The Book of Genesis as a Series of Stories within a Story

Many of the best known stories in Hebrew Scriptures are found in the Book of Genesis, which is itself a story. There is of course the creation story in Genesis 1, which has been quoted by an astronaut in space, inspired Haydn’s masterpiece *The Creation*, and was a major element in the debate over Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. The Garden Story (chapters 2-3), with the creation of the woman and her encounter with the serpent, has been the occasion of comedy as well as serious psychological and theological reflection. The account of Cain and Abel (Chapter 4) informed, among others, John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*. Then there is the narrative of Noah, the flood and the rainbow (Chapters 7-9). The story of the test of Abraham and Isaac (Chapter 22) is well-known as well, and the setting for a number of anti-war pieces. The long story of Joseph (Chapters 37-50) is itself well known, as are some of its parts.

And these are only a sampling of the narratives that fill the book. In addition, and among those that precede any about Abraham and Sarah, there is the marriage of the sons of God with human daughters (Chapter 6); Noah and his sons (Chapter 9), and the tower of Babel (Chapter 11).

In the stories about Abraham and Sarah, there is his passing her off as his sister (Chapter 12 and again in 20), Abram and Lot negotiating over the land (Chapter 13), about the delay of an heir (Chapters 15-21— including stories about Hagar), the renaming of Abram and Sarai and the institution of circumcision (Chapter 17), the visit by the deity in the form of three strangers and the dialogue between Abraham and the LORD (Chapter 18), the Sodom stories (Chapter 19—including Lot and his daughters!), the bargaining for land for Sarah’s burial (Chapter 23), and finding a wife for Isaac (Chapter 24),

There is a cycle of stories about Jacob: the birth of Esau and Jacob and Jacob’s cheating Esau of his birthright (Chapter 25), Isaac passing off Rebekah as his sister (Chapter 26), Jacob and Rebekah deceiving the blind Isaac (Chapter 27), Jacob’s dream at Bethel (Chapter 28), Jacob and Laban his uncle in Haran (Chapters 29-30—including the stories about Rachel and Leah, and the births of their sons), Jacob’s departure from Laban (Chapter 31), the wrestling with “a man” at Penuel (Chapter 32), the meeting with Esau (Chapter 33), the rape of Dinah and its consequences (Chapter 34), and the return to Isaac (Chapter 35).

And these (plus a few others) before we get to the story of Joseph (Chapters 37-50). It is a complete story in itself, but includes a number of narratives within it. These include Joseph’s dreams (Chapter 37), Joseph and his brothers (Chapter 37), Judah and Tamar (Chapter 38), Joseph in Egypt in the house of Potiphar—including the story of Potiphar’s wife and the imprisonment of Joseph (Chapter 39), Joseph’s interpretation of dreams (Chapters 40-41), Joseph and his brothers (Chapters 42-45, 50), Israel in Egypt (Chapters 46-49).

All of these stories, each of which is fascinating in itself, are part of a single story about beginnings (the meaning of the word Genesis)—the beginning of creation and how it narrowed into the beginning of a distinct people, commencing with Abram and Sarai, and promises of offspring, land, and being a blessing. This story, with sorts of twists and turns, ends with this people in Egypt. This allows this whole story to be prelude to the account of the Exodus, told in the subsequent book by that title.

The Book of Genesis within Hebrew Scriptures

The Book of Genesis is the first book of the first section of Hebrew Scriptures (Tanakh), called Torah (the “T” in Tanakh). This section is also referred to as the Law. Since it is made up of five books (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy), it sometimes is called the Five Books of Moses, or the Pentateuch.
In the Torah, there is as much story as law. This is particularly true of Genesis and Exodus. The story is about primeval history (the creation and flood, and such). It is also about the relation of the deity—given various names, but most often “God” or Elohim, or “the LORD” or Yahweh or Adonai—to a special people (from Abraham and Sarah through Moses). In the midst of that story, laws are provided to prescribe proper behavior of the people toward the deity and among themselves. The deity does things and speaks directly with humans (especially Abraham and Moses).

Seen one way, the Book of Genesis is prelude to the Book of Exodus—it delivers Jacob and his people to Egypt, the scene of future slavery and deliverance. The rest of the Torah (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) has limited direct interest in the Book of Genesis. There are passages in Exodus (especially 20.9-11, but also 23.12 and 31.14) that deal with the Sabbath, with reference to Genesis 1. There are references to Abraham and Isaac (18 times), and more to Jacob (32 times)—in the latter case the reference is often to the people rather than the individual. There is mention of the descendents of Esau. There is one allusion to the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah (in Deuteronomy). There is no mention of Adam or Noah, and none of the women. None of its many stories are referred to, though the gift of land to the Moabites and Ammonites as “descendents of Lot” (a reference to the story of Lot and his daughters) is mentioned in Deuteronomy.

Even more so, the stories and characters of the Book of Genesis make scant appearance in the second section of the Hebrew Bible called the Prophets (Nevi'im, the “N” in Tanakh). The first part of this section (the “former prophets”: Joshua through 2 Kings) is more like history than prophecy, and actually functions as a continuation of the narrative that has been running from Genesis through the other books of the Torah. In these books, for example, Abraham is referred to four times and Jacob seven. In the “latter prophets” (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and “the twelve”), there are allusions to creation, with some hint of the account in Genesis 1 (Isaiah 45.7-19, Jeremiah 4.13-28). Jacob is mentioned sixty times and Abraham six. What became of Sodom and Gomorrah is mentioned twice—one in Isaiah and once in Jeremiah. Again, no mention of Adam. There is a reference to the “days of Noah” and the flood in Isaiah 54.9, and a reference to Noah that appears unconnected to Genesis. There is no other reference to any story in Genesis.

In the third section of the Tanakh (the “Writings” or Kethuvim—the “K” in Tanakh), there are allusions to the creation account in Genesis, especially in the Psalms (Psalm 136, but also Psalms 33, 8, 104, and 148) and in Job 38-41. The characters of the Book of Genesis who are mentioned are, once again, Abraham (four times) and Jacob (thirty-four times). These references occur only in the Psalms, but do refer to the promises made by the deity in Genesis. Otherwise, no story of Genesis is referred to.

The Book of Genesis as Interpreted throughout History

What follows is a brief and select history of the interpretation of Genesis.

First, there are the number of books outside the Hebrew Bible or Tanach (books that are in the Roman Catholic Bible and in the Protestant Apocrypha). There we find allusions to the narrative of the creation and garden stories, covering most points of the narrative of Genesis 1-4, in 2 Esdras 3:4-7,10,21,26; 4:30; 6:54-56; 7:11,46-48; Tobit 8:6, the Wisdom of Solomon 2:23 f; 9:2 f; 10:1 f, Ecclesiasticus 15:14; 17:1-4; 25:24; 40:1; 49:16.

Since the consequence of the disobedience of the first couple is not dealt within the Tanach outside of Genesis 3, the treatment in both 2 Esdras and the Wisdom of Solomon is of importance. There we read for the first time that death came upon all men through Adam's sin:

4 “O sovereign Lord, did you not speak at the beginning when you planted the earth—and that without help—and commanded the dust 5 and it gave you Adam, a lifeless body? Yet he was the creation of your hands, and you breathed into him the breath of life, and he was made alive in your presence. 6 And you led him into the garden that your right hand 4—O sovereign Lord, did you not speak at the beginning when you planted the earth—and that without help—and commanded the dust 5 and it gave you Adam, a lifeless body? Yet he was the creation of your hands, and you breathed into him the breath of life, and he
was made alive in your presence. 6 And you led him into the garden that your right hand had planted before the earth appeared. 7 And you laid upon him one commandment of yours; but he transgressed it, and immediately you appointed death for him and for his descendants. (2 Esdras 3.4-7)

The Noah story is alluded to in several books in the Apocrypha (Sirach, 2 Esdras, and 4 Maccabees).

There are over thirty references to Abraham in the Apocrypha, for various purposes. An interesting mention is in 4 Maccabees, where the story of the testing of Abraham is used to praise the courage of Isaac:

7 For it would be shameful if, while an aged man endures such agonies for the sake of religion, you young men were to be terrified by tortures. 18 Remember that it is through God that you have had a share in the world and have enjoyed life, 19 and therefore you ought to endure any suffering for the sake of God. 20 For his sake also our father Abraham was zealous to sacrifice his son Isaac, the ancestor of our nation; and when Isaac saw his father’s hand wielding a knife and descending upon him, he did not cower. (4 Maccabees 16.17ff)

In the New Testament, we find an interpretation of the first disobedience in Genesis 3 that is similar to the one cited above from 2 Esdras—that the transgression of Adam brought death upon the human race—this time by Paul:

For if the many died through the one man’s trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. 16 And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man’s sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. 17 If, because of the one man’s trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

18 Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. 19 For just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous. (Romans 3.15-19)

21 For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; 22 for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.

(1 Corinthians 15.21-22)

As for Noah, he is mentioned in five places in the New Testament (including Hebrews 11.7, 1 Peter 3.20 and 2 Peter 2.5). In Matthew 24.37f=Luke 17.26f, the timing of coming of the Son of Man is compared to the flood.

