

Folk-tales in Old Testament Narrative

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IN dealing with the problems of Old Testament narrative, scholarship must humble itself to the study of popular story-telling, and must make this study as thorough and scholarly as is the study of language and history. I wish here to touch only upon one phase of this subject, that which has to do with the forms of popular tales.

Ancient popular stories divide themselves, according to form, into two classes: those in folk-tale form, and those in what, for want of a better term, I shall call literary form. By folk-tale form, I mean the form which a story has taken as it has been told and retold by people not professional story-tellers, about the campfires, at the close of the day in the villages, and, most notably, to children.

By literary form, I mean the form which a story has taken in the hands of a more or less adept and specialized literary artist. The tales of the professional story-teller in the East are usually in the literary form. Those told by the mother to the children, most often in the folk-tale form.

The folk-tales not only appeal to the interest of the listener, — the story in literary form does that also, — but are adapted to the capacity for memory and narration possessed by the average householder of the humbler classes. Herein lies the possibility of making tests which shall sometimes determine with measurable certainty the origin of particular tales in any body of ancient narrative. Doubtless all tales cannot be thus distributed to their sources, since the distinguishing marks are not always visible, but there is reason to hope that the origin of some tales can be at least presumptively fixed.

Old Testament narration seems in the main to have under-

gone, before it was written, a transition into more or less complete literary form, though one may often suspect even in such cases a folk-tale basis. The method of compilation used by the writers of most Old Testament narration would itself lead one to suppose that examples of the folk-tale might be embodied among traditions cast in a more formal literary mold.

Tests by which such folk-tales can be distinguished must be formed in the light of two facts: (1) the natural limitations of narration among people of average ability in a community of primitive culture; (2) the forms which known folk-tales originating under such circumstances actually take.

The tests will be such as the following:

1. The story is short. Such extended tales as that of Joseph seem to belong rather to the literary than to the folk-tale form, though doubtless resting back upon folk-tale elements. They are comparable to the long tales of the Arabian Nights, which bear marks of literary embellishment.

2. The folk-tale often depends for its power to capture the memory upon some pat saying or unexpected situation, which gives the proper snap to the whole story. Often this sentence or situation is all there is to the story, the rest of the tale being merely background for this one element. The story of David's capture of Jerusalem, with its saying about the blind and the lame, may be an illustration. So, of a little fuller sort, is the story of Solomon's judgment, 1 K. 3 16-27, which belongs to a class of folk-tales very widespread and very popular both in the Arabic east and in India.

3. The folk-tale often has a non-moral character. The point of it is often the trickery by which a weak or despised character obtains an advantage, as in the case of the hare and the hedgehog. The folk-tale proper seldom teaches a moral lesson. Children and other unsophisticated people have always objected to "*Haec fabula docet.*" Most of the stories in the Old Testament which seem to fall into the class of folk-tales are not in themselves moral. Some of them are even the opposite of moral.

4. Folk-tales are very apt to become, if they are not so in their origin, hero tales. Examples are the great mass of Alexander and Solomon tales in the Moslem east, and the Rama tales of India. In the Old Testament we find evidences of such hero tales attached to the names of Abraham, David, Samuel, Solomon.

5. The folk-tale often embodies repetition of internal details and situations. So Cinderella receives a beautiful dress and goes to the ball and dances for three successive nights, the story of each night being told in almost the same words. Grimm's *Märchen* abound in illustrations. So do the genuine folk-tales of the east, where often a situation is repeated over and over in almost the same words.

The reason for this very common characteristic seems to lie in the desirability of sustaining and increasing the interest by delaying the crisis. But the meager mental abilities of both narrator and listener are more easily met if the crisis is delayed by repetition rather than by new matter, with its demand for variety in narration and for the grasp of a number of details by the listener. If you will listen to children of average imagination telling stories to each other, you will usually notice the same characteristics.

In the rest of this article it is proposed to apply these tests to certain narratives which may perhaps be in the folk-tale form.

