

## 10. Genesis

### The Patriarchal Narrative (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 of Jacob and Joseph with them. Judah had its stories about Abraham and Isaac.

No doubt the stories encouraged King Josiah, who saw himself as realising the promise made by YHWH to the patriarchs. What better motivation could he have than a sense of destiny that he was called to inherit the promise.

Elements of the Patriarchal Narrative may have been composed to support the aspirations of King Josiah in the late 7th century. As it stands, Genesis 12-50 is a Post-exilic composition - an imaginary reconstruction of the Patriarchal Period, for the authors wanted their contemporaries to relate their experiences to that of their ancestors. Scholars refer to these stories as 'archaising legends'.

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.

## I. Abraham (Genesis 12-25)

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 storytelling. 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 as we have it 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).

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.

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).

Romans 4:3

‘What does the scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.”

## Acts 7:3

‘God said to Abraham, “Leave your country and your relatives and go to the land that I will show you”(Genesis 12:1).’

## Galatians 3:8

‘The scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you.”(Genesis 12:3).’

Hebrews 7:1-2

‘This “King Melchizedek of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham as he was returning from defeating the kings and blessed him, and to him Abraham apportioned “one-tenth of everything.”(Genesis 14:20).’

Romans 4:17

‘As it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”(Genesis 17:5)  
– in the presence of the God in whom he believed.’

Romans 9:9

‘This is what the promise said, “About this time  
I will return and Sarah shall have a son”(Genesis 18:14)

Hebrews 11:12

‘From one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”(Genesis 22:17).

## II. Isaac (Genesis 25-26)

‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’?  
He is God not of the dead, but of the living.”(Matthew 22:32).

‘The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,  
the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus’(Acts 3:13).

‘You, my friends, are children of the promise, like Isaac’(Galatians 4:28).

‘By faith Isaac invoked blessings for the future on Jacob and Esau’  
(Hebrews 11:20).

‘Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works  
when he offered his son Isaac on the altar’(James 2:21)?

### III. Jacob (Genesis 27-35)

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.

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'(1Corinthians 1:28). This is a story about God who has a preferential option for the poor and who hears their cry.

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 (Israel), 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.

The authors of Genesis tell how Jacob and his sons came to Egypt. This sets 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.

#### IV. The Joseph Story (Genesis 37-50)

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 that concerns us all.

# The Primeval Narrative (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.

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 (see Psalm 115:4-8 and 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, another version of the Flood story, and the Tower of Babel (**J**).

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 natural 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 (**P**). It witnesses to the continuing of God's blessing 'be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth'(Genesis 1:28), despite human sin.

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.

The post-exilic authors had 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.

## Matthew 19:5

In response to a question about divorce, Jesus quotes from Genesis:

‘Jesus answered, “Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female’(Genesis 1:27). For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’(Genesis (2:24).

1 Corinthians 15:45

‘It is written, “The first man, Adam, became a living being”(Genesis 2:7); the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.

## Hebrews 11:5

By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and “he was not found, because God had taken him.” For it was attested before he was taken away that “he had pleased God.”(Genesis 5:24).