But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 37 For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38 For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, 39 and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. (Matthew 24.36-39)

The interpretations of Abraham in the New Testament are interesting. One is by Paul, who portrays Abraham as the proof for justification by faith:

2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3 For what does the scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” 4 Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. 5 But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.

13 For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. (Romans 4.2-5, 13)
But the author of the Letter of James counters:

0 Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren? 21 Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. 23 Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God. 24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. (James 2.20-24)

A number of documents (generally written in the second century) discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945 give elaborate interpretations of Genesis 1-3 (the account of creation and the story of the garden). These include the Secret Revelation of John, On the Origin of the World, The Hypostasis of the Archons, The Gospel of Philip, and The Apocalypse of Adam. In general, the emphasis has shifted from the story of humankind’s disobedience and its consequences, to an account of creation by an ignorant and arrogant figure who is the ill-considered offspring of Sophia (wisdom), one of the aeons of the godhead.

Augustine (254-430) wrote extensively on the Book of Genesis—several commentaries, plus extended sections of the Confessions, the City of God, and treatises against Pelagius and Julian. Part of this inordinate interest stemmed from the fact that many thinkers of his time, including some Christians, disparaged the physical world and the human body. They especially were uncomfortable with Hebrew Scriptures and the accounts of creation of creation in Genesis. While Augustine shared this uneasiness, he also affirmed the goodness of the physical creation and the human body. He thought the world was more than physical, but not other than physical. And the self was more than its body, but not other than its body. Augustine did not consider matter and the body as the realm of darkness. He turned from Manichean myth and cosmology to the Book of Genesis, with its emphasis upon the goodness of the material world. Augustine held that it is the misuse of matter that is the problem for the self, not matter itself. So he sought ways of interpreting Genesis other than merely literally to reflect his views.

His other interest in Genesis had to do with the alteration in human nature that he thought resulted from the disobedience in Genesis 2-3. In this he follows and extends the view of Paul that all humans are subject to death as a result of Adam. He does this with several treatments of the Fall. In one such treatment, he claims that the first humans were created posse non peccare (able not to sin). Only they had the choice of what to love. After the Fall, all humans are non posse non peccare (not able not to sin). Once healed, they are non posse peccare (not able to sin).

Luther (and other Reformers) followed Augustine’s views in many ways, especially in his treatment of original sin. In Luther’s case, his lectures on the Book of Genesis take up eight volumes in the American edition of his works.

Finally, a brief acknowledgment of difficulties the publication of Darwin’s Origin of Species (as well as other scientific developments) caused Christians in their understanding of Genesis. In America, many who addressed this question were scientists with religious commitments; they sought to find an accommodation of ideas of God with the ideas of evolution. They did this by ignoring for the most part Darwin’s idea of natural selection (which did not require God), while affirming the idea of evolution. One professor at Yale suggested that the Hebrew word for “day” in the Creation Story actually meant “aeon.” And a Harvard professor claimed that Divine Providence acts “through all time” rather than “from all time.” Theologians with an interest in science followed suit.

The Book of Genesis as Studied by Modern Scholarship

A Word about “Modern Scholarship”

The phrase “Modern Scholarship” as used in this essay means something specific. It does not mean “recent scholarship,” for scholarly work can be recent without being modern. This is because “modern” denotes not an era but a method used to study these writings from a secular historical or literary point of view. Indeed,
modern scholarship as a method dates from the middle of the seventeenth century (though it really blossomed beginning with the nineteenth), and is related to the rationalism of the Enlightenment and to the emergence of the scientific or analytical method.

In the case of Hebrew Scriptures (and in this case, specifically the Book of Genesis), modern scholarship is not so much interested in the meaning of a text (and especially not meaning within a religious tradition such as Judaism or Christianity), as it is in how the text reveals something of the historical situation in which it was originally composed or how it functions as literature. Modern scholarship as defined here has shown little or no interest in the rabbinic or the Christian exegetical traditions.

Needless to say, all this has not set well with many scholars and leaders within Judaism and Christianity. For a variety of reasons, they have opposed these developments, or at least attempted to neutralize their effect. In 1893 the Presbyterians, for example, tried for heresy an Old Testament scholar at Union Theological Seminary in New York (Charles Augustus Briggs) who was an early advocate of the historical method as applied to the Bible. A Reform Jewish biblical scholar could write in 1919:

They have failed to realize and to stress that the Old Testament, and particularly the Torah…is entirely a Jewish work, written by Jewish authors and edited by Jewish thinkers, the product of Jewish religious genius and a unit of Jewish religious thought and doctrine…and can, in the final analysis, be correctly understood only when interpreted from a positive Jewish standpoint. (Julian Morgenstern, *The Book of Genesis: A Jewish Interpretation*, quoted in *A Documentary History of Religion in America since 1877*, 2003, edited by Gaustad and Noll, p 359)

These misgivings continue and are, I think, understandable and unavoidable.

*Literary-Historical or Source Analysis*

In the Book of Genesis, there are a number of phenomena that beg for explanation. There are duplications or parallel accounts: Abraham claims Sarah is his sister twice (Genesis 12 and 20); Abraham is promised a son three times (15.4, 17.6, 18.10), the name of Isaac is explained four times (17.17-19, 18.12-13, 21.6a, 6b); Hagar is driven out or expelled twice (16.4-16, 21.9-21); Jacob departs twice from Isaac and Rebekah (27.41-45, 27.46-28.5); Jacob twice gives the name Bethel to a place called Luz (28.19, 33.6, 15); Jacob is twice renamed Israel (32.28, 35.10).

There are inconsistencies. In Genesis 1, man and women are created simultaneously and after the rest of creation; in Genesis 2, the man is created first, then the trees, then the animals, and finally the woman. In the story of the flood, Noah is commanded to take with him one pair of each kind of animal (6.19-20), whereas in 7.2-3 he is commanded to take seven pairs of clean animals and one pair of unclean. In 7.12, the rain of the flood was on the earth 40 days, but in 7.24 the waters prevailed 150 days. In Genesis 10, there is a table of nations, descended from the sons of Noah; in the next chapter “they are one people and one language” and only after attempting to build the tower are they scattered. There are numerous inconsistencies related to people’s ages.

Prior to the modern era, Jewish and Christian writers noticed and commented on a number of these phenomena: the fact that there were two creation stories (Genesis 1.1-2.4a and Genesis 2) and that there were a number of names for the deity—especially Elohim (God) and Yahweh (the LORD). But it was not until the modern era that the analytical tools were developed to give explanation to these phenomena.

Analysis as a tool originated largely as a version of the scientific method, dating from the 18th century. In the case of written documents and in this case the Book of Genesis, scholars were able to break down the book into smaller units. They did this by identifying distinctive vocabulary, style and point of view. For example, they separated all the passages that used the divine name Elohim (God) from those that used Yahweh (the LORD). They then saw that all the Elohim passages shared similar distinctive vocabulary, style and point of view, and the same held true the Yahweh (the LORD) passages. Next they put all the Elohim passages together, to see if they constituted a continuous account, and the same for the Yahweh passages: they did. They
concluded that there were two independent sources, which had been combined to form the Book of Genesis. They named the Elohim passages the “P” source (“P” because the point of view was thought to be predominantly priestly) and the Yahweh passages the “J” source (after the German spelling Jahweh). Actually, they also were able to distinguish two sources within the Elohim material, and named the second “E” for Elohim.

That was the “literary” aspect of their work. The “historical” part sought to find circumstances that would explain the various documents or sources that came to make up the Book of Genesis. They noted that the Priestly source (“P”) had an interest in ritualistic matters (for example, the institution of circumcision in Genesis 17) and in genealogies (Genesis 5, 10, passim). These suggest a situation in which cult was more important than land, and in which ethnic purity and identification was important. The formal style suggested a later time, and the similarity of the account of creation in Genesis 1 (“P”) with the Babylonian creation epic enûma eliš led them to conclude that “P” was written or compiled during or shortly after the exile of the Jews to Babylon in the 6th century BCE.

The historians observed that the Yahwist source or document (“J”) had an interest in land beyond the traditional tribal holdings (“from the river of Egypt to the great river Euphrates,” Genesis 15.18-20) and a history that went back and was grounded in creation itself (Genesis 2). It also had a theory that Yahweh’s purposes could not be frustrated by human folly. All of this suggested an imperialistic mindset and a need for divine assurance—namely, in their mind, the time of David or following David in the court of Solomon (the document is sometimes dated circa 950 BCE).

This literary-historical analysis of the Book of Genesis is most often connected with the name of Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918). The next development in textual analysis—Genre (or Form) Analysis—is associated preeminently with Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932).

**Genre (or Form) Analysis**

The next development in analysis had to do with greater attention to smaller units imbedded within the larger documents or sources, and with categorizing them in terms of their purpose or use. Of course, as the whole story of Joseph shows, the “smaller” unit can be quite large.

This method goes like this. The first step is to identify and separate smaller or distinct units, generally by looking for beginning and ending formulas. Coupled with this is the identification of the formulaic structure of each unit. The next step is to translate the recognition of structure into an identification of type or genre (is it a story, is it a song, is it a speech?) Next, the genre or type or form is assigned to the situation within the community life (what Gunkel called Sitz im Leben) where the particular genre is “at home.” (Stories about heroes have, for example, a different structure from that of a speech by messenger, or a battle song, and each is only appropriate in a particular setting or for a particular purpose.)

