

Survey of the Bible

Notes from 9-15-19 Class

Since we took a break over in July and August, the first part of our class today was devoted to reviewing the main points of the last lesson.

As previously discussed, we are beginning with the earliest and longest sustained voice in the bible, that of Genesis chapters 2 through 50, and Exodus chapters 1 through 20. And that is a long voice; Mark's gospel is only 15 or 16 chapters long.

This source material 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.

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. This section of the bible is a saga, but this saga is one of a kind, unique, unparalleled in human history. We reviewed more about this particular saga so that we can make the most of our 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...

Above you have 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.

Unpacking that 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.

Poetic Nature: 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...

As we previously discussed, the author of this section of the bible (or more probably the two authors) were putting together many different stories from the oral traditions of many people, so there are seams in there, structurally. This would be were different oral traditions were stitched together. Plus, there are all sorts of genre's within the larger genre of Myth. There are novellas, there are journey narratives, there are eponyms, etc. We'll point out the seams as we go along.

Style...

As we discussed last time, 'J' is a **primitive** writer. 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 20th 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. 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 two different kinds of human beings exist (male and female), and 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 showcases and underscores the attributes of the hero, in Lot's case that would be 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 Ammonites). This is an etiology. It simply tells a story that describes the fact that the Israelites perceive the Moabites and the Ammonites as sexually dissolute and low lives. It's myth, it didn't really happen, but it explains why the Israelites think so poorly of the Moabites and Ammonites.

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 Ammonites. 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 made up of 4 etiological myths: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood, and the Tower of Babel. They are describing something that exists - human nature and the human predicament. The second are the Narrative or Legendary Histories of Genesis 12 through 50. These histories are passed generation to generation and are deemed to be historical, but not *proven* historically.

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 or earth is Adama, so the word Adam really just means dustling or earthling. 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 breathed life into him (another example of 'J's primitivism).

God planted a garden in Eden, in the east (whenever the bible refers to the east, it is referring to Mesopotamia) 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. This is a tree whose fruit entitles people to independent moral knowledge. The only place in the world you find this kind of tree in mythology is in the Bible. The bible says, unequivocally, that humankind is not entitled to moral knowledge apart from God. There are no competing opinions acceptable by the bible, only God's is valid. Humankind may not decide for itself what is good and evil. 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. The serpent asks Eve if she can eat anything she wants, and Eve explains that God told them they could eat anything except the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil or else they would die. So the serpent said to them (and this is a very important sentence), "You will not die. You will instead be like God and be entitled to know good and evil apart from God." But the crux of all this is that the serpent was tempting her with something she already wanted. You don't tempt people by saying, "Here, I want you to eat these calf brains." Nobody wants that. He tempted her with something she was already thinking she wanted. She wants to be like God, she wants to be a god unto herself, and decide what is good and evil by herself. So this story is so important because it is describing human nature. And this text doesn't use this word, but in a few texts forward it's going to use this word: Human nature in wanting to be like God, in wanting to have entitlement to good and evil, human nature is sinful (in a state of self-imposed alienation from God due to our rebellion against him), and the way sin is described here is PRIDE.

So Eve takes the bait and both Adam and Eve eat 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? It's telling us that in pride's enactment humankind receives knowledge of its guilt and subsequent shame. There's a loss of innocence now, there was no avoiding now this knowledge of their own guilt and shame.

So then God is walking around the garden that evening for the breeze (more primitivism), and Adam and Eve are hiding from him so he knows something's up, and he calls them and says, "Where are you, I heard you out here." They come out and tell him the truth, but now they're resourceful enough to try and shift the blame to someone else, and needless to say God's irritated. As a result they received their 4 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 and be an enemy to humankind. Next, Eve was given much more pain in life (childbirth, etc). 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.

God continues to take care of people though, making clothes for them and what not, even though he's so irritated, but all that's about to change.

If you look in Genesis 3:22, we read the sentence, “Man has become like one of us.” Now who is a monotheistic God talking to in this section? The bible affirms, literally, that there’s an angelic realm. So there’s God at the top, there’s the angelic realm that has humanoid angels and then animal angels (the seraphim and cherubim), and there’s the created order (mankind). So God is conferring with his heavenly court, they see him face to face, and now they have this nightmare creature (us), saying “Oh I know what’s right and wrong”, and what do they do about it? They can’t let this nightmare creature live forever so God drives them out of the garden of Eden to the east, and sits a cherubim (an angelic animal) with a flaming sword at the entrance to the garden to keep mankind from coming back in. The bible despises both nostalgia and utopianism. There’s no turning back. There’s no golden past, and there’s no golden future.

