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GENESIS

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BEHIND THE BOOK

We are accustomed to think of a book as a document written by one person. The author's name appears on the cover; the date and place of publication are given. Often in a 'Foreword' the author briefly explains for the benefit of his readers the purpose of the book. To understand Genesis, and many other books in the Old Testament, we have to think our way into a very different world.

Writing was known and used from an early age in Israel and in the wider world of the Ancient Near East. Religious texts, letters, political treaties survive in written form from a period before Israel as a nation ever existed. Writing, however, was a specialized skill, the possession of the few. It was neither the only, nor the most important way of preserving and handing on information. Many of the traditions of a people, their early tribal or national history, the stories and legends about their ancestors, were handed down *orally*, by word of mouth, from father to son, on the lips of tribal bards and poets. Much of the material now in the book of Genesis must have begun life in this way. Such traditions would have a generally accepted outline and content long before they were ever transferred into writing. Think of how unchangeable certain well-known stories become in the mind of a young child before ever the child can read or write. Even after such traditions did exist in writing, for most people they would continue, living within the community, in oral form.

But when and why were such traditions first committed to writing? There is good reason to believe that, as far as Israel

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was concerned, the answer lies in the foundation and establishment of the united Hebrew kingdom under David and Solomon in the tenth century B.C. Jerusalem then became the political and religious capital of a people who were riding on the crest of military success and economic growth. Just as England in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I produced great writers who reflect the confidence and vigour of the age, so in Israel of the tenth century B.C. the new national self-consciousness found an outlet in writers who recorded the events of the day in narratives such as those now found in 2 Samuel 9 – 1 Kings 2, and gave literary form to the traditions of the past. Contemporary confidence and hopefulness for the future drew strength from the recording of a past in which the purposive hand of God was seen at work, from the beginning. It has also been argued that the written record did not really come into its own until some four centuries later when Jerusalem was overrun by the Babylonians. The last remnant of the once powerful Hebrew kingdom had finally collapsed. With the breakdown of community life the continuing stream of oral tradition was in danger of disappearing. The need for written preservation of the nation's past thus became acute. Whenever it happened – and both periods may have made their contribution to the book of Genesis – no one was concerned to preserve the names of the earliest Hebrew historical writers.

THE SOURCES OF THE BOOK

Traditionally in Jewish circles Genesis is called *Bereshith*, 'In the beginning'. This follows the common practice of designating a book by its opening word or phrase. The title 'Genesis' comes from the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Further information about the Septuagint will be found in 'The footnotes to the N.E.B. text', see p. xii. In Greek *genesis* means 'origin', 'beginning', or 'creation'. *Bereshith* is the first of five books called in

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ancient tradition 'the (five) books of Moses'. These five books, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy – often referred to in modern discussion as the Pentateuch (the five books) – constitute for the Jew *TORAH*, the most important part of the Old Testament. 'Law' is the conventional translation of *TORAH* but perhaps 'revelation' would be nearer the mark. *TORAH* means the instruction or teaching concerning God's purposes and demands which had been given to Israel, according to tradition, through Moses. It was early recognized that to attribute the whole of Genesis–Deuteronomy to Moses was impossible. The obituary notice of Moses in Deuteronomy 34 is an obvious case in point. But if not Moses, then who? Is it indeed possible to think of any one author as responsible for Genesis–Deuteronomy, or even for Genesis alone?

Three examples from Genesis will illustrate the problem.

