

The Earliest Hebrew Writings and their Religious Value

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HISTORICAL writing began in Judah at or shortly after the time of David, with the story of the life of that monarch. This was followed by the history of Saul, and this by the story of the period preceding, until at length the history was carried back to the creation. At the same time it was continued forward to cover the reigns of succeeding monarchs, but after Solomon in the form of brief, dry chronicles. Later a similar work was composed in Israel. When Amos and Hosea prophesied, at or before the middle of the eighth century, these two collections were in existence, and considerable portions of them, imbedded in the later historical works, the Pentateuch, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, have come down to us.¹ A study of these early compositions shows us the development in some circles of a higher, more spiritual life than that which was expressed either in the ritual or in that earlier prophetic movement of the *nebiim*. The latter movement, in fact, while it influenced the thought of the writers or compilers of these collections, was in general the medium through which certain of the doctrines or ideas of these higher thinkers were communicated to or made effective on the mass of the people, and the people prepared for that higher movement based on these ideas which commences with Amos and Hosea.

¹ They are known in the critical analysis as J and E, and earlier and later strata are often designated by further differentiations as J¹, J², etc. They may be read separately in such works as Addis' *The Documents of the Hexateuch*, Bacon's *Genesis, Exodus*, and the different volumes of the Polychrome Bible. The analysis will be found in Driver's or any good modern introduction, or in modern commentaries on the separate books.

For the story of creation, the development of civilization, agriculture, and the arts, the division of men into different nations with different languages, and the like, the original material of the Judæan story is evidently the myths, legends, and traditions which the Israelites found among the Canaanites. These the Canaanites on their part had borrowed from the Babylonians, probably during the long period of Babylonian domination of the West Land, and the old Babylonian material is clearly recognizable in the Hebrew narratives. So it is eastward in Eden that man takes his origin; it is at Babel that the speech of man is confounded and different languages originate. The connection of the Hebrew flood story with the Babylonian is clear to the most casual observer, and it is plain that the Hebrew idea of the heavens and the water above and the water below the earth are identical with the Babylonian; the sacred tree and the tempting serpent appear in old Babylonian art, and the man who must consort with the beasts before a helpmeet is found for him recalls Eabani, the primitive man in the Gilgamesh epic, who satisfies his passion with the beasts until Ishtar sends him a woman from her devotees.² The comparison of this last-named story with the sweet, wholesome, and beautiful picture of the relation of man and woman in the Judæan narrative brings out a characteristic feature of Hebrew religion as here represented, its freedom from the sexual idea. In Babylonia, Phœnicia, Syria, and Palestine great importance attached to Ishtar or Astarte, in whose cult prostitution played so prominent a part, the worship in kind of that great mysterious life-bearing power, to which is attributable so much of the joy and happiness, as well as the sorrow and pain of life, and without which the world must speedily come to an end. In the Hebrew there is no Ishtar; her life-giving functions have been assigned to Yahaweh, and the sex feature has been eliminated. In the story of the temptation we find a view of the carnal relation of man and woman which seems in

² Gen. 2 18 ff. Cf. Jastrow, *AJSL*, xv. 207 f.; Barton, *Sketch of Semitic Origins*, 43; Peters, *Early Hebrew Story*.

some regards almost monastic. It is through this relation that the eyes of man and woman are opened, the sense of decency in clothing is developed, innocence is lost. God is in some way offended, man estranged from Him, banished from His presence,³ and condemned to a life of toil and pain. It is true that we have passages, like the story of Judah and Tamar,⁴ in which the consecrated harlot or *kedesha* appears. This particular story belongs not to that part of the narrative derived from the ancient myths, but to the folklore history of the tribes, and narrates the mixture by intermarriage of Judah with the native Canaanites. It was in precisely such intermarriage, with its resultant combination of gods and cults, that the danger of Israel lay. The religion of Israel was affected by its contact with Canaan in this regard, and certain immoral practices were introduced in the cult of the temples and high places. This is testified to not only by such stories as that of Judah and Tamar, but also by categorical statements of both the Judæan and Israelite⁵ narratives; but it is clear that this did not meet the approval of the better minds, and that such practices were never regarded by them as an integral part of their religion. It is presumably true that certain ideas and practices, not considered immoral at the outset but so considered later, were glossed and eliminated by succeeding writers; but, making all due allowance for this, it remains a fact of the greatest significance that the thinkers of Israel, having such myths as their material and surrounded by such licentious practices, sanctioned and required by religion, should have developed a product so spiritual and so void of immorality.