So now we can tackle Cain and Abel. Turn to Genesis 4. The bible tells us that Adam ‘knew’ his wife, which in ancient Hebrew meant something a little more than just having knowledge of. In ancient Hebrew knowledge was not centered in the brain, but in the heart, which is why ‘knowing’ your wife was another way of saying they had sex, and the result of course was offspring. The first two being Cain and then Abel. Abel was a keeper of sheep, a shepherd, and Cain was a tiller of the ground. And over the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel is a shepherd so he’s going to bring for his offering the firstling of his flock. And here we read that the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So why not? It’s not as though he’s playing favorites. The text hasn’t made clear yet, but what it’s about to make clear is that Cain made a slipshod offering. Cain got very angry, and his face fell. Here the Lord asked him why he was angry, and said to Cain, “If you do well you’ll be accepted, but if you don’t do well, sin is lurking at your door.” God is telling him to get his act together, make a decent offering and don’t act out of the emotion he’s feeling at being rejected. Let’s see what he does.

Cain says to his brother, “Let’s go out into the field.” When they got out in the field Cain rose up and slew his brother. Next thing you know the Lord is asking Cain what happened to his brother, and Cain decides to be mouthy and disrespectful and say, “I don’t know, am I my brother’s keeper?” Now he’s just killed his brother and then decided to mouth off to the Lord, so this is pretty consistent with a guy who’s going to make a bad offering. You really get to see some of this guy’s character. God says Abel’s blood is calling out to him from the ground, and so he throws down an additional curse onto Cain. He says he’s cursed from the ground that has opened up to take his brother’s blood. Now he’s not even going to be as lucky as Adam was, to just have to work the ground to get his food, but for Cain the ground isn’t even going to yield for him. He’s going to have to be a fugitive and wanderer on the earth. On top of that, when Cain is concerned that everyone will try to kill him because he’s going to be a solitary guy wandering the earth, God makes it so no one will kill him. He’s just going to have to live with what he did.

So this story is telling us that alienation from God breeds alienation within humankind, which breeds disunity unto violence. And disunity and violence breeds greater alienation from God, which breeds more alienation within humankind, which leads to more disunity and violence, and so on in a sort of spiraling vortex. And the vortex keeps growing until we get to Noah and then all of a sudden we crash and burn. Which is not a kid’s story.

Turn to Genesis 6:5, Noah. In 6:5 the bible says, “The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually.” This is not a positive assessment of the human predicament. The Lord was sorry that he had ever made humankind in the first place, and decided that he would blot out all the human beings from the earth. The only person he still had regard for was Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation (that is before he became an alcoholic, so Noah doesn’t end up well, but at this point he’s blameless). We also meet Noah’s three sons here as well.

God tells Noah that he's done taking care of humankind now, because they are so filled with violence, and he's going to get rid of everything on the earth except Noah, his family and two of every animal. He tells Noah to make himself an ark of gopherwood. Nobody knows what gopherwood is, the closest thing translators could guess is that he meant cypress wood. In the original Hebrew there are no vowels, so the text looks like this: G Ph R. Since there's no vowels, and we are not aware of any wood that existed around this time that would have a G, Ph and R in it, linguists just had to guess that it is gopherwood, and assume that gopherwood is similar to cypress. Could have been Giphire Wood, or guphar wood, or really anything. It's anybody's guess. But the point is this, Noah was to make himself an ark of some kind of wood, and make rooms in the ark for his family and the animals. He gave him measurements in cubits (a cubit was the distance from your elbow to the top of your hand) of how big to make the ark.

Then God told him he was going to destroy all created life on the earth. But then God tells him that he's going to establish a covenant with Noah. This is the first time the word covenant is used in the bible. The first covenant is not made to the people of Israel, but to Noah as representative of all humankind. Now he hasn't established the covenant yet, he's just saying that if Noah makes that ark he intends to establish a covenant with him.

Then we read that the flood comes along. Read in Genesis 8:21... we'll read up to the punchline, the cliff hanger, and then we'll pick up from there next time. In Gen 7:11 we read that the fountains of the deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. So these people were not getting out alive. These waters were coming up from below and down from the heavens. It fell for forty days and forty nights, which is just a figurative reference to a very long time. Why was Jesus in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights? The bible likes the number forty as a measurement of something that takes a very long time. So just like we use numbers figuratively (as in "I told you a million times to put your bike away"), so does the bible. Forty days is the bible's favorite number for a good long time. The waters swelled so mightily on the earth that it covered the mountains, and all the flesh that had moved on the earth died. Everything.

In due time, God remembered Noah and he made the waters stop. Here we read about the birds that Noah sent out after the rains stopped. First a raven, which flew around and saw nowhere to land and so came back. Then Noah sent a dove, which had the same problem, it found nowhere to land and had to come back. Then he waited a while and sent another Dove out, and this time the dove came back with an olive branch in its beak. This is where we get the idea of extending an olive branch as a kind of peace offering. In due time then the waters receded enough for the boat to come aground and for Noah and his family to come out. They came onto the dry land and the first thing Noah did was to build an altar, and offered burnt offering to God there. The thought there was that the smoke would go up and the smell would wake God up and draw some favor from him. So when the Lord smelled the pleasing odor (more primitivism), he said he would never again curse human kind. And there's where we will end it, and I'll tell you about this cliff hanger when we get together next time.