we, too, should be looking for the meanings and values that inhere in the rich narratives. How did the authors see life? How did they understand God and God's purposes in their history? How should they and their contemporaries live so as to be in tune with God's designs for them? As we ask the same questions, may these stories sustain our faith in the God that they reveal.

Abraham is held up to the reader as a model, a flawed one who had a lot to learn, but one who reached a heroic degree of faith and obedience, such that we can look to him as our 'father in faith' (Romans 4:16). Not so Jacob. This is a story, not so much about Jacob as about God who is faithful to his promises and his blessing, brought about through the weak human beings that he has chosen.

This is a story of a family with plenty of family conflicts. It begins in conflict. Jacob and Esau are twins. Esau is the first one born, and so by convention is in a key position of power in the family as regards authority and inheritance. However, even in the womb there is a struggle and this struggle dominates the narrative till finally it is the second born, Jacob, who prevails. And there is much more to the struggle than this. The drama plays out because it is God who has ordained it to be this way, and we have no idea why. We are so used to claiming God for the way things are, for the positions of power that are set up by human convention (see Deuteronomy 21:15-17), that we ought to be scandalised by this story. It is about God who will not be bound by our conventions. This is about God who is free, for whom 'the first will be last, and the last first' (Matthew 19:30). This is a story about God who chooses 'what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are' (1 Corinthians 1:28). This is a story about God who has a preferential option for the poor and who hears their cry. The authors of Deuteronomy remind Israel:

It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that YHWH set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because YHWH loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that YHWH has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that YHWH your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty.

– Deuteronomy 7:7-9

This is a story of God's blessing that, like the wind, 'blows where it wills' (John 3:8). Nor does the blessing mean an untroubled life. Jacob is always in conflict: with Esau throughout the narrative; with his uncle, Laban (Genesis 29-31); with his wife Rachel (Genesis 30:1-2); with his sons (Genesis 34:30); and, most significantly of all, with God (Genesis 32:22-29). The prophet Hosea sums up his life: 'In the womb he tried to supplant his brother, and in his manhood he strove with God' (Hosea 12:3). Yet, throughout his troubled life, Jacob encounters God, just as the people of Israel, throughout their troubled history, experienced the guiding hand of the God who has chosen them in love, for a mission to the world God loves.

The authors of the narrative and their readers have lived through and were part of a history of human unfaithfulness. They have also experienced proofs of YHWH's faithfulness through it all. This is a major theme of these stories.

The favoured position of Rachel's sons, Joseph and Benjamin, and the significant role of Bethel suggest this important sanctuary of the northern kingdom of Israel as a likely centre for the gathering and propagation of stories about Jacob. This is supported by the fact that the prophet Hosea in the latter part of the 8th century BC shows that he is acquainted with a number of the stories found here in Genesis. In words of warning to the southern kingdom (Judah) and the northern kingdom (Jacob), Hosea has this to say:

YHWH has an indictment against Judah, and will punish Jacob according to his ways,
and repay him according to his deeds.
In the womb he tried to supplant his brother, and in his manhood he strove with God.
He strove with the angel and prevailed, he wept and sought his favour;
he met him at Bethel, and there he spoke with him.
YHWH the God of hosts, YHWH is his name!
But as for you, return to your God, hold fast to love and justice,
and wait continually for your God ...
Jacob fled to the land of Aram, there Israel served for a wife,
and for a wife he guarded sheep.

– Hosea 12:2-6, 12

The authors of Genesis are drawing on these ancient stories.

It is also possible that there is a link between the way Jacob is portrayed and the way Moses is portrayed in the early chapters of Exodus. Like Jacob, Moses has to flee because of his actions (compare Genesis 27 and Exodus 2:11-15). Like Jacob, Moses has a mysterious encounter with YHWH in a sanctuary where he is given a mission from God (compare Genesis 28:10-12 and Exodus 3:1 - 4:7). Like Jacob, Moses is told that he is to return to the place from which he is fleeing (compare Genesis 31:13 and Exodus 4:18-20). Like Jacob, Moses has a mysterious encounter at night (compare Genesis 32:22-32 and Exodus 4:24-26). Do these parallels witness to the way in which the ancient stories were re-shaped when they were blended into the Torah?