It is noteworthy also that these myths, which in their original form are grossly polytheistic, become in Hebrew monolatrous and almost monotheistic. It is Yahaweh who

³ Cf. with this the rule which forbade a man to partake of holy things within a certain period after cohabitation, 1 Sam. 21 & f.

⁴ Gen. 38 & f. Evidently certain usages, immoral in their nature and inconsistent with the general principles represented by J, were accepted as facts, after a manner familiar in the history of all religions.

⁵ Cf. Judges 2, 3 & f.

creates earth and heaven, man and the beasts, who drives man out of Eden because of his transgression, and sends a flood to drown men because they were become corrupt. We find a few slight indications of the polytheistic sources from which the material was drawn, such as the remnant of a story about the offspring of the "sons of god" (or the gods) and the "daughters of men";⁶ but such remnants only make more clear the monotheistic character of the Hebrew version of those ancient myths and legends, and emphasize the fact that the Hebrews deliberately blotted out all other gods, recognizing no god besides Yahaweh.

There is also in general a strong moral element pervading the Hebrew tales. So in the flood story it is the wickedness of man which causes Yahaweh to send destruction upon him, not, as in the Babylonian tale, the mere caprice of the gods or a sort of fate which compels the gods themselves. There is a moral purpose in Yahaweh's government of the universe and His dealings with men. This is not, it is true, carried out consistently, and in some cases the motives ascribed to Yahaweh are those of caprice or favoritism or jealousy. It is the smell of the sweet fragrance of sacrifice, so long absent, which leads Yahaweh to say in His heart that He will not again curse the ground because of man.⁷ It is jealousy of man's power and independence which causes Yahaweh to drive him out of Eden⁸ and to confound his speech at Babel.⁹ But while we have such representations, similar in principle to the representations of the sources from which the compilers of these tales drew their material, yet in general Yahaweh is represented as acting on moral grounds, and as showing loving-kindness and mercy toward men.

The stories of the patriarchs, beginning with the twelfth chapter of Genesis, are of a different origin. One important element is local folklore, and especially the tales of the local sanctuaries which were adopted by the Hebrews. The story of Abraham in the Judæan narrative connects itself with Mamre or Hebron and with a tomb or *siara* of Abraham at that place. It is evident from the story that the sanctity of

⁶ Gen. 6:2 ff.⁷ Gen. 8:21.⁸ Gen. 8:22.⁹ Gen. 11:1.

this place antedated the Hebrew occupation. This sanctity was taken over by the Hebrews, with its local traditions. With these local traditions were combined by the Hebrews their own ethnic traditions, so that Abraham becomes in a sense the impersonation of the Hebrew people. Even the great historical event of the deliverance of the Hebrews from Egypt appears in the Judæan narrative of Abraham. The Israelite or Elohist narrative connects the name of Abraham with the region further southward about Beer-sheba, a favorite place of pilgrimage for Israelites. With this latter region, and especially with the shrine of Beer-sheba, were connected also the name and the traditions of Isaac.

The name of Jacob was associated with the ancient sanctuary of Bethel. This was conquered by the Israelites, who, according to the early and evidently historical narrative in Judges,¹⁰ destroyed the inhabitants. But clearly, also, they took over the ancient sanctuary, so that in the same narrative we read that "the messenger of Yahaweh went up from Gilgal to Bethel (so LXX); and they offered sacrifice there to Yahaweh."¹¹ With the sanctity of the place were taken over its cult and its traditions, the great *mazzebah* which Jacob set up, and the natural high place, rising like a *ziggurat* heavenward. With the local traditions of the ancient shrine were combined the folklore of Israel, and the native Jacob was identified with the conquering Israel. As in the case of Abraham, so here, also, the descent into and the return from Egypt were woven into the story, until the folklore connected primarily with the sanctuary of Bethel became a compendium of the national legends and traditions.

Somewhat similarly, with Shechem was associated Joseph, who becomes the parent of the great central tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim.

As these stories have come down to us, they have been brought into connection with one another and with the worship of Yahaweh. He has displaced the local divinities, and these are His shrines consecrated by those honored

¹⁰ 1 22 ff.

¹¹ Judges 2 1. 5.

fathers, the patriarchs, who, after a method common in other religions, have been brought into a genealogical relation.