(i) Anyone who reads from the beginning of Genesis must become aware that the character of the writing changes between verses 4 and 5 of chapter 2. The N.E.B. indicates this by putting a major division of the text at this point. The opening chapter is hymn-like, formal in structure, very carefully schematized. Certain key words and phrases occur again and again, e.g. 'God said . . . and so it was . . . Evening came and morning came'. The deliberate use of repetition is well illustrated in 1: 27: 'So God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.' Throughout the chapter the language used to describe God is very restrained and dignified. From the words 'When the LORD God made earth and heaven', however, there is a marked difference. Here is narrative, simple yet remarkably vivid. Certain of the key words and phrases of chapter 1 have disappeared. Instead of 'created' we find 'formed' (2: 7). The language used to describe God is much more homely. He is like a potter forming man; he breathes into man's nostrils the breath of life (2: 7). He plants a garden (2: 8). He is heard 'walking in the garden at

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the time of the evening breeze' (3: 8). At precisely the point where such changes begin, a new name for God appears; he is now the LORD God.

(ii) Turn to the flood story in Genesis 6–8. Here again the story as it now lies before us is a curious patchwork of passages which use different divine names. In 6: 5–8; 7: 1–5 and 8: 20–2 it is the LORD; but elsewhere it is God, with the exception of 7: 16 where within one verse both God and the LORD appear. Furthermore, what the LORD says to Noah in 7: 1–5 is curiously like a repetition of what God says to Noah in 6: 9–22. Repetition is common enough in ancient narrative texts, but there also seem to be contradictions. In 6: 19 Noah is told by God to take with him into the ark living creatures of every kind, 'two of each kind, a male and a female'. In 7: 2, however, the LORD orders Noah to take with him into the ark 'seven pairs, male and female, of all beasts that are ritually clean', acceptable for use in sacrifice, 'and one pair, male and female, of all beasts that are not clean; also seven pairs, male and female, of every bird'. Again in 7: 4 the LORD warns Noah that he will send 'rain over the earth for forty days and forty nights', and this is described as happening in 7: 12. In 7: 24, however, God thinks of Noah 'when the waters had increased over the earth for a hundred and fifty days'.

(iii) Three times in Genesis a very similar story is told of how one of the patriarchs passes off his wife as his sister. Twice the narratives feature Abraham and his wife Sarah, once when they were in Egypt (12: 10–20), once when they were resident in Gerar under the jurisdiction of King Abimelech (20). The third narrative concerns Isaac and his wife Rebecca; again the third party involved is Abimelech, the Philistine king of Gerar (26: 1–11).

Differences in style and vocabulary, duplicate narratives, contradictions, different divine names – such things occur at point after point throughout the first five books of the Old Testament. How do we account for them?

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As traditional stories, laws and customs, were handed down orally within the Hebrew community, they would naturally tend to reflect the interests of the groups in which they circulated. Thus basically the same story told in a community in the northern part of the country and in a community in the southern part of the country would, in its detail, have a northern or southern colouring. The sanctuary at Bethel would keep alive one set of stories linking the patriarchs with the Bethel sanctuary, while the priests at Hebron would have their own traditions linking these same patriarchs with Hebron. Similarly we would expect material which circulated in priestly circles as part of the continuing theological education of the priesthood to have a rather different character from the popular stories recounted by tribal bards. There are those who believe that the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers are, in their present form, the result of a gradual, centuries-long coalescing of such traditions from many different circles. The priestly editors, who gave final shape to the whole during the breakdown of the nation's life in the period of the Babylonian exile, preserved the character of the different traditions, and made little attempt to eliminate discrepancies between them.

Deuteronomy is now usually separated from the first four books of the Old Testament. It shares a common outlook and judgement on events with the succeeding historical narratives in Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings, and is best considered in relationship with them. It seems likely, however, that in the composition of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers there was an intermediate stage at which the material existed in three independent, written sources, each with its own literary characteristics of vocabulary, style and interest. These sources may be represented by the symbols J, E and P. J, the earliest of these written sources, ninth or tenth century B.C., comes from Judah, in the South. It consistently refers to God as YHWH, four Hebrew consonants, traditionally but quite erroneously rendered into