The authors of Genesis have fitted together ancient stories from Israelite folklore to produce an engaging narrative of Esau and Jacob, linked to Abraham by being portrayed as his grandchildren, and of God's blessing that issues in the twelve sons of Jacob, and so in the tribes that would one day form the people of Israel.

In Genesis 37-50 the authors of Genesis continue the story of Jacob, telling how he and his sons came to Egypt, and setting the scene for the story of Moses. As with the earlier sections, into their narrative they incorporate stories that have come down through the tradition. What sets this section apart from the previous two sections of the patriarchal narrative is that the authors also incorporate a separate literary composition focusing on Joseph. The 'Joseph Story' is not a compilation of separate stories. Rather it is a unified literary production, unlike anything we have met so far in the patriarchal narrative.

There is as yet no consensus among scholars as to when the Joseph Story was composed. It seems to arise out of and be directed to a community that is concerned with ongoing struggles within the 'family', and with public, political concerns; a community in which God's action is hidden. It is a story that urges the community to hold on to the 'dream', assuring them that it will come true, against the odds. It explores the question: should one brother rule over others?(see Genesis 37:8). The focus on Joseph points to the northern kingdom. Egypt is presented in very positive light. Does this indicate that at the time of writing the author was looking to Egypt to come to Israel's rescue against Assyria? The questions that are explored in the Joseph story were ones also being asked during the exile when the inclination was to blame the monarchy for the collapse of Jerusalem and so for the exile. Right government is a matter than concerns us all.

Genesis 1-11

It is likely that it was after the return from exile that scribes from the various schools composed Genesis 1-11. It offers a perspective on the ancient Semitic myths about creation and primeval history (stories that they heard while in exile) from the perspective of Israelite faith. The monarchy had failed, but the religion of Israel went back well before the monarchy. The temple had been destroyed, but the cult went back well before the temple. Assyria, Babylon and Persia had proved more powerful militarily than Israel, but it was YHWH, the God of Israel, who created the universe and the nations – all of them.

During the Babylonian Exile the exiles came in contact with the religious ideas and cult of Babylon. They were stunned at how primitive it all was.

Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands.
They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see.
They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell.
They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk.
They make no sound in their throats.
Those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them.

– Psalm 115:4-8

They do not know, nor do they comprehend; for their eyes are shut, so that they cannot see, and their minds as well, so that they cannot understand. No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, "Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals, I roasted meat and have eaten. Now shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?" He feeds on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot save himself or say, "Is not this thing a fraud?"

– Isaiah 44:18-20

While in Babylon the exiles had come into contact with myths about the beginnings of the world and of the human race – myths like that of Atrahasis, composed in the ancient Akkadian language of the 17th century BC, and the Enuma Elish of the 12th century BC. These myths spoke of the genesis of the gods, the beginnings of humanity and the privileged position of Babylon in the world. The first eleven chapters of Genesis presents an alternative view of creation, of the origins of mankind, and of the presence and action of God in the world – a view that is inspired by the distinctive faith of Israel in YHWH and in the special relationship of God with Israel.

Scholars discern two different kinds of material in these chapters, recognisable by their different styles, interests and themes. We have an account of creation culminating in the blessing of the seventh day, a story of the Flood, and a number of genealogies. These have the distinctive style of the Priestly School (**P**). There is also a story of the beginnings of the human race, which looks at the human condition in the light of Israel's faith, and includes the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the Flood and the Tower of Babel. In post-exilic Judah the authors of Genesis 1-11 have blended this material into one continuous narrative. Both strands are composed as counters to the primeval myths encountered in Babylon during the exile, and they declare that the God of Israel, YHWH, is the Creator of the universe and the Lord of history.