1 Sam. 3 2-18. The story of the boy Samuel in the temple.

The story is short, has attached itself to a hero of national tradition, and contains repetition. It bears definitely the marks of the folk-tale. The story seems to be edited into the narrative by the prophetic writers. The message to Samuel (vss. 11-14) is plainly a prophetic sermon and bears no relation to the folk-tale style. It is a common suggestion that part or all of these verses lack connection with the story. Budde would excise vss. 11-14, Wellhausen and Nowack, vs. 12. Perhaps the solution may be, not in a later addition to the prophetic writing, but in an addition of the prophetic writer to the folk-tale which he borrowed. Without the prophetic sermon the story becomes character-

istically non-moral. It is fruitless to conjecture exactly what the tale had in place of the prophetic message, but one may surmise that it was an oracle of disaster to Eli or to Shiloh. Following such an oracle, the submissive word of Eli, "It is Jahveh, let him do what is good in his eyes," forms a very fitting climax of the common folk-tale style. In the story as it now stands, following the sharp condemnation of the prophetic message, it is a weak ending. It shows submission instead of penitence, fatalism instead of moral sensitiveness.

When one remembers how much of the popular estimate of Eli has been based on this inept ending of a prophetic story, it is worth while to call attention to the fact that if we can separate the folk-tale from its prophetic surroundings, we shall give a more virile aspect to this somewhat shadowy character in Hebrew tradition.

1 Sam. 16 1-13. The story of the anointing of David presents another case of folk-tale repetition. The story is prolonged, the imagination held and the interest sustained by the introduction, one after the other, of David's brothers, and each repetition is in almost the same words. The final choice of the boy who had been left among the sheep is heightened by the dramatic contrast with his brothers of beautiful countenance and great stature. One sees the popular element also in the fact that the neglected member of the family proves to be the favorite of fortune—a very common element in the folk-tale, always popular.

That the narrative stands isolated from its context is held by most commentators. It is usually assigned to a late redactor (see Budde, Kittel, Wellhausen, Nowack. H. P. Smith ascribes it to the Sm. writer). The folk-tale form in itself argues neither for nor against the late date. If the date is late, it does, however, offer a reason for its insertion. The folk-tale form shows it to be a popular and widely known story. Such tales are, among simple people, considered to be matters of common knowledge and taken as unquestionably true, like the story of Tell and the apple and of Washington and the hatchet. If a written collection

of tales about a popular hero is still open to any sort of interpolation, such a story will sooner or later find its way into the book.

The story shows the characteristic non-moral trickery of folk-tales. Samuel fears the wrath of Saul and gets into contact with the family of Jesse by trickery. The moral element is only introduced in the oracle about Eliab — "Jahveh seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh upon the eyes, but God looketh upon the heart." Such didacticism is hardly natural in the genuine folk-tale, and moreover blocks the rapidity of movement in the story. It is harmonious with prophetic thought, and one suspects that here the editor is reading a moral into the original tale. The original tale without this suggests no moral. It is only that the boy comes out ahead of his big brothers, and that is quite enough for the folk-tale.

The editors have also supplied a connection between this tale and what precedes, but it is of the slightest — perhaps only the suggestion that Samuel is mourning for Saul. At the end there is also a very slight editorial connection with what follows; for surely the statement that "the Spirit of Jahveh came mightily upon David from that day forward" looks toward the statement in the next verse that "the Spirit of Jahveh had departed from Saul." With the exception of these three minor additions, we seem to have a complete folk-tale narrative. It ends: "And Jahveh said, Arise, anoint him, for this is he. Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brethren. And Samuel rose up and went to Ramah."

