

## Survey of the Bible

### Notes from 6-16-19 Class

After much discussion of the different genres found in the bible, some history, themes and a review of the various methods of Biblical scholarship, as promised, we are actually going to get into the bible today.

We're going to begin at the earliest sustained voice in the bible, and one of the longest sustained voices. So what we're turning to is Genesis chapter 2 through chapter 50, and Exodus chapters 1 through 20. And that is a long voice; Mark's gospel is only 15 or 16 chapters long. Since this is a very long voice we're turning to, we're going to be in it for a good long while, because this is major foundation laying.

This source was written by an anonymous individual that scholars have nicknamed just 'J'. When someone is referring to the 'J' writer, you're referring to this material. The name 'J' came about because the guy who named it 'J', was German, and he named it after God, which in German is Jahwe. If he had been an English or an American guy, he would have spelled it Yahweh, and called this author 'Y'. But he didn't, so here we are.

If you'll recall, source criticism acknowledged that there are different written sources in the bible, so that when it is said that this material was authored by 'J', that is not to say that there are no other sources within this material, but that it is *principally* written by 'J'. There is at least one clear other voice found in this part of the text, and that author is referred to as 'E', because he uses the word 'Elohim' for God, rather than Yahweh.

An example of this different source 'E' within the 'J' material is found in Genesis 12:10. God had just called to Abram to tell him to go from his country and his kindred to go to the land God would give him. It discusses a famine in the land we was to reside in, so he goes instead to Egypt, because there can't be a famine there, there's just too much water from the river delta. It goes on to explain that because Abrams wife, Sarai, was so beautiful, he feared being killed so that the Egyptians could steal his wife, so he asked Sarai to pose as his sister so that his life would be spared. Not exactly chivalrous, but that was what he did. Needless to say, Sarai was considered beautiful, as predicted, and the Pharaoh took her into his harem. So Abram has essentially turned himself into a pimp, because he got a lot of property and what-not for his wife. Eventually everyone finds out and they get scooted out of town.

Now if we flip to Genesis 20:1, it tells the story of Abram going on from there to a different land, and essentially doing the exact same thing, but here God is referred to as Elohim, not Yahweh. This is a good example of the 'J' narrative, with the 'E' narrative included into it. When we come across these differences (in names, etc) or inconsistencies within the bible, this is what accounts for them. We don't know why the 'J' author would have incorporated elements from the 'E' author into his writing, or really anywhere throughout the bible, except to say that these were probably stories that the authors or compilers did not want to lose to for history. Some part of them must have seemed important enough to retain even though it created inconsistencies. There is a part of the Noah story that tells of the animals going into the ark two by two, but later it says they went in seven by seven, so we just have to accept the fact that there are some voices within the bible that present inconsistencies and move on.

Back to the material covered by the 'J' author. When we tackle the bible, as we discussed, the paramount question we always need to consider for each section is what is the genre we are looking at. The genre we are encountering here (in the 'J' material) is a saga. Now that genre is kind of tricky, because we don't read a lot of those anymore, so what is a saga? A saga is a normally lengthy, majestic, epic narrative of a peoples' origins

or their founding heroes, or their founding beliefs, etc. Some variation on the theme of origins. Like the Iliad. This is a saga, but this saga is *sui generis*. It's one of a kind, unique, unparalleled in human history. We should say more than, about this particular saga so that you can make the most of your analysis of it.

This saga can be look at with regard to the following points:

1. Its definition
2. Its structure
3. Its style
  - a. Primitive
  - b. Folkloric
    - i. Topics of barren wives
    - ii. Topics of competing brothers
    - iii. Etiology
    - iv. Eponym

### **Definition...**

We just gave you the definition of a saga in general. But with regard to this particular one, it is a historical narrative, with a mythological preface, of a theological, poetic nature of the purpose and origin of the people of Israel. So let's unpack that whole sentence. Historical narrative is a pretty straight-forward phrase, everyone can understand that, it's a narrators voice telling a history. Mythological preface refers to the fact that these aren't literal stories. The stories contained within it are all mythologies. No one thinks they literally happened. It begins in the accounts of Adam and Eve, Cain and Able, Noah and the Flood, and the Tower of Babel. These are myths, these are not historical. The writer of the Adam and Eve story did not think that snakes talked. Ancient people were not gullible. Like all mythologies, these stories disclose the worldview of a people. It doesn't mean they are not true, it just means they are not literally true. The truth they are disclosing is about their belief in a certain worldview.