Gunkel and others identified numerous genre or types or forms in Hebrew Scripture. In Genesis, he found among others, myths, legends, sagas, history, the novelette (he had precise definitions for each: a myth, for example, is a story about gods; a saga is about human endeavors). Many of the sagas in Genesis can be further categorized as etiological (or explanation) stories. These are used to explain the origin of a certain place, practice or even of a people. In Genesis 19, for example, we are given the story of origin of Moab and Ammon (they are the offspring of Lot and his daughters). In Chapter 32, where Jacob wrestles, the story of the origin of the place name Peniel is given.

What genres tell us is what people wanted to know and hear in their ongoing and everyday lives—the way hymns in a given hymnal reveal the people who sing them. Where literary-historical analysis reveals how a people saw themselves at a particular time in history (as a cultic people during and after the exile in “P,” as an empire during David and Solomon’s reign in “J”), genre analysis reveals more the characteristics of a people. Some have called it societal, as compared with historical.
Tradition Analysis

Tradition analysis, identified with Martin Noth (1902-68) and Gerhard von Rad (1901-72), developed to work in the area between the larger sources (identified by literary-historical analysis as “J,” “E,” and “P”) and the smaller units identified and categorized by genre analysis. “Tradition” as used here refers to the process of handing on. It seeks to answer two questions: (1) what is the process by which the individual narratives come together to form a larger whole? and (2) what is the process by which an individual story adds layers of meaning as it is retold?

This method involves looking at larger narratives to see if there is evidence of component parts that suggest an earlier level of development. In the case of the Abraham-Isaac-Jacob stories, for example, evidence was found to suggest that these narratives existed independently before being joined in generational sequence. Put another way, it may be that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had distinguishable gods and lived in distinguishable areas. They were joined together generationally at a later time when the three groups were united under yet another deity, Yahweh. This is the conclusion of an influential essay by Albrecht Alt, “The God of Our Fathers” (1929).

The Jacob stories have proved to be the most fertile ground for this work. As they stand, they tell the story of Jacob and Esau his brother and of Jacob and his uncle Laban. As structured, the Jacob-Esau stories bracket the Jacob-Laban stories, with certain theophanies (divine appearances) serving as transition. These cycles of stories really have different focal points. Jacob-Esau is about conflicts between two kinds of people (one in the tent, the other out hunting); Jacob-Laban is about having children and getting ahead from a position of relative weakness. Their geographical settings are significant: one is set in a part of Canaan where two cultures (hunting and shepherding) are in conflict, the other in Mesopotamia, the traditional home of Abraham and Sarah. The tradition analysts wonder whether these were not originally two separate unconnected stories and, if so, what dynamics brought them together.

The individual smaller stories in the Jacob cycle also interest the tradition analysts. The two major theophanies have layers of meaning, and the layering appears to have occurred as the stories were retold by different peoples with different interests. Also, the story of the births of Jacob and Esau, and their eventual conflict, appears to be both about the people of tents being in conflict with the hunting peoples, and about the conflict between the peoples of Jacob/Israel and of Esau/Edom (whose “redness” is a play on the Hebrew for Edom). Traditional analysis suggests that the former conflict was transformed into the latter over time as the story was handed down.

Tradition analysis gives us some insight into how meanings change for people over time.

Literary Analysis

To call this development in textual analysis “literary,” may be confusing, since the term was also used by the literary/historical critics. But this method is quite different. Whereas the early literary analysts used vocabulary, style and point of view to identify one strand of material from another, these literary analysts are interested in how a given text is put together in order to draw the reader (or hearer) into the piece and to accomplish a certain effect. That is why it is sometimes called “rhetorical analysis.”

One thing they do is to look at how a narrative, for example, is structured to gain and sustain the reader’s (or hearer’s) interest, largely through symmetries or parallels. An example is Joel W. Rosenberg’s outline of the garden story in Genesis 2.4b-4.1 (in his introduction to Genesis in the Harper Collins Study Bible):

A  Headnote: “These are the generations” (2.4)
B  No field economy: “no one to till the ground” (2.5-6)
C  Human Beings given life, installed in garden (2.7-17)
D  Man prefers human companionship over beasts (2.18-22)
E  Man calls his companion “Woman” (2.23)
Notice how the total narrative reaches a turning point with the “transgression” (“I” on the outline), after which each prior incident achieves a parallel action—for example, “G” (“Human couple ‘naked and…not ashamed’”) is matched by “G´” (“They experience shame”).

They also study how certain words are chosen, placed and repeated for effect. At times two sentences are in parallel with one another; in one case the parallel will be exact, in another the order may be reversed, or the key word may be first in one line and last in the other. Phyllis Trible gives this example (following the Hebrew word order) in Genesis 1.27:

And-created God humankind in-his-image
in-the-image-of God created-he him:
male and-female created he them.

One thing to be noticed is that “male and female” in the third line occupies the same place as “the image of God” in the second. By this account, as many commentators have pointed out, male and female were created simultaneously (not sequentially, as in Chapter 2) and together define “image of God.”

This approach to the text takes the original language seriously and attempts to convey the tone of the original in the translation. Everett Fox compares his translation of Genesis 1.3-5 with that of the New English Bible:

**Genesis 1.3-5 (New English Bible)**
God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light; and God saw that the light was good, and he separated light from darkness. He called the light day, and the darkness night.

**Genesis 1.3-5 (Fox)**
God said: Let there be light! And there was light.
God saw the light: that it was good.
God separated the light from the darkness.
God called the light: Day! And the darkness he called: Night!

The first translation reads better as English, while the repetition of “God” in Fox’s rendering follows the Hebrew and is closer to the original impact.

Sound matters. Robert Alter, one of the pioneers in literary analysis of the Hebrew Scripture, has written an extensive and extraordinary essay “to the reader” in his 1996 translation and commentary on Genesis. In the first part, titled “The Bible in English and the Heresy of Translation,” he accuses nearly all translations of interpreting the text rather than rendering it. Among a number of things, Alter maintains that while the text is written to be read, the Hebrew was intended to be heard. The sounds of the words—their tonality—are essential to their meaning, and should be retained in translation. An example he gives is the alliteration of *tohu wabohu*
in Genesis 1.1, translated “formless void” in the New Revised Standard Version. Fox attempts to capture the alliteration with “wild and waste.” Alter translates it “welter and waste.”

Of related importance for Alter is rhythm. “The most pervasive aspect of the magic of biblical style that has been neglected by English translators is its beautiful rhythms.” Rhythm is what causes a text to move forward and carries the listener with it. Breaking the rhythm—arrhythmia—deadens the impact of the text. Alter’s discussion suggests several ways that this is done by English translators. One is the omission of the word “and” (“in Hebrew not a separate word but rather a particle, waw, prefixed to the first word of a clause”) at key points, where its use allows the language to move and gain power. He uses Genesis 7.13-14 (the entry into the ark) to make his point:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alter’s translation</th>
<th>King James Version (which Alter generally admires)</th>
<th>E. A. Speiser (Anchor Bible commentary) (whom he criticizes)</th>
<th>Everett Fox (whom he criticizes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>That very day, Noah and Shem and Ham and Japheth, the sons of Noah, and Noah’s wife, and the three wives of his sons together with them, came into the ark, they as well as beasts of each kind and cattle of each kind and each kind of crawling thing that crawls on the earth and each kind of bird, each winged thing.</td>
<td>In the selfsame day entered Noah, and Shem, and Ham, and Japheth, the sons of Noah and Noah’s wife, and the three wives of his sons with them, into the ark; They, and every beast after its kind, and all the cattle after their kind, and every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth after his kind, and every bird of every sort.</td>
<td>On the aforesaid day, Noah and his sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, Noah’s wife, and the three wives of his sons had entered the ark—they as well as every kind of beast, every kind of creature that creeps on earth, and every kind of bird, every winged thing.</td>
<td>On that very day came Noah, and Shem, Ham, and Yefet, Noah’s sons, Noah’s wife and his three sons’ wives with them, into the Ark, they and all wildlife after their kind, all herd-animals after their kind, all crawling things that crawl upon the earth after their kind, all fowl after their kind, all chirping things, all winged-things.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the above passage, the Hebrew uses “and” seven times, as does Alter. The King James has nine. The other two translations cited each use “and” four times. Omissions reduce the cumulative impact of the text.

Another example he gives is Genesis 24, the encounter of the servant of Abraham and Sarah with Rebekah at the well. Verses 16b-20, according to Alter, record an extraordinary physical feat by Rebekah—fetching water for the servant, then for his ten camels, each of which could consume twenty-five gallons of water. The “and” is important to convey the intensity of her actions (“and” is italicized in the following samples to show number of uses).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alter’s translation</th>
<th>King James Version</th>
<th>Revised English Bible</th>
<th>New Revised Standard Version</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| …and she came down to the spring and filled her jug and came back up. And the servant said, “Pray, let me sip a bit of water from your jug.” And she said, | and she went down to the well, and filled her pitcher, and came up. 17 And the servant ran to meet her, and said, Let me, I pray thee, drink a little water of thy pitcher. | She went down to the string, filled her jar, and came up again. Abraham’s servant hurried to meet her and said, “Will you give me a little water from your jar?” | She went down to the spring, filled her jar, and came up. 17 Then the servant ran to meet her and said, “Please let me sip a little water from your jar.” 18 “Drink, my
“Drink, my lord,” and she hurried and tipped down her jug on one hand and let him drink. And she let him drink his fill and said, “For your camels, too, I shall draw water until they drink their fill.” And she hurried and emptied her jug into the trough, and she ran again to the well to draw water and drew water for all his camels.

