

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 purposes 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 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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 978-0-521-29520-8 - Genesis 12-50
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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 Sam. 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. xi. 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 Deut. 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 Gen. 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).

It is possible to lift each of these stories out of its present context in the book of Genesis and to regard each as giving us a different version of one traditional theme. There is no mistaking the basic similarity in outline of the three stories,

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but equally striking are the marked differences in presentation and emphasis.

For Gen. 12: 10-20 the story is the thing. It is told directly and briefly with remarkable restraint. No attempt is made either to defend or to explain Abraham's action in passing off Sarah as his sister. Indeed Sarah's entry into Pharaoh's household proves a good investment for Abraham. Pharaoh treated Abraham well because of her, and Abraham came to possess sheep and cattle and asses, male and female slaves, she-asses and camels (12: 16). Little or nothing is revealed of the inner feelings of the principal characters; no explanation is given as to how Pharaoh knew that the troubles which befell him and his household were linked to Sarah. There is but one mention of the LORD in the story (12: 17).

Gen. 20 is much more circumstantial and discursive. The characters are more sharply delineated. Religious and moral issues predominate. Much of the story revolves round two dialogues, the first between God and Abimelech (20: 3-7) - God appearing to Abimelech who claims to have acted 'with a clear conscience and in all innocence' (20: 5). God exonerates him and warns him. Abraham is described as 'a prophet' who will intercede on behalf of Abimelech (20: 7; cp. verse 17). In his confrontation with Abimelech, Abraham justifies his action on several grounds:

(i) he was living as an alien in what he believed to be a God-less community (verse 11);

(ii) he hadn't actually told a lie: 'She is in fact my sister, she is my father's daughter though not by the same mother; and she became my wife' (verse 12);

(iii) Sarah (Sarai) in true wifely obedience had long since agreed to connive at the subterfuge (verse 13).

The narrative is even concerned to vindicate Sarah's involvement in the incident (20: 16).

Gen. 26: 1-11 is in some respects the furthest removed from the story outlined in Gen. 12. Here nothing in fact happens to Rebecca. There is therefore no need for God either

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to exonerate or to warn. Abimelech himself discovers the true relationship between Isaac and Rebecca and after a somewhat testy interview with Isaac warns his people against laying a finger on either this man or his wife. Isaac's action in passing off Rebecca as his sister is explained but on a much more human level, 'he was afraid to say that Rebecca was his wife in case they killed him because of her: for she was very beautiful' (26: 7). In one respect, however, this version is the most explicitly integrated into the broad religious interest of the book of Genesis. Why did Isaac choose to remain in the Philistine city of Gerar during a period of famine? He was remaining faithful to a God-given promise of blessing, a promise which first appears in Gen. 12: 1-3 and echoes and re-echoes across the narrative (see commentary, pp. 97, 127, 147). In reading Genesis, therefore, we come across differences in style and vocabulary, different names for God, contradictions, overlapping yet varied stories. Such features occur at point after point throughout the first five books of the Old Testament. How do we account for them?

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,

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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, now usually separated from the first four books of the Old Testament, shares a common outlook and judgement on events with the succeeding historical narratives in Joshua, 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 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

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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 200 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. 60-5.

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 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.

Let us return for a moment to Gen. 12: 10-20. Whatever the original form or meaning of this story of Abraham deceiving Pharaoh into believing that Sarah was his sister, not his wife - and there have been many attempts to peer into the dim past of the story - there is little doubt that it stands in its present context because the J narrator is using it to communicate a deep-held conviction. One of the dominant

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themes in the patriarchal stories is that of a promise made by God, the promise of a land, the promise of a great nation to spring from Abraham, the promise of a blessing radiating outwards from this people into the wider world. The theme is first heard in Gen. 12: 1-3; the first glimpse of its fulfilment is then given in 12: 4-9. Abraham journeys to the promised land and lays claim to it by there building an altar to the LORD. But there is to be no easy or quick fulfilment of this promise. In Gen. 12: 10-20 famine drives Abraham out of this promised land down into Egypt. Abraham has apparently so little faith in God's ability to fulfil his promise that he has to resort to deceit to save his own skin. As Sarah disappears into Pharaoh's household the reader is left wondering how the promise of a great nation sprung from Abraham can ever be fulfilled. God's promise is thus seen to be a promise under threat both from external circumstances such as famine and from the fickleness of those who ought to have believed in the promise and lived by it. This was a painful truth that men of faith had to face at many points in Israel's history. It has shaped the present form of the Genesis narrative.

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.

THE PROBLEM OF HISTORICITY

The material in Genesis falls into two main sections:

(i) chapters 1-11 which in a previous volume we have thought of as 'the Prologue' to Israel's faith;

(ii) chapters 12-50 which in general terms we may call 'the patriarchal traditions'.

The two sections are linked by the list of the descendants of Shem (11: 10-26) and the list of descendants of Terah (11: 27-32). When we come to the story of Abraham in Gen. 12

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 978-0-521-29520-8 - Genesis 12-50
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we are handling a tradition in which many Old Testament passages see the beginning of the life of the Hebrew people: 'Long ago your forefathers, Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor, lived beside the Euphrates, and they worshipped other gods. I took your father Abraham from beside the Euphrates and led him through the length and breadth of Canaan' (Josh. 24: 2, 3). During desolate days of exile a prophet cries to his people:

'look to the rock from which you were hewn,
 to the quarry from which you were dug;
 look to your father Abraham
 and to Sarah who gave you birth'
 (Isa. 51: 1, 2; cp. Ps. 105: 6, 9-11).

In what sense can we claim that this tradition has firm roots in events that once happened? Was Abraham a man who one day packed his bags in north-west Mesopotamia and set off westwards to the land of Canaan? Can we accept as historical all the incidents which Genesis narrates concerning this man; and is the same to be said about Isaac, Jacob and Joseph? It must be frankly admitted that we move here into a realm where certainty is elusive and where sharply divergent views are held by scholars. If, for example, as we have argued, J, E and P are not merely free-lance authors but the servants of the religious and historical traditions of the community which nurtured them, what can we say about such traditions before they were woven into our present narratives in Genesis? Suppose a man called Abraham did travel west to Canaan some time in the first half of the second millennium B.C.: between that event and the earliest strand in the narrative as it now lies before us there lies a period of somewhere between 600 and 1000 years. Genesis itself is quite clear on this point. Gen. 36: 31-9, for example, quotes a list of the kings who ruled over Edom before there were kings in Israel, a meaningless comment except from the pen of a man