Other shrines and cults were more local in their influence. In the story of Jephthah¹² an event of Israel's history has been brought into connection with a cult in Gilead in which the maidens lamented "four days in the year for the daughter of Jephthah." In the story of Samson¹³ we have, apparently, combined with historical events of a struggle with the Philistines, mythical elements connected with the neighboring Beth-Shemesh, the sanctuary of the sun-god Shamash. Here we have also a strange and primitive combination of the Nazarite and the consecrated harlot. Both of these stories, like that of Judah and Tamar, already noticed, bring us into connection with the obscene sexual worship evidently so common in Canaan. It is probable that other stories of a similar character existed in the earlier period, and that those tales which have come down to us contained gross elements which were later glossed over or eliminated. Considering their origin in the cult and myths of the native shrines, this is at least what we should expect. The remarkable fact is that those grosser elements should have been so effaced, and at such an early date that the earliest Judæan and Israelite collections contain only such feeble traces of them as are noted above.¹⁴

The lore of most of the sanctuaries perished, or was preserved in small fragments mingled with later history or with the great stream of popular story which connected itself with Bethel, Mamre, and Beersheba. So popular, on the other hand, did the tales connected with these sanctuaries become, that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob assumed a national existence, dissociated to some extent from locality,

¹² Judges 11.

¹³ Judges 13-16.

¹⁴ It is worthy of note that the stories of Jephthah and Samson belong to the concubine tribes of Gad and Dan, which we have reason to suppose were of Canaanite origin. These stories may, therefore, be connected with their ancient worship. In the case of Dan, the myths or legends of Beth-Shemesh are mingled with the historical struggle against the Philistines. All the more remarkable becomes the monotheistic transformation which they underwent in the crucible of Israelite folklore.

and connected with the people as a whole. These stories, as their content shows, the historical references interwoven with the earlier myths and legends, had assumed form before the time of David, as a part of the lore of the nation. They were utilized later as history by the early historical writers of Judah and Israel, and underwent more or less modification, and probably also spiritualization, at the hands of those writers. But the gist and the bent of these tales were presumably settled long before the time of those writers or compilers.

As a whole, this patriarchal lore presents a pure and spiritual, if naïve and childlike, conception of mingled religion and morality. Especially is this the case with the story of Abraham, whose character is depicted as wonderfully grand and beautiful. He becomes a type of that unworldly goodness, rooted in faith, which the later prophets preach. At the divine command he leaves his home to seek a foreign land which God promises to give him. His wife is barren, and God promises that his seed shall inherit the land. At God's command he prepares to offer up his only son. He goes through life listening for the true teaching of God, which is not shut up in formal precepts.¹⁵ He is hospitable, merciful, compassionate.

The story of Jacob does not present so high a model, and that of Isaac is shadowy compared with the others, but all alike exhibit a clear conception of the difference between Israel and other peoples, more particularly the Canaanites, and Israel's racial and religious antagonism to the latter. Israel is the people of Yahaweh, whom He has chosen from among all peoples, and to whom He has given the land of Canaan. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are their ancestors, strangers to the Canaanites among whom they dwelt, to whom Yahaweh promised children and heirs, which they are. Their relation to Yahaweh is a moral one, or rather He is a moral God who abhors and punishes sensuality and crime. So he destroys Sodom and Gomorrah with fire and brimstone because of their unnatural lust, from which, as it would seem, Moab and

¹⁵ Cf. art. "Abraham," *Encyclopædia Biblica*.

Ammon as well as Israel were free. How prevalent this unnatural lust was, and that it was sanctioned by religion, is made clear by the later history and legislation of Israel. How abhorrent it was to the better consciences in Israel, and yet how great a danger to the people, is shown not only by the story of Sodom and Gomorrah,¹⁶ but also by the ancient and gruesome story of the crime of Gibeah,¹⁷ which is evidently in its main features historical. Another of the abominations not only of Canaan, but also of the surrounding nations, was the sacrifice of first-born sons. This is condemned in the story of Abraham's would-be offering of Isaac, which recognizes the right of God to the first-born, for whom, by substitution, is to be sacrificed a ram.¹⁸

The deliverance from Egypt, the life in the wilderness, and the formation of the people of Israel under the law of Yahaweh, constitute a cycle of traditions of another character, entirely Israelite in origin, centering around the person of Moses. These traditions evidently originated among the people before the time of the Judæan and Israelite collectors, by whom they were gathered together and incorporated in their histories. In these traditions Moses is represented as the founder of the nation and religion of Israel, the interpreter and mediator to it of the will of Yahaweh, who gives it a law from Yahaweh. Accordingly the laws which existed at the time when these collections were made were ascribed to Moses, who was supposed to have obtained them from Yahaweh. This cycle of traditions also makes clear the fact that the god of Israel was one, and that Israel might have no god besides Him, for He was a jealous god, who would brook no rival. Israel was a peculiar people, separated from the nations, holy to Yahaweh. Yahaweh fought for them and gave them the lands of the Canaanites for an heritage.