“Please drink, sir,” she answered, and at once lowered her jar on her hand to let him drink. When she had finished giving him a drink, she said, “I shall draw water also for your camels until they have had enough.” She quickly emptied her jar into the water trough, and then hurrying again to the well she drew water and watered all the camels.

Alter is impressed by the limited vocabulary available in Biblical Hebrew, and how it is used to effect. A single word is repeated a number of times in a passage, with a different meaning (as required by context). The word serves as a theme or motif binding the various meanings within the text in a nuanced manner. Rather than seeing the limited vocabulary as an indication of an early stage in the development of the language, Alter follows a number of Hebrew scholars in concluding that the restricted number of words is part of a sophisticated literary toolbox. “Biblical prose, then, is a formal literary language but also, paradoxically, a plainspoken one, and, moreover, a language that evinces a strong commitment to using a limited set of terms again and again, making aesthetic virtue out of repetition.” (Alter, *Genesis*, p. xxv) “…the literary prose of the Bible turns everywhere on significant repetition, not variation” (Ibid., p. xxvi).

An example he gives is the use of the word for “hand” (*yad*) in stories about Joseph in Genesis 37 and 39 (Chapter 38 is the story of Judah and Tamar). There are three places at which “hand” is used in 37.22-27 (the fateful encounter of Joseph and his brothers), and nine times in 39.2-23 (the experiences of Joseph in slavery to two Egyptian masters). Of the nine times in Chapter 39, seven are translated “hand” in the New Revised Standard Version and five in the New Jewish Publication Society Translation, thus robbing the passage of its literary unity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse</th>
<th>Alter’s translation</th>
<th>New Revised Standard Version</th>
<th>New Jewish Publication Society Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>37.22</td>
<td>do not raise a hand</td>
<td>lay no hand</td>
<td>do not touch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37.22</td>
<td>from their hands</td>
<td>out of their hand</td>
<td>save him from them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37.27</td>
<td>our hand will not…</td>
<td>not lay our hands</td>
<td>do away with him ourselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>from the hands of</td>
<td><em>omit</em> “hands”</td>
<td><em>omit</em> “hands”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>succeed in his hand</td>
<td>prosper in hands</td>
<td>everything he undertook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39.4</td>
<td>placed in his hand</td>
<td>put him in charge</td>
<td>placing in his hands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verse</td>
<td>Alter's translation</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version</td>
<td>New Jewish Publication Society Translation</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>39.6</td>
<td>in Joseph’s hands</td>
<td>in Joseph’s charge</td>
<td>in Joseph’s hands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>placed in my hands</td>
<td>put...my hand</td>
<td>placed in my hands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39.12</td>
<td>garment in her hand</td>
<td>garment in her hand</td>
<td>garment in her hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39.13</td>
<td>garment in her hand</td>
<td>garment in her hand</td>
<td>it in her hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39.22</td>
<td>placed in Joseph’s hands</td>
<td>committed to Joseph’s care</td>
<td>put in Joseph’s charge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39.23</td>
<td>in his hands</td>
<td>in Joseph’s care</td>
<td>in Joseph’s charge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Alter:

A kind of dialectic is created in the thematic unfolding of the story between the hand as the agency of violent impulse and the hand of scrupulous management....the hands of Joseph and the hands upon Joseph provide a fine object lesson about how biblical narrative is misrepresented when translators tamper with the purposeful and insistent physicality of its language, as here when “hand” is transmuted into “trust” or “care.” Such substitutions offer explanations or interpretations instead of translations and thus betray the original. (Ibid., p. xvi)

This kind of literary critic also places whole passages over against each other, using common themes to revise the meaning of each passage in isolation. Alter investigates what appears to be an intrusive story (Judah and Tamar) in the larger context of the story of Joseph and his brothers, using among other things the theme of deception. In similar fashion, Trible allows the garden story in Genesis 2-3 (which she titles “A love Story Gone Awry”) to be balanced by the Song of Solomon (she calls “Love’s Lyrics Redeemed”).

As for the Book of Genesis, Alter prefers to read it as a coherent whole (as distinguished from the practice of historical analysis, which breaks the whole down into identifiable parts):

The informing assumption of my translation and commentary is that the edited version of Genesis—the so-called redacted texts—which has come down to us, though not without limited contradictions and disparate elements, has powerful coherence as a literary work, and that this coherence is above all what we need to address as readers. (Genesis, p. xliii)

This is demonstrated by the way he deals with the long-observed two stories of creation. The historical critics had seen these as indicative of two distinct sources reflecting two different historical settings. Alter writes,

Whatever the disparate historical origins of the two accounts, the redaction gives us first a harmonious cosmic overview of creation and then a plunge into the technological nitty-gritty and moral ambiguities of human origins. (Ibid., p. 7)

In the earlier forms of analysis, the meaning of the text was found in an outside referent: the history of the times or the social practices of a people. In this form of analysis, the meaning of the text lies not outside the text, but within the text.

Archeology

All of these approaches by modern scholarship involve analyzing the text itself. Archeology, on the other hand, looks at things discovered outside the text. In terms of Hebrew Scriptures as a whole, archeological work at Bethel, Ai, Shechem, and Jericho has contributed to understanding the Book of Judges, for example. The documents found at ancient Ugarit (modern Ras Shamra) has thrown light on the nature of Canaanite religion. Some discoveries have given outside validation to a claim in the text. An instance is the finding of the first extra biblical reference to David. While not as clear, there has been some success in locating the sites of
Sodom and Gomorrah, mentioned in Genesis. A passage in Genesis 15, referring to inheritance, has gained some clarity from documents at Ugarit.

**The Book of Genesis**

Genesis is divided into four roughly equal parts: the so-called primordial history (Genesis 1-11), the story of Abraham and Sarah (12.1-25.11), the narrative about Jacob, Rachel and Leah (25.19-37.2a), and the account of Joseph (37.2b-50.26). It begins with a grand portrayal of the creation of the heavens and the earth, and all that is in it. It ends with the family of Jacob settled in Egypt.

Woven into this story, according to source analysis, are two accounts, with fragments of a third. There is an earlier source, usually designated “J” or “Yahwist” (from the predominance of the divine name YHWH or Yahweh) and dated during the reign of David or Solomon—it begins with the story of the Garden (2.4a-3.24), and contains most of the other stories in Genesis. It is marked by narrative. A later source, usually called “P” or “Priestly” and dated from the time of the exile in Babylon, has less interest in narrative. It contains the account of creation in Genesis 1 and a number of genealogies (e.g., Chapter 5 and 10), as well as Chapter 17 (the renaming of Abram and Sarai, and the institution of circumcision). We will note some smaller Priestly units as we go along. Also, the story of Noah and the flood (6.1-9.17) has both Yahwist and Priestly versions interspersed within it. There are some fragments of an intermediate source, termed “E” or “Elohist,” because it uses in a distinctive use of the divine name “God”—the best known story in this tradition is the test of Abraham in Chapter 22.

**The Primordial History (Genesis 1-11)**

The Primordial History includes the account of creation (1.1-2.4a), the story of the garden and the disobedience of the first humans (2.4b-3.24), Cain and Abel (4.1-16), Enoch, then Lamech (4.17-24), Seth (4.25-26), the descendents of Adam (Chapter 5), the offspring of the sons of God and daughters of humans (6.1-4), Noah and the flood (6.5-9.17), Noah and his sons (9.18-29), the table of nations (Chapter 10), the tower of Babel (11.1-9), the descendents of Shem (11.10-32).

In the sections designated as “Priestly” or “P,” the creation (Chapter 1) is followed by genealogies in Chapter 5, 10 and the latter part of 11) --these sections show how from the beginning a line was laid out that began with Adam and culminated in Abram (later known as Abraham). With the exception of the “P” portions about Noah and the flood, there is no narrative. In the remaining sections (the “Yahwist” or “J” portions: 2.4b-4.26, parts of 6-9, and 11), the author or editor has drawn on old narratives to weave a story of the gradual decline of humanity from the garden to the tower of Babel, again culminating in the call of Abram.