The material found in Genesis 1-11 is not history as we understand history, for the authors do not narrate historical events. At the same time it is not myth, for myth sets out to describe a stable and unchanging situation, usually supported by cult, and one that favours the power exercised by the ruler who is presented as 'divine'. Genesis 1-11 has a different focus. It is on God as creator, on God's relationship with creation, and especially with the human race, and on how people must live to benefit from God's blessing.

The text expresses inspired insights into God's design for creation and into why it is that God's design is sometimes thwarted by human sin. The kind of sin that is highlighted comes from reflection on the kind of sin that brought about the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile. The post-exilic authors wanted their contemporaries to learn the right lessons, so as not to repeat the sin of their ancestors.

It was important for the authors of Genesis to state that their God, the God of Israel, was the one who created the universe. The destruction of Jerusalem, the exile in Babylon, and the fact that the community in Judah after the exile was still under the control of a foreign power (Persia) could have led some to think that YHWH, the God of Israel, was less powerful and of less significance than the gods of Babylon or Persia. Some in exile were tempted to despair: 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely' (Ezekiel 37:11). So it was for those left in Judah: 'YHWH has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me' (Isaiah 49:14); 'My way is hidden from YHWH, and my right is disregarded by my God' (Isaiah 40:27). The authors wanted to state that their God, the God of Israel, the only true God, is the creator of the universe, including the nations that had defeated them in battle and under whose authority they now lived.

The authors chose, therefore, to introduce the primeval narrative, indeed the whole Torah, with a magnificent, dramatic piece that said exactly this. There are indications that they were aware of the Mesopotamian creation myths that they encountered in exile. Indeed, the image of the land and its human inhabitants coming to life out of the chaos of flooding waters parallels what we find in these myths. It is hardly a Palestinian image, where it is the desert, not flooding waters, that threatens life. The myths of Mesopotamia begin with the genesis of the gods. Not so in the opening chapter of Genesis. It begins with God, the only God (identified in 2:4 as YHWH, the God of Israel), and it begins with creation as we know it: the place where human beings live out their lives. The stars, worshipped as divine in Babylon, are declared to be creatures of God.

Whatever power the Babylonians might wield, the people of Israel need not envy them, for whatever exists owes its being to the God of Israel.

In Genesis 2-4 we are not sharing in privileged information that gives us the names of the first human couple, and describes how they actually lived in paradise before they sinned. Rather, we have a reflection on what it means to be human, set in contrast to the myths of the Ancient Near East, and from the perspective of Israel's faith. We are offered a reflection on what life could be like if only we listened to God, as well as a reflection on some fundamental dimensions of sin and its terrible consequences for human life. The account no doubt reflects on legends of the patriarchs and on Israel's history, but it is a story which aims to help build a harmonious community in Judah by pointing out the kind of behaviour that must be avoided to be faithful to God's covenant and live the kind of life willed by God.

The authors make no attempt to tell how evil came into the world. The talking serpent is a figure of fable, not the devil in disguise. Nor are they telling their readers the origin of death. Death is obviously an essential dimension of being human.

The text does say something about human folly, but, as we should expect, the focus is on God and on God's response to our folly. It is an amazingly loving response – a lesson the returned exiles needed to hear. The narrative reminded them (and it continues to remind us) that we are destined to live in God's world, and in dependence on God. It insists that the Creator is their own YHWH, the One who hears the cry of the poor. The effects of our sin – portrayed here as punishment – can be corrective because of the mercy of God. But we cannot go on sinning without suffering sin's consequences.

These chapters focus on the limits within which they (and we) must live. If they are going to build a faithful community in post-exile Judah they should live wisely, attentive to God's directions. If they do not, they are in danger of bringing upon themselves a repetition of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, and the suffering of exile.

The correct question to ask ourselves as we read this material is not 'What is the meaning of these past events to us today?', but 'What are the authors saying about the human condition?'