Closely connected with this cycle are the traditions of the conquest of Canaan, which reveal the same conception of

¹⁶ Gen. 19.

¹⁷ Judges 19-21.

¹⁸ Gen. 22. This appears in the Israelite narrative (E) and seems to be a product of the period of reflection when these stories were collected rather than a part of the original Hebrew lore.

Israel's relation to Yahaweh and to the nations of Canaan. Connection and intermarriage with them is forbidden, since it involves acceptance of their gods. The worship of those gods was connected with immoral practices abhorrent to the religion of Yahaweh.¹⁹ Sometimes, however, we find that some foreign or even immoral practice has been condoned and has lingered on, its existence being accounted for and excused by some story like that of Rahab, the harlot, of Jericho, which may have an historical foundation.²⁰

Following this we have a cycle of local and tribal traditions of the vicissitudes of the occupation of the land, the struggles with Canaanites, Moabites, Ammonites, Midianites, and Philistines, material contained in our present book of Judges, with part of Samuel. These traditions are diverse in character, and some of them have connections with local shrines and cults, as already pointed out.

With the story of Saul we begin to find ourselves on more strictly historical ground, the events narrated being closer to the time of their recording and the conditions favoring a more accurate preservation of the facts. The story of David was written almost, if not quite, by contemporaries, and from that time on we are dealing in general with history. But throughout all this mass of diverse material, Babylonian-Canaanite myths and legends, the legends of the sanctuaries, tribal and clan legends and traditions, the national traditions of Israel, the stories of its legendary and traditional heroes, its patriotic and folk songs, the records of court chroniclers and historiographers, and the stories of the prophets, runs the same monotheistic strain, the same pure, moral tone, distinct from and antagonistic to the surrounding polytheism and religious licentiousness.

The picture of Yahaweh's religion and of Israel's relation to Yahaweh which we obtain from these earliest writings, may be roughly described as follows: Yahaweh is a person like man, only wiser and stronger. He walks in the garden of Eden in the cool of the day, He comes down to see what man is doing at Babel, He visits Abraham in human form.

¹⁹ Cf. Num. 25 1 ff.

²⁰ Josh. 2, 6 ff. .

But in the later thought represented in these writings we find a movement away from this naïve anthropomorphism. He reveals Himself through His messenger, He shows Himself in the pillar of cloud and fire, man cannot see Him face to face, but only His hinder parts, and we even reach in the story of Elijah the thought of His manifestation, not in the cloud or the fire or the earthquake, but in the still, small voice which speaks in the heart of man. He is localized, having His abode in Horeb or Sinai, in the land of Canaan, which becomes His land, or more peculiarly in this or that sacred spot or object in which He manifests Himself. He dwells in the Ark, in the cherubim. He is worshiped in the stones or pillars at or on which one pours out the blood or the oil, which one touches or strokes. He is summoned by the smell of the sacrifice, and placated and satisfied by it; He consumes it by His fire. But withal He dwells unseen, in a region and a wise beyond the ken of man, in thick darkness. This is all very crude, unphilosophical, and inconsistent; and it is inconsistent partly because it represents different stages in the development of the thought of God, partly because it is unphilosophical. They knew Yahaweh only as they came in contact with Him; beyond that, not being speculative, they did not go.

Yahaweh is clearly marked off from the forces of nature, which He controls. He is a jealous God, not tolerating any God beside Himself, and therefore all supernatural agencies and effects in His land are centered in Him. He sends alike drought and rain, famine and plenty, sickness and health. Greatly to be feared is His wrath, which He displays especially towards Israel's foes, but at times also towards Israel itself when it violates His honor and sanctity. While in general Yahaweh has an ethical character and bestows His bounties or displays His wrath for moral causes, yet this is by no means always the case. The causes of His wrath are at times unethical, due to a transgression of His prerogative in some possibly unknown manner; and because His wrath is thus at times unethical, therefore also it must be satisfied by unethical and savage means, such as the sacrificial or semi-

sacrificial death of innocent offenders, or members of the family of the offender.²¹