**The Account of Creation (1.1-2.4a)**

The account of creation in 1.1-2.4a (“P”) contains eight distinct acts of creation over six days, culminating in the creation of humans (male and female) and followed by a day of rest. The deity is Elohim (God), who creates mainly by divine decree (“And God said, ‘Let there be...’”), but also by acts (“made” and “created”). This has been compared and contrasted with the creation story in the Babylonian creation epic the *enûma eliš*. As for similarities, the beginning of each is somewhat alike in portraying chaos or formlessness (the *tohu wa bohu* of Genesis 1:2):

*enûma eliš*
When on high the heaven had not been named,
Firm ground below had not been called by name,
When primordial Apsu, their begetter,
And Mummu-Tiamat, she who bore them all,
Their waters mingled as a single body,
No reed hut had sprung forth, no marshland

**Genesis 1.1-2**

1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God (or mighty wind) was moving over the face of the waters.
Both creations are answer to the threat of chaos, exemplified by vast and uncontrollable water.

enûma eliš (Book IV)
Then the lord paused to view her dead body,
That he might divide the form and do artful
works.
He split her like a shellfish into two parts:
Half of her he set up as a covering for heaven,
Pulled down the bar and posted guards.
He bade them to allow not her waters to
escape. (140)

Genesis 1.6-10
And God said, “Let there be a dome in the
midst of the waters, and let it separate the
waters from the waters.” 7 So God made the
dome and separated the waters that were under
the dome from the waters that were above the
dome. And it was so. 8 God called the dome
Sky. And there was evening and there was
morning, the second day.
9 And God said, “Let the waters under the
sky be gathered together into one place, and let
the dry land appear.” And it was so. 10 God
called the dry land Earth, and the waters that
were gathered together he called Seas.

The similarities extend, generally, to the sequence of the creation: light, firmament, dry land, luminaries,
and the human. In the case of the luminaries, in both the sun, moon and stars are not in themselves deities, but
are reduced to being lights and calendar marks. In like manner, Genesis 1 the sea monsters (such as Leviathan)
are mere creations along with fish. The major difference is that in the enûma eliš the point of the long epic is
the elevation of Marduk as the supreme god, who wins that position after a battle with Tiamat, a major deity.
Marduk creates the world from the dissected body of Tiamat. In Genesis 1, Elohim (God) stands alone,
experiences no conflict, and is from the beginning in complete control. God creates with no opposition, most
often by merely speaking, and declares every result as “good” (or “very good”).

If these similarities and differences hold up—and there is much later scholarship that questions this
view—the conclusion is that Genesis 1 was composed as a response to the Babylonian claims about creation.
One way of putting it is that during the exile in Babylon in the sixth century BCE the Israelites were confronted
by a culture that was in many respects superior or in any case highly appealing. They were struggling to
maintain their ethnic, cultural and religious identity, and this revision of sorts of the enûma eliš was part of this
effort.

In any case, Genesis 1 is stated in formal and repetitive language. It may be an account of creation, but it
is more like a hymn or even a creed—this is one reason it has been called “Priestly” by the source analysts.

The Garden (2.4b-3.24)

Phyllis Trible
Rhetorical Analysis of Genesis 2.4b-3.24 (The Story of the Garden)
(Summary of “A Love Story Gone Awry,”
the name of the essay on this passage in her book God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality).)

(Professor Trible is a feminist biblical scholar, which she once quipped sounds like something of an
oxymoron. In her scholarly work she has used rhetorical analysis to uncover within the biblical texts the
voice and life of women, which have been hidden within the texts themselves, but more often in later
interpretation. In the present case she finds a different picture of the woman while redefining the meaning
of the story itself. Another of her books is Texts of Terror, which contains a new reading of the two stories
of Hagar, Genesis 16 and 21).
The traditional reading of the story has four characters interacting with one another: Yahweh God, man, woman and the serpent. Trible’s reading, on the other hand, reveals four “worlds” in interaction: divine, human, plant, and animal. This new delineation informs a more complex plot. In the first part of the story, the deity (Yahweh God) has not caused any plants to grow, because Yahweh God has not allowed it to rain, because there is no one to tend the plants. When water seeps up from below (on its own?), Yahweh God forms ha-‘adam (usually translated “man”; Trible translates “earth creature”) from ha-‘adamâ (usually translated “ground”; Trible translates “earth”). Then the plants appear, with one forbidden tree. The animals are created because “it is not good for ha-‘adam to be alone,” and when they do not fit the bill, the woman (‘îššâ) is formed from the rib of ha-‘adam. In the middle part of the story, the deity is absent, but the other three “worlds” interact: the animal (the serpent), the human (the woman with the man present), and the plant (the trees and the forbidden tree). In the final section, Yahweh God is back to judge and punish, first the animal (the serpent), then the human (the woman and the man), and finally the plant (“cursed be the earth”).

Traditionally, the focus of the story is the middle part, commonly called the disobedience. This is the story of the intriguing conversation or dialogue between the serpent (not the devil; rather, “the sliest of all the wild beasts that Yahweh God had made” and presumably named by ha-‘adam) and the woman, and of the couple eating of the forbidden fruit. Interpreters have almost always held the woman responsible for the disobedience, beginning with the author of 1 Timothy: “the man was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.”

These interpreters trace the woman’s disobedience to her being derivative, subordinate, inferior, untrustworthy, gullible, and simpleminded. Trible counters this characterization in several ways. As for her being inferior, Trible maintains that derivation does not mean inferiority (else ha-‘adam would be inferior to the ground or earth, ha-‘adamâ, from whence ha-‘adam was derived). Moreover, she translates ha-‘adam as “earth creature,” and holds that it is not sexually differentiated—that is, ha-‘adam is not male.

She supports this by noting that the sexually differentiated woman and man are created at the same time and are equal. The woman is not the female of ha-‘adam (the feminine of ha-‘adam is ha-‘adamâ, ground or earth). The woman is (‘îššâ), and on her appearance, the man qua male (‘îš) is identified for the first time. Sexual differentiation occurs only then. They are “one flesh.” She goes further. The woman was not created as a “helper” (New Jerusalem Bible) or even as “a helper as his partner” (New Revised Standard Version”) but as “a companion corresponding to it,” her translation of ‘ezer kenegdô. The problem the woman solves is that ha-‘adam is “alone.” Following her creation, the female (‘îššâ) and the male (‘îš) are companions of one another.

This is the woman who is engaged by the serpent. Rather than being untrustworthy, gullible and simpleminded, she is intelligent and sophisticated, capable of subtle theological and ethical discourse. Because they are “one flesh,” she speaks and acts for both. The text clearly indicates that the man is present (though many interpreters have him absent, away at work when the traveling salesman comes to visit). He is silent and passive, even brutish and inept (takes the fruit and eats it without question or reflection). In any case, together they are responsible. The sad thing, and the turning point for Trible, is that they (and particularly the man) do not accept joint complicity and responsibility. He in fact turns on her. And therein and thereafter in the story lies the seeds of their estrangement.

There is an interesting example in her treatment of 2.25-3.7 of how she uses a term to frame an incident and to show an important movement of the story. The prologue to the account of disobedience states “And the man and the woman were both naked, and were not ashamed.” The epilogue reads, “and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and make loincloths for themselves.” The word “naked” frames the whole episode: they were naked and were not ashamed; they knew they were naked, and they sewed...” What moves the text from one nakedness to another is “knowing,” and “knowing” plays back to the promise of the serpent: “You will be like God, knowing good and evil.” Things begin to become undone at this point.
The story ends badly. The woman will now bring forth children in pain and she will desire her man ('îš), who will rule over her. The man’s relation to the earth is corrupted: “In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread.” He is expelled from the garden.

For Trible there is an even more ominous ending. When the animals are brought forward for consideration by ha-'adam, it calls the name of each. Naming, in biblical thought, involves control. In this instance, calling the name of each animal “becomes the way in which the earth creature establishes power over the animals” (Trible, p. 99). The formula combines “call” and “the name of” (Trible provides examples from elsewhere in Genesis). In the case of the newly created woman, this formula is not used: “call” is used without “the name of.” Trible claims that “call” by itself is an act of recognition, not naming, and thus implies no exercise of power. This distinction is important for Trible, because in the last part of the story (after the disobedience, the trials, and the punishments), when the woman is named Eve, it is the same formula that was used with the animals. The man names her and thereby exercises power over her. “Now, in effect, the man reduces the woman to the status of an animal by calling her a name” (Trible, p. 133). What was equality becomes domination. What was companionship becomes estrangement.

So for Trible, this is not a story of how God created man, then how—by the wiles of the serpent and the gullibility of an inferior woman—man fell. It is the story of how God wanted a garden, made a creature to care for it, sought a companion for the creature, and succeeded when woman and man established a life of companionship in the fruitful care of the garden, only to see companionship turn to estrangement. This is why she calls it “A Love Story Gone Awry.” In her use of rhetorical analysis, Trible clears a path to new understanding of a familiar text.

In 2.4b-3.24 (the story of the garden) we have, in contrast to Genesis 1, a full fledged narrative. There are characters (Yahweh Elohim [the LORD God], Adam, the woman [only later named Eve], and the serpent. Even animals and plants play a role. Yahweh Elohim is anthropomorphic, experimenting rather than declaring. There are scenes, with action. There are turns in the story and a resolution.

The story in Chapter 2 goes like this. There is no garden, because there is no rain (in contrast to too much water in Chapter 1). The scene is more like Canaan. Yahweh Elohim creates from the ground (Hebrew ha-'adamâ-- Trible: earth:) man (Hebrew ha-'adam with an article --Trible: the earth creature, Alter and Fox: the human) to till the garden, and only then plants the garden, replete with many trees. These include two special trees, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (the fruit of which is forbidden).

