

Early Writings of the Old Testament

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Photo date and location unknown

When the Israelites formed a strong national entity under the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon, they began to keep records, first as brief narratives of current events. But some early poems, such as the songs of Miriam and Deborah, had been passed down from generation to generation as well as the oral tradition of the great patriarchs.

Textual studies of the Old Testament and the history of the times shows that a systematic account of their history as a people was not initiated until about 900 B. C. What we now know as the Torah or the five books of Moses did not reach their final form until perhaps the fourth century B. C.

Noted Old Testament scholar, Julius A. Bewer, has described this process in *The Literature of the Old Testament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962). This article is based on his research.

The Yahwist

The Yahwist is the first great historical document in the Bible, compiled about 900 B. C. Descended from stories handed down by word of mouth, it spans the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Samuel. Many stories originally Canaanite or Babylonian were adopted by the Israelites. Yahweh, however, replaced Baal (Canaanite) or Marduk (Babylonian) as the wonder-working god.

The document was written during the first flowering of Hebrew literature, during the reign of Jeroboam I, Solomon's son. The author, a Judean code-named "J" or the Yahwist by scholars, used the name Yahweh for God. He fused many stories into an account of Israelite history from the time of patriarchs to the conquest of Canaan. He described how and why the Israelites came to possess the land.

Garden of Eden

According to the Yahwist, man lived in a Golden Age at the beginning of history. Sin and misery entered the world through man's disobedience. The first man and woman (Adam and Eve) succumbed to the serpent's temptation and ate of the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden, in violation of God's will. As a result, man must labor for his food and woman must labor in childbirth. In a variant story, Adam and Eve ate the fruit from the Tree of Life in order to become immortal. In doing so, they angered God, who expelled them from the garden.

According to Beyer, the story of Cain and Abel was probably originally told by a shepherd, who wanted to illustrate the superiority of sheep offerings over grain offerings. The Hebrew author inserted a moral: God could not accept Cain's gift because of his sinful heart. So Cain rebelled and slew Abel, and received the sign of the tribe of Cainites, a tribe famous for blood feuds.

The descendants of Cain and Abel played varying roles in civilization. Cain built the first city; his children were ancestors of cattle raisers, musicians, and smiths. But Cain's lineage promulgated murder and sin. In Seth's family religion arose. After the birth of Seth's son Enos "men began to call upon the name of Yahweh."

Eventually man's sinfulness became too great for God to bear, and He was determined to destroy mankind, as the story of Noah and the flood reveals. Ham's behavior, however, proved that sin could not be eradicated. The Ham story provided an important step in Hebrew historical ideology- Noah's curse on Ham and his blessing on Shem and Japheth. The theme of J's history -- Canaan being subjected to Shem and Japheth- provided the goal for future history. According to ancient belief, the curse or blessing of an ancestor had potency and would be fulfilled despite all obstacles. The effects of Noah's blessing form the character of the remaining stories.

Abraham's family

Abraham was the father of the chosen race. God promised that his ancestors would be like the stars and that they would inherit the Promised Land. While Abraham and Sarah were in Egypt, God rescued Sarah from the Pharaoh. Later God helped Sarah to have a son, Isaac, although Sarah was past childbearing age. The son was promised to Abraham by God and two angels.

Isaac's twin sons, Esau (Edom) and Jacob, struggled in the womb, a prophecy of the struggle between the nations of Israel and Edom. God told the mother Rebecca that, "The elder shall serve the younger." Jacob, to whom God had thus promised heirship, obtained Isaac's blessing and overcame all obstacles to achieve his goal. He settled in the Promised Land after 21 years of labor in Haran.

Moses the deliverer

But the Israelites experienced hard times. They settled in Egypt to avoid the famine in Canaan, but the pharaohs enslaved them. Moses, however, secured their liberation when the Pharaoh, realizing that his resistance had caused the ten plagues, agreed to the exodus.

In the desert their fortunes appeared to suffer a reversal. Pharaoh pursued them with his army, and the Israelites seemed destined for extinction.

Then God intervened. A strong east wind parted the Red Sea, enabling the Israelites to cross. Pharaoh and his army, their chariots stuck in the mud, perished with the incoming tide. This victory could become the foundation of Jewish history. God revealed that He could protect His people from all perils, caring for them in the desert despite their complaints.

Although the dispensation was prolonged for 40 years, the Israelites, descendants of Shem, invaded Canaan. Although unable to drive out all the Canaanites, they gradually learned the art of war from them. Under David they conquered and enslaved the Canaanites, while western tribes, descendants of Japheth, also invaded Canaan and remained there until David drove them out. Thus Noah's prophecy was fulfilled.

History is God's providence

The J document was the first comprehensive history ever written. The Greeks could not match it. Until the fifth century B. C. the early history of Israel was set within the framework of world history. Each nation was descended from the earliest of mankind, and history, therefore, depended on the actions of Noah's descendants. The whole movement of history began when God blessed Noah and then Abraham.

