Session 13: The Primeval History of Genesis 1 - 11

B. The 'Yahwist'

We have already found the scholars of Solomon's palace at work on at least two major projects. One was the succession narrative, written either to explain why and how Solomon became king or as a reflection on the use and abuse of power. Another was perhaps the Joseph story. Elsewhere in the palace, perhaps, we might imagine a group of scholars engaged in the collection of Israel's proverbs. And in another room, another group would have been working on the biggest project of all: the collection of the stories of Israel's past and their arrangement to form a great epic of her history from the creation of the world to the present day.

Until that time, Israel's history would have been passed on by word of mouth from family to family and in particular at the shrines when people came to worship. We can see this reflected in the opening words of Psalm 44:

Psalm 44

We have heard with our ears, O God,
our ancestors have told us,
what deeds you performed in their days,
in the days of old:

The psalm goes on to complain that Yahweh was not acting in the psalmist's day in the same way as he had done in the past. It suggests that the recounting of the stories of history was a regular feature of Israel's worship.

Different shrines would have treasured different sets of stories. In session 2 we looked at Hosea 12:2-6, an oracle about Jacob, and I suggested that Hosea would probably have given this message at the shrine of Bethel, not just because it was one of the most important places of worship but because it had special associations with Jacob. It would have been at Bethel that the Jacob stories would have been passed down and in a similar way the Isaac stories at Beersheba and the Abraham stories at Hebron. The scribes of Solomon's day would have visited the various centres of worship to write down the stories that may previously have only been passed on orally and arrange them into a coherent history.

But they did not confine their researches to Israel alone. Solomon's reign was a time of enormous confidence. Economically and politically, Israel was the centre of the world, a great power on a par with Egypt in the west and the empires of the east and south. The Canaanite inhabitants of the land had been incorporated into the Israelite state, and, with their international outlook, the men working on J would have no hesitation in collecting material from the surrounding nations.

For example, we know that most, if not all, ancient peoples had versions of the Flood story. The Babylonian 'Epic of Gilgamesh' from 3,000 – 2,000 B.C. is available as a Penguin paperback. It contains a version of the Flood story in which the hero is called Utnapishtim. He survives the flood by making a boat, taking his family and animals with him as well as gold and craftsmen.

Similarly, Ezekiel 28 contains a version of the Eden story, used in a prophecy about the King of Tyre, and this is somewhat different from the version we have in Genesis 2 and 3:

Ezekiel 28:12-15

Mortal, raise a lamentation over the king of Tyre, and say to him, Thus says the Lord God:
You were the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.
You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering,
carnelian, chrysolite, and moonstone, beryl, onyx, and jasper,
sapphire, turquoise, and emerald;
and worked in gold were your settings and your engravings.
On the day that you were created they were prepared.
With an anointed cherub as guardian I placed you;
you were on the holy mountain of God;
you walked among the stones of fire.
You were blameless in your ways
from the day that you were created, until iniquity was found in you.

Here the first man walks among 'stones of fire' and the cherub is a guardian for him.

So the Yahwist compilers would have collected versions of the great creation myths of the Near East, selected the version best suited to their purpose and perhaps further shaped the stories to express Israel's understanding of the God who had rescued them from Egypt and was now blessing the nation and making it great. In the next section, we shall see how this might apply to the story in Genesis 3.

The result of their labour would have been an epic of Israel's history in three great cycles:

1. The primeval history: stories concerning the whole of humankind, in Genesis 1 – 11.
2. The stories of the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, in Genesis 12 – 50.
3. The exodus from Egypt and the journey to the promised land.

So what are the criteria by which scholars recognise J and distinguish it from the other sources?

a) God is given the personal name, 'Yahweh'. In E he is referred to 'Elohim' or 'God'. In the P tradition there is a complicated progression. In the first stage the divine name is 'Elohim', in the next 'El Shaddai' which translates roughly as the 'Almighty' and is found in the P versions of the stories of the patriarchs. From the time of Moses P refers to God as 'Yahweh'.

b) J has a characteristic vocabulary. This includes 'know' as a euphemism for sex; to 'call upon the name of Yahweh' for worship; the original inhabitants of the land are the Canaanites, whereas E calls them Amorites; the holy mountain is Sinai, whereas in E it is Horeb.

c) J does not flinch from recording the questionable deeds of Israel's ancestors, such as Abraham's lie to Pharoah in Genesis 12; Jacob's deceit towards his uncle Laban; Simeon and Levi's resort to trickery and murder at Shechem in Genesis 34; Moses' murder of the Egyptian taskmaster in Exodus 2.

d) 'Anthropomorphism' or descriptions of God in human terms, are characteristic of J: in Genesis 2 Yahweh forms a human being out of clay; puts him to sleep and makes a woman out of his rib; in chapter 3 he strolls in the Garden of Eden during the cool of the day; in chapter 7 he shuts the door of the ark; in chapter 11 he comes down to investigate

> the Tower of Babel; in chapter 18 he has dinner with Abraham; in Exodus 14 he clogs the Egyptians' chariot wheels. He makes decisions and changes his mind: with Abraham over Sodom in Genesis 18, with Moses over Israel in Exodus 32. He is personal yet definitely God; he allows human freedom but is definitely in charge.

J's view of God is robust: it can cope with ambiguity and is not shocked at sin. It is a similar ambiguity to that which we find in the other strands from Solomon's time, such as the proverbs and the succession narrative: an ambiguity that expresses both divine sovereignty and human freedom and holds them together.

Further Reading

You can read more on J in Norman Gottwald's *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction,* section 31.1