Something is awry: it is not good for the creature to be alone, so a helper as a partner (Hebrew 'ezer kenegdô--Trible: a companion corresponding to it, Alter: a sustainer beside him, Fox: a helper corresponding to him) is sought. It is at this point in the narrative that the animals are formed “out of the ground” and brought to the human to name. This attempt fails. So now, from the rib of the sleeping human Yahweh Elohim makes a woman. The human recognizes “this one” as the answer. Trible translates the recognition scene:

23 Then the man (Trible: Hebrew ha-'adam) said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one (Trible omits “one”) shall be called Woman (Hebrew 'îššâ), for out of Man (Hebrew 'îš) this one was taken (Trible: “was taken this”).” 24 Therefore a man (Hebrew 'îš) leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife (Trible: woman; Hebrew 'îššâ), and they become one flesh. (2.23-24)

Trible makes much of the fact that ha-'adam is now called 'îš and the woman is called 'îššâ—which she reads to mean that male and female come into reality at the creation of the woman.

In any case, the garden has been planted and the caretakers are in place. Though two, they are “one flesh.” Moreover, they are naked and not ashamed.
The story takes a turn. The serpent—not the devil and not Satan, but “more crafty than any other wild animal that the Yahweh Elohim had made”—appears for a marvelous conversation with the woman. The turning point comes when the serpent casts doubt on the divine threat of death and the decision to eat:

4 But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; 5 for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” 6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. (3.4-6)

There is the subsequent discovery by Yahweh Elohim (“walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze”) of this disobedience, the excuse making, and the penalties. The woman will have increased pangs in childbearing and submission to her husband; the man will toil the soil which is now cursed—these qualify the story as containing etiologies, “explanation stories.” The woman is renamed (again Trible pays special attention to this). Then--

22 the LORD God said, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”— 23 therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. 24 He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life. (3.22-24)

The questions abound: was the human immortal to begin with, then lost its immortality as a result of eating the fruit?—with the possibility of regaining it by tasting of the fruit of the tree of life? Or was the human mortal to begin with, threatened with immediate death (“for on the day that you eat of it you shall surely die,” 3.17), and remained mortal but alive after the eating, with the possibility of gaining immortality by eating from the tree of life (“he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever,” 3.22)?

What of the serpent? If it is not another being over against Yahweh Elohim—not the devil and not Satan—who is it? The text explicitly says that it was a creature made by the deity (and presumably given a name by the human), indeed the most crafty of all. Does this mean that the limitations placed upon the human and the commandment not to exceed those limitations contain within them the temptation to exceed them?

If the consequence of the eating from the forbidden tree is not immediate death and not the loss of immortality, what is it? The first is the awareness of nakedness and the famed fig leaves (3.7)—the seeing and knowing promised by the serpent indeed produces seeing and knowing, with unexpected consequences.

You will not die; 5 for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (3.4.b-5)

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. (3.7)

The story explicitly names the penalties (pain in child bearing, labor turned to toil, and such) for the characters. Do they hold true for subsequent generations? And is that all? Later Christian interpreters turned to the language of Genesis 1—“Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness”—to suggest that either the image or the likeness was altered or lost. But the text doesn’t say that.

What is the meaning of “knowledge of good and evil” in the description of the tree that is forbidden? The humans already knew the difference between good and evil, or the commandment not to eat would make no sense. Some interpreters (Gordis, Fox) have suggested that it means “all knowledge, from A to Z.” This seems to fit the overall story better, since both the serpent (3.5) and Yahweh Elohim (3.22) use the phrase in a way that is friendly to this reading.
The story of the garden has received much comment and interpretation. It has been seen as the story of the universal human dilemma. It has been seen as the explanation of how a good creation went bad, and also as how death entered the world. It has that appeal. But this kind of view developed later on, with such works as 2 Esdras and the letters of Paul, cited above. The story itself carries none of those meanings: it is the first of a series of stories showing how the intent of the deity is frustrated by human actions, which are dealt with by the deity, who then acts in such a way as to keep the story going. This in fact is the ongoing theme of the Yahwist epic, as we shall see.

*The First Murder and the Beginnings of Civilization (4.1-25)*

Things continue to break bad. The human couple has two sons, first Cain then Abel. Cain is a tiller of the ground (a chip off the old block); Abel is a keeper of sheep. In time each brings the fruit of their labor to Yahweh (who has dropped Elohim from the divine name, it seems), who “had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.” The upshot is that Cain kills Abel: the first murder. Cain is discovered and cast out as a fugitive by Yahweh, but protected by a “mark.”

Things look up. Cain builds the first city and names it after his son Enoch. Down the line several generations, Lamech’s two wives bear the ancestor of “all those who play the lyre and pipe” and another who made “all kinds of bronze and iron tools.” There is a boasting song sung by Lamech to his two wives. Meanwhile Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth to replace Abel. “At that time people began to call on the name of Yahweh” (4.26)

The Cain and Abel story is of interest to those who see how a story changes in meaning over time—that is, the tradition critics. They see this as an old brothers’ rivalry story that has been transformed into a narrative reflecting cultural conflict, in this case between farmers and shepherds. We will see this more clearly when we get to Jacob and Esau. Within the Yahwist epic, however, it functions as yet another indication that things are not going well with the human race, though Yahweh once again intervenes to punish, but also to preserve.

What is of interest is that it is Cain the murderous son of a banished father and his descendents (where did Cain’s wife come from? many have asked) who bring about civilization—the city, the musical instruments, the tools of construction. Does this show any anti-civilization attitude by the Yahwist? And in the midst of these notations, there is the old song of Lamech, boasting

> 23 Lamech said to his wives:
> “Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;
you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say:
I have killed a man for wounding me,
a young man for striking me.
If Cain is avenged sevenfold,
truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.” (4.23-24)

Another picture of the worsening situation for humanity, commensurate with the Yahwist story.

The reference to the beginning of worship of Yahweh (“At that time people began to call on the name of Yahweh,” 4.26) is a little strange—principally because according to the Priestly account of the encounter of Yahweh and Moses in Exodus 6.2-3, Yahweh’s name was not revealed until the time of the bondage in Egypt:

> 2 God also spoke to Moses and said to him: “I am the LORD. 3 I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty [El Shaddai] but by my name ‘The LORD’[Yahweh] I did not make myself known to them.

*The Genealogy from Adam to Noah (5.1-32)*

The genealogy in Genesis 5, ten generations long and with descending longevity, is the first appearance of the Priestly source since Genesis 1-2.4a. That it is continuous with that account is easy to see:
Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude.

And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done.

These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. (1.27-2.4a)

5 This is the list of the descendants of Adam. When God created humankind, he made them in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them “Humankind” when they were created.

3 When Adam had lived one hundred thirty years, he became the father of a son in his likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth. The days of Adam after he became the father of Seth were eight hundred years; and he had other sons and daughters.

5 Thus all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred thirty years; and he died.

6 When Seth had lived one hundred five years, he became the father of Enosh. Seth lived after the birth of Enosh eight hundred seven years, and had other sons and daughters.

8 Thus all the days of Seth were nine hundred twelve years; and he died. (5.1-6)

And so on.

What is striking about this Priestly genealogy is that it makes no mention of Abel or Cain, who played such an important role following the murder of Abel (3.17-24). Seth is the first and only child.

Also, the life span decreases progressively from nine hundred thirty years (Adam) to seven hundred seventy-seven (Lamech)—the exception being, of course, Methuselah living nine hundred and sixty-nine years. These large numbers are not unusual for the ancient texts. But their use and the gradual diminishing of life plays a special role in the Priestly account. Where the Yahwist source accounts for the gradual intensification of the human dilemma in narrative form, the Priestly has no such story to tell—only this gradual diminishing of power, until it reaches a crisis in the Priestly account of the flood. In 9.28-29 (a Priestly insertion) Noah lives nine hundred and fifty years—but that is after the flood, and he was not part of the diminishing life span.

The Birth of the Heroes and Warriors of Old (6.1-4)

Then, picking up the Yahwist account, there is this strange story about the sons of God having intercourse with the daughters of humans to produce “the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown.” This is obviously an old and well known etiology or explanation story to explain the presence of heroes and warriors, which has been used by the Yahwist as something like the last straw before the flood, which immediately follows. Also, in the midst of the story Yahweh decides to limit human life to one hundred and twenty years.
The Great Flood (6.5-9.17)

The story of the flood in the Book of Genesis, which has striking similarities to the flood story found in Book XI of the Mesopotamian Gilgamesh Epic, goes like this: the deity is dissatisfied with the creation and decides to destroy all living beings, with the exception of Noah, his family, and pairs of land animals and birds. At the command of the deity, Noah constructs an ark and boards his family and the animals. A flood comes, destroying all living beings (except the fish, of course). Eventually the flood subsides, and the human beings and animals disembark. Following the offering of burnt offerings by Noah, the deity establishes a new creation and promises never again to destroy all living things, and sets a bow in the clouds as the sign of that promise.

There are discrepancies. At one place Noah is told to “take with you seven pairs of all clean animals…and a pair of the animals that are not clean”; in another, “of every living thing…you shall bring two of every sort.” The flood results from rain in several passages, and in others from the “fountains of the great deep” and from the “windows of the heavens.” The flood lasts forty days according to some sections, and one hundred fifty days according to others.