But it was not in general the wrath of God which was in the mind of the Israelites in connection with God. In its outward expression, in its feasts and its friendly relations with its God, the religion of Israel was glad and joyful, and a similar conception of the relations of Israel to Yahaweh shows itself in these writings. The Israelite was proud of his God, and of His unique power and character. He delights to tell of the victories of his God over the gods of other peoples. In Egypt his God enables Moses to overmatch the sorcery of the Egyptians. But in Israel's relation to Him there is no sorcery nor magic art; in fact, there is a remarkable freedom from superstition. This and the thought that Yahaweh alone was lord in Canaan led to the condemnation of sorcery and witchcraft, which, nevertheless, continued to be practiced. Clearly the common people believed in the existence of malignant spirits, whom they sought to propitiate in order to avoid their curse and win their favor, and through whom, or the spirits of the dead, they sought to obtain guidance and knowledge of the future. The higher thinkers, although not prepared to dispute the existence of such agencies, nevertheless opposed their recognition and cult as an offense against the jealousy and exclusiveness of Yahaweh, who can and does in fact Himself fill this field, so that the propitiation or consultation of such spirits is really quite unnecessary.

The name Yahaweh, while it plays in these writings a larger part probably than it did in common practice, is not even there the exclusive use. Men might and did call God *baal*, or *melek*, or *adon*, or father, uncle, brother, etc., and in Israel there was more particularly an inclination to use the more general *el*, deity, or *elohim*, God. This renders it easier at the outset to identify the god of Israel with the gods of the various local shrines, the *baal*, or *god*, or *father* of Mamre or Bethel, or whatever else. But gradually more emphasis is

²¹ Cf. the death of Saul's descendants, 2 Sam. 21.

laid upon the special name, Yahaweh, of Israel's God. This development we can trace in these writings.

And now where and under what influences were these writings composed, and what relation did they bear to the actual religion of the people in the pre-prophetic period?

They bore the same relation to the actual religion of the people which the works of a few spiritual-minded thinkers, chiefly monks, bore to the actual religion of the masses of the people in Italy, or France, or Germany, or England in the dark ages. The name of Yahaweh, the tradition of His wonderful deliverances of His people, the belief that Israel was the people of Yahaweh—this the people held fast in the darkest part of the dark ages of Israel. This colored their folklore. There was a remembrance also of Moses, but, one would judge, very little of his teaching or religion, except as that and the rough morality of the nomad combined to protect them somewhat against the licentiousness of the religion of Canaan, or to keep alive a protest against it. A more formal expression of Moses' religious teaching was preserved in the cult connected with the Ark, and probably, also, borrowed from that, in a more or less modified form, in other shrines. A more ethical recollection and understanding of the religion of the great prophet and founder was preserved by a few thinkers. With the development of the national and literary sense this was applied to the folklore which had sprung up or been borrowed in the ways above indicated, with the result of selecting what was best in that, and modifying and spiritualizing it still further.²² The strengthening of the national sense aroused a desire to be informed of the past, and a pride in the nation's origin, achievements, and, as it were, peculiarities, which greatly reënforced the literary and religious motives. With the attempt to study their past comes inevitably a higher appreciation of the ethical aspect of the religion of Moses and a truer perception of the principles of that religion. We have here, in fact, the same sort of result which followed from the attempt among Christians to

²² The Judæan story is on the whole closer to the folklore than the Israelite, which shows more of the reflective and conscious element.

study the life and teachings of Jesus. This affected in its turn the folklore as embodied in the national stories which were being collected, and this in turn, as the culture and the national sense of the people increased, affected a constantly increasing number, but in its entirety always a relatively small minority. Religious practice did not change at all in pace with the changed conceptions of the thinking few who were most deeply affected by the spiritual and ethical literary development, until at last the latter came to be not only far in advance of, but also in opposition to the common expression of religion among the people, and the ideas connected with that expression. This was the condition reached in the prophetic period, but prepared by the school of writers and compilers whose work has come down to us in the fragments of the Judæan and Israelite collections known to the critics in the Hexateuch as J and E, with the kindred material in Judges, Samuel, and Kings.²⁸

²⁸ For parallels to the growth of Hebrew chronicles and legislation in Anglo-Saxon chronicles and laws, cf. Carpenter-Battersby, *Hexateuch*, I. Chap. I.; Peters, *The Old Testament and the New Scholarship*, Chap. V.