Gen. 18 17-33. The story of Abraham's pleading for Sodom is also in folk-tale form. It is usually separated from its context as containing elements incongruous with the J story in which it stands (see Carpenter and Battersby; Bacon, *Genesis of Genesis*; Cornill; Kuenen; Wellhausen; Driver, *Genesis*, etc.). Removing vs. 22, which serves to make connection with the preceding narrative, the tale is independent and complete in itself. The men who visited Abraham then disappear, and the story is a colloquy between Jahveh and

Abraham. Its primary motive is that of the typical hero folk-tale, to exalt a national hero. This it does by the decision of Jahveh to take Abraham into divine confidence, and by his patient yielding to Abraham's successive requests. Its secondary motive is the wickedness of Sodom. Both motives are emphasized and dramatized by the reiterated prayer of Abraham in almost the same words at each repetition. Late prophetic phraseology at the beginning, with the formal national emphasis in vs. 18-19, seem to be due to prophetic editing. Vs. 17 might be a part of the folk-tale, "and Jahveh said, Shall I hide from Abraham that which I will do?" Then follow with vs. 20, "And Jahveh said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorah is great, . . . I will go down now and see whether they have done according to the cry of it," vs. 23, "And Abraham drew near and said, Wilt thou destroy the righteous with the wicked?" and the colloquy begins.

Cut it off from the theological concepts as to Jahveh which gather about it in our minds, isolate it from the prophetic teaching in which it is set, regard it simply as a story told in Palestinian villages overlooking the Jordan chasm, and it illustrates the greatness of Abraham rather than the mercy of God. The story is non-moral. Doubtless the God is great, for he can destroy whole cities; but what of the ethical quality of a God who lays aside punishment so easily at the request of a human favorite? This is hardly the God of the prophets, but — and here is the point — it is the God of the folk-tale, from ancient India to Mediæval Europe. The primary purpose of the tale is not to teach about God, but to tell a story about a hero, who was so great that he could get what he wanted from God himself. As prophetic teaching, it would be immoral. As a folk-tale it is not. It is only non-moral.

An interesting example of repetition is the prologue of Job. The double scene in heaven, followed by a double scene on earth; the repetition in almost the same language of the colloquy of the Satan and Jahveh, and of the message of destruction to Job, along with the brevity and rapid move-

ment of the story — all these are very suggestive of the folk-tale. One questions whether this may not throw some light on the oft-mooted problem of the tradition lying back of this book. That some tradition did lie back of it, the analogy of Hebrew literature and the mention of Job in Ezekiel suffice to make probable if not certain. A frequent suggestion has been that the prologue and epilogue constituted a “book of popular character, which in simple, popular fashion gave an account of the pious Job” (Cornill, *Introduction to O. T.*). So Duhm regards the prologue and epilogue as a “*Volksbuch*.” Macdonald (*JBL*, XIV. pp. 68–71) suggests a legend as the basis of the story. May we not raise the question whether this legend was not in folk-tale form? If so, it would seem probable that the tale is given almost, if not quite, complete in the prologue, and possibly in the epilogue. The prologue presents the characteristic repetition, compactness, and brevity of folk-tales. The epilogue does not exhibit folk-tale elements so plainly. Whether the epilogue is part of the original tale or not, the poem certainly displaces the heart of the story. Some supreme expression of piety must have formed the climax of the tale, some expression to which the words, “In all this Job sinned not with his lips,” look forward. We can only surmise that it must have been a far cruder and more naïve form of piety than is the subtile play of doubt and faith which the genius of the poet has substituted for it. That the Satan is a figure which can only belong to a comparatively late date, together with other evidences of a late date, does not militate against the folk-tale form. Not all folk-tales are old. The older strata of tales are very persistent, but to them are constantly being added new tales, or new elements in the old tales.

The above are only suggestions of the application of the folk-tale tests in Old Testament narration. Whether these particular narratives conform to the tests is of less importance than whether the tests themselves can be applied to any narratives. The discrimination which they suggest is of value in the following ways :

1. By it we can push our way back one step nearer the birth of a story.

2. We can sometimes differentiate between a folk-tale and its literary setting and so add to our means of the discrimination of sources.

3. We can get the basis for a further principle of literary and historical judgment; for we shall not judge a folk-tale in all respects as we do a story in literary form.