The literary critics of the older literary-historical school noticed that the command to take seven pairs of clean animals and one pair of unclean, the reference to rain and to forty days come in a speech by Yahweh to Noah (7.1-6). The simpler command to take a pair of each animal appears in a speech by Elohim (6.19-20), and this is linked to the water bursting from beneath and from on high, and the one hundred fifty days. Moreover, there are two conclusions to the story, one featuring Yahweh and the other Elohim.

They found other distinctive vocabulary. In the several Yahweh sections: “evil” (6.5, 8.21), “heart” (6.6, 8.21), “blot out” (7.4, 23). In the Elohim passages: “corrupt” (6.11, 12), “violence” (6.11, 13), “all flesh” (6.12, 13, 19; 7.21; 8.17; 9.11, 15, 16, 17), “covenant” (6.18; 9.8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17).

As to style, the story with Yahweh is humanlike and matter of fact. Yahweh sees the wickedness of humankind and ponders what he has done: he is sorry that he made them. “It grieved him to his heart.” Noah finds favor in the eyes of Yahweh. When everyone is on board the ark, Yahweh shuts the door. For his part, Noah opens the window at the end of forty days and sends forth a sequence of birds to test the scene. After leaving the ark, Noah builds an altar and offers burnt offerings. Yahweh smells the pleasing odor, again speaks to himself, and resolves not to destroy again—for it does no good (“the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth,” 8.21).

In contrast, the account with Elohim is formal. Elohim evaluates the situation and makes a decree, instructs Noah on the dimensions of the ark and how to construct it. This version is careful to record the age of Noah and the date when the flood begins and ends. At the close Elohim issues a new set of rules and makes a formal covenant.

Finally, these scholars noted a distinct point of view in each set of passages. In the story with Yahweh, the problem is humankind (6.6-7). Regretting its creation (6.6-7), Yahweh blots it out, with the exception of Noah, his family, and the pairs of animals. When it is all over, Yahweh sees that destruction was to no avail (“for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth”) and resolves never “to destroy every living creature as I have done” (8.21). With Elohim, on the other hand, the problem is with creation itself (“the earth was corrupt…and was filled with violence,” 6.11-13) and it is creation itself which Elohim decides to destroy (6.13). But the purpose of the destruction is a new creation, blessed and operating within an “everlasting covenant,” complete with a new provision to eat meat (9.1-17).

All of this led the literary-historical analysts to conclude that there are two sources in the story, one with the deity named Yahweh and the other with a deity named Elohim. What was difficult at first and interesting in any case was that these two sources were woven together and had to be extracted from one another. Whereas with the two creation stories in Genesis 1-2, they identified the first (1.1-2.4a) as one source, and the second (2.4b-25) as another source, the flood story starts with one source, switches to the second, and then back and forth ten times. This is the most striking time in Genesis where this form of combination occurs.
They also saw that the reference to “curse the ground because of mankind” in the conclusion of the Yahweh version was linked to the curse of the ground in the garden story, also a Yahweh story. And they saw that the reference to “be fruitful and multiply” in the conclusion of the Elohim story (along with a revision of eating laws) was linked to the creation story, also an Elohim story. They reasoned that the creation story and the Elohim sections of the flood story were part of a single source, which they called “Priestly” (P), because of its interest in priestly matters. In like manner, they concluded that the garden story and the Yahweh sections in the flood story were part of a single source, which they called “Yahwist” (J).

Eventually, this kind of analysis identified three sources throughout Genesis (“J,” “E” for Elohist, and “P”), and set about to speculate on the historical situation that produced each. What this shows us, I think, is that there are a great variety of religious experiences, insights and points of view imbedded within the text as we have it; how these differ and at the same time are related; and how each is an advocate to us of the time and place that produced it.

The Sons of Noah (9.18-28)

Noah comes from the ark, plants grapes, gets drunk, and lies “uncovered in his tent.” So much for being a righteous man. One of his three sons—Ham, the father of Canaan—sees the nakedness of his father, and tells his two brothers Shem and Japheth, who judiciously cover the nakedness of their father. Noah eventually awakes and knows “what his youngest son had done to him.” This would have been Ham. Robert Alter writes (Genesis, p 40):

Some, as early as the classical Midrash, have glimpsed here a Zeus-Chronos story in which the son castrates the father or, alternately, penetrates him sexually. The latter possibility is reinforced by the fact that “to see the nakedness of” frequently means “to copulate with,” and it is noteworthy that the Hebrews associated Canaanites with lasciviousness.

Still, it is Canaan—not his father Ham—who is cursed by Noah:

“Cursed be Canaan;
lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers.”
He also said,
“Blessed by the LORD my God be Shem;
and let Canaan be his slave.
May God make space for Japheth,
and let him live in the tents of Shem;
and let Canaan be his slave.” (9.25-27)

Whatever the source of this story, by the time to Yahwist uses it, it is validation (desire, hope?) of the Canaanites serving the Israelites (Shem) as slaves.

Nations Descended from Noah (10.1-32)

The priestly genealogies resume from Chapter 5. All humans, following the flood, descend from one of three sons of Noah. The three lineages are laid out in some detail to explain the origin of all nations. Each ends with the statement, “These are the descendents of...in their lands, with their own language, by their families, in their nations” (10.5b, 20, 31), which is especially interesting given that Chapter 11 (Yahwist) begins “Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.”

This is a complex listing, and in the main a mystery. The descendents of Ham are mainly located in North Africa, but include Canaan. This probably reflected the close ties of Canaan with Egypt before the Amarna period (14th and 13th C BCE).
The Tower of Babel (11.1-9)

The story of the Tower of Babel is well-known, along with the garden and the flood. It tells how the human race fell into linguistic disarray. Starting with “one language and one set of words,” they set about to build first a city then a tower “with its top in the heavens.” Their motive?—“let us make a name for ourselves” (11.4). Yahweh came down (I was told the form of the verb is intensive: “came way, way, way down”).

And the LORD said, “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. 7 Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” 8 So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.

Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth. (11.6-9)

Following Genesis 10, where the diversification of peoples and languages is portrayed as normal and even proper, this story sees it as a scattering and a confusion of language. Here it is seen, if not as a penalty, certainly as a response by Yahweh to a perceived threat—not unlike Genesis 3:

* * * * *

The Descendents of Shem (11.10-26)

But first there is another priestly genealogy, which introduces Abram (Abraham’s name until Chapter 17) as in the Semite line.

This lineage, as set out by the Priestly writer, begins with Shem (ignoring Noah’s other two sons Ham and Japheth) and ends with Terah, father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran. It follows the formula used in Genesis 5, and continues it:

25 When Methuselah had lived one hundred eighty-seven years, he became the father of Lamech. Methuselah lived after the birth of Lamech seven hundred eighty-two years, and had other sons and daughters. 27 Thus all the days of Methuselah were nine hundred sixty-nine years; and he died.

28 When Lamech had lived one hundred eighty-two years, he became the father of a son; he named him Noah, saying, “Out of the ground that the LORD has cursed this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the toil of our hands.” Lamech lived after the birth of Noah five hundred ninety-five years, and had other sons and daughters. 31 Thus all the days of Lamech were seven hundred seventy-seven years; and he died.

32 After Noah was five hundred years old, Noah became the father of Shem, Ham, and Japheth. (5.25-32)
These are the descendants of Shem. When Shem was one hundred years old, he became the father of Arpachshad two years after the flood; 11 and Shem lived after the birth of Arpachshad five hundred years, and had other sons and daughters.

12 When Arpachshad had lived thirty-five years, he became the father of Shelah; 13 and Arpachshad lived after the birth of Shelah four hundred three years, and had other sons and daughters.

14 When Shelah had lived thirty years, he became the father of Eber; 15 and Shelah lived after the birth of Eber four hundred three years, and had other sons and daughters.

16 When Eber had lived thirty-four years, he became the father of Peleg; 17 and Eber lived after the birth of Peleg four hundred thirty years, and had other sons and daughters.

18 When Peleg had lived thirty years, he became the father of Reu; 19 and Peleg lived after the birth of Reu two hundred nine years, and had other sons and daughters.

20 When Reu had lived thirty-two years, he became the father of Serug; 21 and Reu lived after the birth of Serug two hundred seven years, and had other sons and daughters.

22 When Serug had lived thirty years, he became the father of Nahor; 23 and Serug lived after the birth of Nahor two hundred years, and had other sons and daughters.

24 When Nahor had lived twenty-nine years, he became the father of Terah; 25 and Nahor lived after the birth of Terah one hundred nineteen years, and had other sons and daughters.

26 When Terah had lived seventy years, he became the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran. (11.10-26)

The section 11.27-32 sets up the cycle of stories which are to follow. It locates Abram first in Ur, then in Haran (a locale we will visit more than once). It introduces Sarai (later Sarah) his wife, who is barren and has no child—portents of things to come. And it presents Abram’s nephew Lot, about whom we will hear a great deal.

Ancestral History/ Abraham and Sarah: Genesis 12.1-25.18

Red identifies the “Yahwist” or “J” source; green the “Elohist” or “E” source, and purple the “Priestly” or “P” source. Sections left in black are either mixed or not able to be identified.