The theological aspect just means that God's presence, aim and actions are scripted into the narrative. The theological nature might be evident, but what might not be evident is that almost everything written at the time was of a theological nature. Today we don't do a lot of theological readings, our reading is all secular. But back then, in fact prior to the 1900s, almost *all* writing was theological. Lincoln did not say a word that wasn't theologically formed. And back at the time of the writing of the bible, writing wasn't common. There weren't dime store novels you could pick up to read on your day off. When something was written down it was because it was generally theologically or philosophically important.

This section itself is not poetry, but it has to be grasped as poetry is grasped, which is intuitively. Intuition is a direct encounter with reality. Not through your senses, but head on with your mind. Additionally, poetry must be grasped aesthetically, as art, which refers to our receptors for the sublime and the beautiful. It's not a literal bean counting kind of thing. It has to be felt.

### **Structure...**

We have the 'J' narrative, and we have another source in there, the 'E' narrative, so that means there are seams in there, structurally. Now many scholars have pulled all the 'E' material out of this section, to look only at the 'J' material, because 'E' can't stand on its own and 'J' can. But even with all the 'E' material pulled out, there are still all sorts of seams; there are all sorts of genre's within the larger genre of Myth. There are novellas, there are journey narratives, there are eponyms, etc. So what scholars say 'J' probably did was receive or inherit all sorts of traditions, and he redacted or edited them all together to make a more polished whole. We'll point out the seams as we go.

## Style...

'J' is a primitive. Certain geniuses give expression to their genius in a primitive fashion, but this is not to say that they're backward or crude or stupid. It's simply an understanding of the way that certain geniuses advance their genius. For example, Pablo Picasso is arguably one of the greatest painters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When he was 13, he could paint like the renaissance painters, he could depict anything naturalistically. At that point his father who was also an artist said he was putting down his brushes. He said he was just playing at painting, whereas his son was a true artist. But from 13, Picasso went on. His work changed dramatically, but this was him expressing himself in a primitive way. Grandma Moses is another good example of genius expressed in primitive form. The way you can detect these primitivisms in the bible is in these crude anthropomorphisms for God. God has temper tantrums; God fashions man out of mud; God doesn't know anything, "Where are you guys?" he's always asking. That is all a function of 'J's primitive style.

'J' is also very folkloric, which simply means he's writing for the masses, for the common people. It's more similar to the Paul Bunyan story. Paul Bunyan is a folklore. He was not a real person, but he was representing a reality. The lumberjacks that cleared Northern Wisconsin and Minnesota were clearing huge forests that held three, four, five hundred-year-old trees, *with their hands*, with axes. They didn't have chain saws or tree cutting machines. They were huge strapping people, with enormous muscles. They are represented folklorically through Paul Bunyan.

The traits of its folkloric nature are demonstrated in its stories. They have all these barren wives and competing brothers. Why are there all these barren wives? The women in the old testament wanted sons above all else, because the sons were their future. A husband is fine for helping you produce sons, but he's your age. He can't protect you when you get older. Only a son could do that. They would stop at nothing to get sons. So what could be more dramatic to the folk, to the masses at the time, than a woman who is barren? This was a topic of interest to the folks, it engaged them. The same is true for the theme of competing brothers. Back in the old testament days, everything went to the eldest son (primo genitor). It was a disaster to break up land holdings or other assets and spread them out between two or three or ten sons, so in those days everything went to the first son. That was a great way to protect your land holdings, but from the standpoint of sibling rivalry it was a disaster. So competing brothers was another story theme that appealed to the masses. It's drama, it's entertaining.

Etiology is a little more difficult concept to understand. It's hard to give a modern-day example, because there aren't many. An Etiology is a purported or ostensible story of origin that in fact simply describes something that exists. My only example is Rudyard Kipling's story of How the Elephant Got its Trunk. It starts with all elephants having short noses, but one little elephant was very curious, and so he set off to the river looking for satisfaction for his curiosity, and he leaned into the river and out came a crocodile that grabbed onto his nose. Back and forth they tugged until his nose had grown down into a trunk. That's an etiology. There's nothing important about the story of how the elephant got his trunk, it's just describing something that exists. Elephants have long trunks. It's fun, it's folkloric.