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English as *Jehovah*. Most English versions translate YHWH as the *LORD*. *Yahweh* is probably as near as we can get to the pronunciation of what for the Hebrews was the personal name of their God, a name which became so sacred that the custom grew up of not pronouncing it. When a Jew came to the letters *YHWH* in the sacred text he substituted the word *Adonai* ('my lord'). The form *Jehovah* arose through inserting the vowels from *Adonai* into the consonants *YHWH*. J first appears in the Genesis narrative at 2: 5. E, probably a century later, comes from Israel (Ephraim) the northern part of the divided Hebrew kingdom. From Genesis 15 onward it provides a narrative parallel in many respects to J, although it is not always easy to distinguish the two sources. It is possible to regard E as a revision of J. The latest of the documents, P, possibly fifth century B.C., is a priestly source which provides the framework within which the other two sources find their place. The character and interests of P are well exemplified by the hymn of creation in Genesis 1: 1 – 2: 4.

It must be admitted that this is a hypothesis. No one has ever seen a document labelled J or E or P; but it is a hypothesis which provides a reasonable explanation for the problems which confront us when we study in detail the material in Genesis–Numbers.

As outlined above the hypothesis is the logical outcome of over two hundred years of intensive study of the Pentateuch, study which received its classical formulation in the nineteenth century in the 'Documentary hypothesis'. Fuller discussion of the sources and further information about this hypothesis will be found in the introductory volume to this series, *The Making of the Old Testament*, pp. 60ff.

Two points about this hypothesis are worth stressing: (i) The date assigned to a source does not decide the antiquity of the material within that source, nor is it a sure guide to the religious value of that material. It is demonstrable, for example, that P, the latest source, contains very old material, particularly in its description of religious rites which tend to

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be tenaciously conservative. Likewise the fact that J is held to be the earliest source does not mean that it is the most primitive or naïve in outlook. No one who carefully reads the J story of the Garden in Genesis, chapters 2 and 3, should be in any doubt that it is the work of one who is not only a skilled literary artist but also a profound thinker.

(ii) J, E and P must not be thought of as free-lance authors. As we have seen, they inherit, and are the servants of, their people's religious and historical traditions. This does not mean that they have no originality. Far from it. They reshape what they inherit. They link together once independent traditions in such a way that they take on new meaning. Genesis 6 is a good example. It opens (verses 1–4) with the strange episode of 'the sons of the gods' and 'the daughters of men'. Stories of the gods having intercourse with mortal women are common enough in religious mythology. Nor is it surprising that such a story should be used to explain the existence on earth of a race of giants, called in verse 4 'Nephilim'. As such, this episode stands on its own, with its own meaning. Yet J has deliberately changed the character of these verses. He has done this by placing them as the prologue to the story of the flood, and by linking them to the flood story by his own commentary (6: 5–7) in which he stresses the depth and dimension of that evil in the world which makes God's judgement inevitable. He is thus inviting us to re-interpret the story so that it becomes an illustration of the universality of evil infecting not only the world of man but even celestial beings.

Genesis preserves many of the old religious and historical traditions of Israel. In the form in which they now lie before us they have been reminted by some of Israel's greatest thinkers; no less great because they are anonymous, known to us only by the symbols J, E and P.

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THE PURPOSE OF GENESIS 1–11

The material in Genesis falls into two main sections:

(i) Chapters 1–11 which we may call 'the Prologue' and
(ii) Chapters 12–50, 'the patriarchal traditions'.

The two sections are linked by the list of the descendants of Shem (11: 10–26) and the list of the descendants of Terah (11: 27–32). It is only when we come to the story of Abraham in chapter 12 that we can claim with any certainty to be in touch with traditions which reflect something of the historical memory of the Hebrew people. In this volume we are concerned only with chapters 1–11. Chapters 12–50 will be dealt with in a second volume. How are we to approach chapters 1–11? It may be helpful to think of these chapters as the Prologue, not merely to the rest of the book of Genesis, but to much of the Old Testament and the faith to which it bears witness. As such these chapters fulfil the same function as the Prologue to a Shakespearean play. Two things are worth noting about such a Prologue.