Despite all obstacles, their descendants achieved the blessing because of the desire of the divine will. History, therefore, was interpreted as the unfolding of God's providence. The J document influenced later Babylonian and Persian religions, which also explained their teaching in universal terms. J taught religion through stories.

Yahweh was the Creator and the only God of Israel. He offered proof of His control over nature with the flood and proof of His control over history with the story of Jericho. As a moral God, He demanded righteousness, rewarded faith, and punished wickedness and oppression, not only in Israel but throughout the world. The stories of the tower of Babel, the destruction of Sodom, and the exodus substantiate God's role. The Cain-Abel story impresses upon the reader not the original conflict between animal and cereal sacrifices, but moral sanctions against harboring sinful thoughts and the need to subjugate sin in one's heart. The social obligation of caring for one's brother still dominates, however.

J's anthropomorphism does not easily conform to the grand conception of the Creator. But J may not have felt the incongruity, for anthropomorphism is a sign of a vital religion.

J contains several beautiful additions to the ancient tradition. The most beautiful religious sentiments are expressed in Abraham's plea for God to spare Sodom, Jacob's prayer while alone at the Ford of Jabbok, and Moses' intercession for God to cancel judgment on the Israelites after they stoned Joshua and Caleb. Also included are the descriptions of the purification of Moses and Israel at Mount Sinai and God's words to Moses before giving him the law.

The Elohist

This document, written in the Northern Kingdom about 800 B. C. emphasized Israelitic tradition, rather than that of Judea. Though not as broad historically as J, the Elohist or "E" brought the people closer to God. The author wrote it more as a religious rather than historical document. He emphasized people's reactions, not historical events. The author used the word "Elohim" for God, avoiding the name "Yahweh" until the accounts of Moses, because he believed that God had revealed His name for the first time to Moses. The name "Yahweh," he believed, was unknown to the patriarchs.

Begins with Abraham

The Elohist document began with Abraham. The advance in theological and ethical views made the stories more acceptable to the readers. J mentioned that Pharaoh took Sarah into his harem, and made no mention of Sarah being untouched. In E Sarah, although taken by King Abimelech of Gerar, remained pure, because God had warned the king in a dream. In J Abraham lied about Sarah as his sister; in E Abraham did not really lie, for Sarah was Abraham's half-sister. In J God struck the Pharaoh's house with plagues; in E Abraham interceded with God, and God healed Abimelech.

The story of the sacrifice of Isaac had a definite moral. While God demands absolute obedience, even if it involves the sacrifice of man's dearest possessions, He will not have human offerings. The demand that Abraham sacrifice Isaac was a test. God desired animal offerings in place of first-born sons, although sacrifice of the first-born son was mentioned even in the book of the covenant (Ex. 22:29). But E knew the value of a story in persuading people to change their beliefs.

In J Esau and Jacob struggled in the womb, while in E Esau sold his birthright to Jacob, who became the legal first-born. J could not tolerate the sharp practices of Jacob by which he gained his wealth. E pointed out God's special blessing by which Jacob could take sheep from Laban. Jacob scolded Laban with righteous indignation (Gen.

31:4-16).

The story of Joseph was E's masterpiece. The brothers intended evil, but God turned it to good, by enabling Joseph to save his family from famine. God's providence ruled in the life of the individual, as well as in history.

The burning bush

E's version of Moses' life included traditions that J did not give. God's providence saved the baby Moses from death and put him in care of the Pharaoh's daughter. God revealed Himself to Moses at Horeb in Midian, (the story of the burning bush), where Moses heard the name of God and his mission as the deliverer of Israel. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law and a Midianite priest, instructed Moses on the administration of justice, before God gave the Ten Commandments. Evaluated non-Israelite influence more than J.

Finally, in the story of the golden calf, E emphasized the heinousness and folly of worshipping hand-made gods and attributing to a calf the great deliverance from Egypt. When Moses broke the two tablets in a rage, Aaron could give only a foolish explanation for the people's false worship.

He said that he cast the people's gold into the fire and it turned into a calf. The Israelite readers laughed at this anecdote and found it hard to seriously worship the calves in the Canaanite temples at Bethel and Dan.

E worshipped Yahweh as ardently as J did, and demanded Israelite loyalty to Him. But E had a more refined moral consciousness, as evidenced in the stories of Abraham and Jacob. E's theology was more "advanced." He shunned the anthropomorphic instances of God's revelation so prevalent in J.

Jehovist synthesizes J and E

E finished his work about 750 B. C. After the fall of Israel, the Judeans preserved E's work and about 700 they combined J and E into a single history-the Jehovist -- which was given a pan-Israelitic slant. J alone provided the material from the creation to Abraham. From Abraham on, both documents were interwoven. Sometimes both stories were placed side by side without abridgment, as in Sarah's peril: Gen. 12 (J) and Gen. 20 (E). Sometimes the compiler wove both into a single story, as with Joseph in Egypt. And sometimes he added his own material to emphasize certain ideas (the prophecy of Israel's great future: Gen. 22: 15-18; 26: 3b, 4f). On the whole, however both the J and E stories remained in their original form. Later they would be expanded by Deuteronomist and Priestly documents.