Let's turn to the bible for an example of etiology. Turn to Genesis 2:18. The Lord said that it was not good for man to be alone, so he was going to create a helpmate for him, a partner. God took out a rib from the man and made a woman. Therefore man leaves his mother and father and clings to his wife and the two become one flesh. This is an etiology that simply describes the fact that marriage exists. It's an entertaining story, but it does nothing more than give a made up backstory to something we see around us all the time. We can go on and look at a little more salacious etiology as well. Turn to Genesis 19:30. Here we get the story of Lot, who was a foil - which is a trusty sidekick who has qualities that are in contrast to the hero, who sort of augments and underscores the attributes of the hero, in this case Abraham. Lot is Abraham's ne'er-do-well

nephew. Lot left Sodom and Gomorrah (which had just been destroyed) and settled in the hills with his two daughters. The daughters recognized that there were no men around to give them sons (as we previously discussed this was super important to people at this time), so they got their father drunk and had sex with him in order to get some sons. They both got pregnant by their father, without him even knowing about it. The first daughter had a son and named him Moab (he turned out to be the ancestor of the Moabites), and the second had a son and named him Ben Ami (he turned out to be the ancestor of the Amonites). This is an etiology. It simply tells a story that describes the fact that the Israelites hate the Moabites and the Amonites. It's myth, it didn't really happen, but it explains why the Israelites think so poorly of the Moabite and Amonites. The people of Israel thought of these people as lowlifes and sexual deviants, and this story explains why.

An eponym is another type of story that is difficult to find an example of. An eponym is a story or history of the individuals for whom peoples or nations are named. An example could be the birth above of Moab and Ben Ami, who gave their names to the Moabites and the Amonites. We don't really have any modern examples. They're harder to come by now, because we have had the written word for so long we know the actual story of how things came to be called what they are called, we don't need a myth.

With that much under our belt, we can finally jump in and begin to survey our 'J' material.

We are going to jump off at the first subset of this larger saga. The first subset is Genesis chapters 2 through 11. Scholars call these the primordial stories. They are the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood, and the Tower of Babel. What is the sub-genre of this set of stories, within the larger genre of Saga? We can call these etiological myths. Stories that disclose a worldview that take the form of stories of origins. What is the worldview that they're disclosing? They're disclosing human nature and the consequent human predicament. The bible, once it establishes this human nature and the consequent human predicament, does not waiver from it throughout its entirety down to Jesus Christ.

We are not tackling Genesis 1, because we are proceeding according to the earliest written books. Genesis chapters 2-10 were written in about 960 BCE, but Genesis 1 was not written until 540 BCE. This is how we will move through the bible. We're going along source critically, from the earliest sources to the most recent ones.

Genesis 2:4b, the Garden of Eden. We read about God creating the garden of Eden. We read about a pristine garden being created from the primordial mist and dirt. God fashions man from the dust of the earth. The name given to that man is Adam, but the Hebrew name for dust is Adama, so the word Adam really just means dustling. For whatever reason when the bible was translated they kept the name Adam rather than calling him Dustling, but that is the literal translation. God created this Dustling and breather life into him. Another example of 'J's primitivism. He planted a garden in Eden, and put into it a mystical Tree of Life which was good for food. Now every culture on the earth has a myth about a Tree of Life, but the bible has another tree added to the garden, and that is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The only place in the world you find this kind of tree in mythology is in the Bible. This Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil represents independent moral knowledge, which the bible says, unequivocally, that humankind cannot have apart from God. Humankind may not decide for itself what is good and evil.

The Bible was very strongly against pluralism, which is the notion that there is no truth, that each individual or group decides its own truth, and that each of those truths are equally reasonable or logical. The bible is very clear in stating that there is no truth apart from God, and the day that you try to come up with your own moral truth is the day you begin to die off.

But the nature of people is to want to be like God, to dethrone God and put ourselves in his place. This can be thought of as pride. The desire to be like God and rule unto ourselves. To develop our own moral truth.

So in this story of Adam and Eve, the nature of people is described. They allowed themselves to be 'tricked' by the serpent, and they ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and in doing so both their eyes were opened; they received the knowledge of their own guilt, and saw that they were naked. But what is this story trying to tell us?

First it is telling us that humankind is prideful by nature. In pride's enactment humankind had its eyes opened, and received knowledge of its guilt and shame, which it was resourceful enough to try and deny and blame others for. But there was no avoiding now this knowledge of their own guilt and shame. As a result they received their 3 etiological curses (remember etiologies are stories that are meant to explain something that exists): first they are sent to live out their days in a cursed, in-hospitable environment, where they have to work their fingers to the bone just to survive. Second the snake, which formerly had legs, has his legs taken away and he's forced to crawl around on his belly for the rest of his days. Finally, male domination becomes part of the cursed nature of existence, because Eve was the one who 'forced' Adam to eat the fruit the snake had talked her into.

This also introduces us to the concept of people being named for their essential identity. Eve was named Eve because she was the mother of all humankind. Adam was named Adam because he came from dust. That also includes changing people's names if their essential identity subsequently changes, for example when Abram had his name changed by God to Abraham because he listened and obeyed. We don't do that today, once you get a name that's it, but back in the old testament times names changed whenever they needed to.

Next month we will pick up from this spot.