(i) The Prologue is written after the drama is already known to the author. We cannot understand Genesis 1–11 aright unless we recognize that behind these chapters lie the traditions concerning the patriarchs, the miracle of deliverance from Egyptian slavery, the settlement in Canaan, the advent of the Hebrew state and much of the knowledge of God which came to men of faith in Israel through these events. Genesis 1–11 are the opening chapters in our present Old Testament, but they are the fruit of reflection upon much that is found elsewhere in the Old Testament.

(ii) The Prologue makes an appeal to the imagination. Shakespeare in the Prologue to Henry V thus invites the spectators to use their imagination.

'can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram
Within this wooden 'O' the very casques

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> That did affright the air at Agincourt?
> Think when we talk of horses, that you see them
> Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth.
> For 'tis your thoughts that must now deck our kings,
> Carry them here and there, jumping over times,
> Turning the accomplishment of many years
> Into an hour glass.'

So Genesis 1–11 makes an appeal to the imagination of faith to grasp that what was being played out on the narrow stage of Israel was of significance for all time and for all men. Within the history of one people, and that never a very important or significant people politically, there is revealed, claims this Prologue, the God who is the lord of all history, the source of all life. In Israel's encounter with God the truth about 'Everyman' is laid bare. The book of Genesis begins with the broad canvas of creation and narrows down to the particular history of one nation in its pilgrim forefather Abraham. Israel's religious experience was the reverse. It began with that one pilgrim and moved out in ever widening circles till it claimed universal significance. Genesis 1–11 is one of the ways in which this claim is made.

THE MEANING OF MYTH

The word 'myth' has been, and is, so frequently applied to some of the contents of Genesis 1–11 that it is as well, when discussing the nature of these chapters, to begin by explaining its meaning. Myth is a word which has been badly devalued in popular usage. We speak of something as 'mere myth' when we wish to indicate that it is wholly illusory or devoid of any truth. It should hardly need to be said that this is not what is meant when a scholar describes Genesis 1–11 as myth. More seriously, the word myth is being commonly used today to mean little more than religious language or the thought-world of the Bible. There are, however, two clearly definable

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usages of the word which may be helpful for our understanding of Genesis 1–11.

(i) In many different cultures we find what we may describe as 'story myths'. Such 'story myths' are not told for their entertainment value. They provide answers to questions people ask about life, about society and about the world in which they live. To the extent to which they give explanations, such 'story myths' are often described as 'aetiological', from the Greek word *aitia* meaning 'cause'. The questions answered may range all the way from questions about the deepest mysteries of life to questions about local tribal customs. One South African 'story myth', for example, answers the following questions. Why are men mortal? Why does the hare have a cleft lip? Why does the hare always seem to be running? Why does the moon have marks on its face? Why is hare's flesh taboo to the tribe?

Such 'story myths' appear in two forms. They may be traditional, popular stories handed down within the community from generation to generation, their ultimate origin lost in the mists of antiquity. But they may also be the conscious literary creation of a teacher whose concern is to help others to share his insights into the meaning of life. Plato's myth of the prisoners in the cave in Book VII of the Republic is a good example of this second type. When Glaucon, after listening to the story, says to Socrates, 'You are describing a strange scene and strange prisoners', Socrates replies 'They resemble us'.

Some of the material in Genesis 1–11 may be handled as 'story myths', e.g., the story of the Garden (2: 5 – 3: 24), the Flood (chapters 6–8), the Tower of Babel (11: 1–9). Such stories may draw on fantasy – this is probably true of the story of the Garden (see commentary pp. 32–3); or they may draw on fact. The Flood story uses the memory or knowledge of severe floodings in southern Mesopotamia; the Tower of Babel has as its background the soaring temple towers of Mesopotamia (see commentary pp. 105–7).

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