The authors of Genesis are interested in history, in human behaviour and responsible action, here formalised in a description of the human-being-as-such [*hā 'ādām*], and the various basic relationships within which we human beings live out our lives. They assert that we are inclined towards evil (8:21) but they reiterate their conviction that YHWH is intimately involved in human history and that divine mercy, as has just been demonstrated in the return from exile, transcends our sin.

Genesis Chapter 5 introduces a list of those who were generated from Adam. For the ancients, importance is measured by antiquity. The ultimate aim of the authors is to demonstrate that the people of Israel go right back to the beginnings of history. This genealogy comes from the Priestly School. It witnesses to the continuing of God's blessing 'be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth' (Genesis 1:28), despite human sin.

Note the repeated pattern, the constant rhythm, as the blessing is handed on. The variety of names and numbers points to the changes that occur within this divinely blessed rhythm. Like the Babylonian king list this genealogy has ten names, with extraordinarily long reigns, and like the Babylonian king list it ends with the hero of a flood story. It is not evident that the genealogy depends on the ancient king list. Rather, it points to a common tendency to systematise in this way. The key aim of the authors is to locate history (beginning with Abraham, Genesis 12) with God's promise of blessing on the human race, while highlighting the immeasurable vastness of the development of humanity prior to Abraham.

In the myths of the Ancient Near East, the story of the beginnings leads directly to the establishment of the monarchy. Their purpose was to provide a stable and divine foundation for the king's reign, supported by the cult. As we have already noted, the stories of the beginnings in Genesis do not take the form of myth. Their purpose is different. The primeval narrative in Genesis does not reach a climax with king and cult. It introduces the patriarchs, the ancient ancestors of the people of Israel. The authors draw on stories handed down through the generations and re-tell them in terms that address the interests and concerns of their contemporaries.

Just as Christians read the Older Testament in the light of Jesus' revelation, so the people of Israel read these patriarchal stories in the light of the revelation given to Moses. They were a kind of 'Old Testament' for them in which they expected to find material that was a preparation for, but not always consistent with, their own religious practices as spelt out in the other books of the Torah. This is particularly noticeable in the way God and God's relationship to human beings are portrayed in the patriarchal narratives. There is no sense of religious antagonism. Other nations are not rejected because they worship false gods. Everyone is assumed to be relating to the one God. This is true of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, but it is also true of Abimelech, a Canaanite king, and the Pharaoh of Egypt. Furthermore, God relates to people directly, without the mediation of priests or prophets. Cult is simple family cult, quite different from that prescribed in Mosaic Yahwism.

Some of this comes from the fidelity of the authors to the ancient stories that they have received and are handing on. Some of it comes from quite subtle theological reflection as they move from the 'once upon a time' portrayal of God in the primeval narrative, through the patriarchal period and up to the revelation to Moses. The Book of Genesis is a book of inspired and insightful human stories and human reflections. These stories do not give us one, true, complete, or final revelation of how God relates to us and how we should respond. The picture they present is rich and varied. In an article entitled '*Narrative Structure and Canonical Perspective in Genesis*' (JSOT 25, 1983), R. Cohn writes:

The anthropomorphic God of the primeval stories who acts primarily by way of response to human initiatives becomes the promising and leading God who speaks frequently to Abraham. To Jacob he speaks only at critical junctures in his life and then in highly numinous ways, while to Joseph he does not speak at all, revealing himself instead through the ironically providential course of events. At the same time human action becomes more independent of divine control, more autonomous (page 14).

The post-exilic authors has a vision of Israel/Judah that transcended their own experience and their own time. The way God is portrayed as relating to human beings and the way religion is expressed in the primeval narrative (Genesis 1-11), and in the patriarchal narrative (Genesis 12-50), is significantly different from the way God is portrayed and religion expressed in the books that aim to capture the essence of Mosaic Yahwism. Though it is clear that the post-exilic authors have adapted the stories (orally transmitted or already written) to speak to the needs of a much later time than that of the patriarchs or Moses, they wanted to present an understanding of God and of God's relationship to the people of Israel, indeed to the world, that reflects the different periods of their history till it reached its highest point in the revelation given to Moses.