12.1-9 The Call of Abram; the Threefold Promise of Land, Progeny, Blessing
12.10-20 Abram and Sarai in Egypt (Sarai and Pharaoh)
13.1-18 Abram and Lot Separate
14.1-16 Lot’s Captivity and Rescue
14.17-24 Abram Blessed by Melchizedek
15.1-21 God’s Covenant with Abram (UNCERTAIN: “J” and “E”?)
16.1-15 The First Story about Hagar; the Birth of Ishmael with some “P”
17.1-27 El Shaddai’s Covenant with Abram; Circumcision
18.1-15 Yahweh Visits Abraham, Promises Son
18.16-33 Abraham and Yahweh on the Fate of Sodom
19.1-11 The Depravity of Sodom
19.12-29 Sodom and Gomorrah Destroyed
19.30-38 Lot and His Daughters: The Origin of Moab and Ammon
20.1-18 Abraham and Sarah et Gerar (Sarah and King Abimelech)
21.1-7 The Birth of Isaac (MIXTURE OF “J” AND “P”)
21.8-21 Hagar and Ishmael Sent Away
21.22-34 Abraham and Abimelech Make a Treaty
22.1-19 The Command to Sacrifice Isaac
22.20-24 The Children of Nahor
23.1-20 Sarah’s Death and Burial
24.1-67 The Marriage of Isaac and Rebekah
25.1-6 Abraham Marries Keturah; Their Children
25.7-11 The Death of Abraham; Burial by Isaac and Ishmael
25.12-18 Ishmael’s Descendants
Divine Promises

The Story of Abraham begins with a call to migrate and is driven by three-fold promise for land, offspring and to be blessing to the families of the earth.

Now the L ORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (12.1-3)

This promise in one form or another is repeated throughout the remainder of Genesis. The promise to be a blessing occurs twice more to Abraham:

17 The L ORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? (18.17-18)

7 I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.” (22.18)

To Isaac once:

2 The L ORD appeared to Isaac and said, “Do not go down to Egypt; settle in the land that I shall show you. Reside in this land as an alien, and I will be with you, and will bless you; for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will fulfill the oath that I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and will give to your offspring all these lands; and all the nations of the earth shall gain blessing for themselves through your offspring, because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.” (26.3-5)

And to Jacob:

And the L ORD stood beside him and said, “I am the L ORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. (28.13-14)

The promise of land occurs in two of these citations (to Isaac, 26.3-5; to Jacob 28.13-14), but there are several specific promises of land:

When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the L ORD appeared to Abram, and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” (12.5)

The L ORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, “Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you. (13.14-17)

Perhaps the most striking comes in 15.18, where the description of the land promised corresponds to the extent of Solomon’s kingdom (1 Kings 4.21)—this is one of the reasons scholars identify the Yahwist source with Solomon’s court.

18 On that day the L ORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.” (15.18)
To Jacob:

The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you.” (35.12)

Given the fact that the stories of Genesis set up the books that follow, which are focused mainly on reaching the land that was promised, it is a little surprising that it is the promise of offspring that predominates in Genesis —and most especially in the Abraham and Sarah narratives.

The promise of offspring is repeated again and again both by Yahweh (12.2, 15.5, and 18.10) and, in an important Priestly passage, by El Shaddai (“God Almighty”) in 17.15-22. But no child comes. Abraham raises this problem directly with the deity on two occasions:

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” 2 But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” 3 And Abram said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” 4 But the word of the LORD came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.” 5 He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” 6 And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness. (15.1-6)

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty… 2 And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” 3 Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 4 No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 5 I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. 6 I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. 7 And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God.”

15 God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. 16 I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.” 17 Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, “Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” 18 And Abraham said to God, “O that Ishmael might live in your sight!” 19 God said, “No, but your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. (17.1-8, 15-19)

Isaac, by the way, means “he who laughs,” and laughter occurs several times in these stories—see above and below.

Doubt in the promised is expressed another way in 18.9-15, with Sarah’s laughter:

9 They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” 10 Then one said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. 11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. 12 So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” 13 The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ 14 Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.” 15 But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. He said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.”
Promises and Problems

The difficulty is not only that deity seems to be in no hurry, Abraham and Sarah also add to the problem. In the primordial stories, humans cause trouble by disobedience, anger, arrogance. This is not true of Abraham, who is more careless than anything else. And Sarah is, if anything, impatient (the main example is her substituting Hagar as a child bearer).

Just after they reach the land of Canaan, and Abraham has done some moving around building altars (this is interesting in itself, as “Canaanites were in the land,” 12.6b, and Abraham is visiting Canaanite sites to reconsecrate them for Yahweh), there is a famine in the land. They head for Egypt (as will Jacob and his family later in similar circumstances). As they enter Egypt, Abraham asks Sarah (the means by which the promise of a child is to be fulfilled) to say that she is his sister. Since this wife-as-sister is told three times with different characters, it is interesting to compare them (what is striking is that in Genesis 20, this is just before Isaac is finally born):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genesis 12.10-20 (Yahwist)</th>
<th>Genesis 20.1-17 (Elohist)</th>
<th>Genesis 26.6-11 (Yahwist)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to reside there as an alien, for the famine was severe in the land. When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, “I know well that you are a woman beautiful in appearance; and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife;’ then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account.” When Abram entered Egypt the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. When the officials of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh’s house. And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female slaves, female donkeys, and camels. But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram’s wife. So Pharaoh called Abram, and said, “What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, ‘She is my sister,’ so that I let her live?”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>From there Abraham journeyed toward the region of the Negeb, and settled between Kadesh and Shur. While residing in Gerar as an alien, Abraham said of his wife Sarah, “She is my sister.” And King Abimelech of Gerar sent and took Sarah. But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, “You are about to die because of the woman whom you have taken; for she is a married woman.” Now Abimelech had not approached her; so he said, “Lord, will you destroy an innocent people? Did he not himself say to me, ‘She is my sister’? And she herself said, ‘He is my brother.’ I did this in the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands.” Then God said to him in the dream, “Yes, I know that you did this in the integrity of your heart; furthermore it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her. Now then, return the man’s wife; for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you shall live. But if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, you and all that are yours.”</td>
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<td>6 So Isaac settled in Gerar. 7 When the men of the place asked him about his wife, he said, “She is my sister”; for he was afraid to say, “My wife,” thinking, “or else the men of the place might kill me for the sake of Rebekah, because she is attractive in appearance.” When Isaac had been there a long time, King Abimelech of the Philistines looked out of a window and saw him fondling his wife Rebekah. So Abimelech called for Isaac, and said, “So she is your wife! Why then did you say, ‘She is my sister’?” Isaac said to him, “Because I thought I might die because of her.” Abimelech said, “What is this you have done to us? One of the people might easily have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us.” So Abimelech warned all the people, saying, “Whoever touches this man or his wife shall be put to death.”</td>
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25
20 And Pharaoh gave his men orders concerning him; and they set him on the way, with his wife and all that he had.

9 Then Abimelech called Abraham, and said to him, “What have you done to us? How have I sinned against you, that you have brought such great guilt on me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that ought not to be done.”

10 And Abimelech said to Abraham, “What were you thinking of, that you did this thing?”

11 Abraham said, “I did it because I thought, There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife. Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife.

12 And when God caused me to wander from my father’s house, I said to her, ‘This is the kindness you must do me: at every place to which we come, say of me, He is my brother.’”

13 Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves, and gave them to Abraham, and restored his wife Sarah to him.

14 Abimelech said, “My land is before you; settle where it pleases you.”

15 To Sarah he said, “Look, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver; it is your exoneration before all who are with you; you are completely vindicated.”

16 Then Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children. 18 For the LORD had closed fast all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham’s wife.
There is another careless act by Abraham, which could have frustrated the promise of land. It comes in 13.5-13. The land cannot support the flocks of both Abraham and his nephew Lot, and there was strife between their herders. Abraham offers a solution by allowing Lot to choose the land he wants, and Abraham will take what is left. Fortunately for the future of the promise, Lot chose the land to the east, and Abraham was left with what Yahweh promised.

**Lot**

This introduces one of two major sub-plots in the Abraham-Sarah narratives: the story of Lot. (The other is the story of Hagar, to which we will turn.) Lot has come with Abraham from Haran (12.4), gone with him to Egypt (13.1), and after the agreement with Abraham settled in Sodom (13.12-13). When, in Chapter 18, Yahweh visits Abraham and (in addition to promising a child once again) confides his displeasure with Sodom and Gomorrah. There follows the well known dialogue between Abraham and Yahweh, in which Abraham appeals to Yahweh’s justice to save Sodom if—after wrangling—ten righteous are found there. The angels arrive at Sodom, are desired by the men of the city, protected by Lot with an offer of his virgin daughters, and finally secured by the angels who strike the men with blindness. (19.1-11) There is the failed attempt by to rescue Lot’s sons-in-law (whose wives are virgins!), then the forced escape by Lot, his wife and two daughters, and the fate of his wife. (19.12-26) Finally, there is the story of Lot and his daughters, and the birth from drunken incest of the ancestors of the Moabites and the Ammonites (19.30-38), an explanation story with a vengeance.

**Hagar**

There are two stories about Hagar, Sarah’s Egyptian slave-girl and mother of Abraham’s son Ishmael. Phyllis Trible in her book *Texts of Terror* has an excellent treatment of these narratives. In the first, Genesis 16.1-15, Sarah takes the initiative when she remains childless:

> You see that the LORD has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.” And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. 3 So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram’s wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. 4 He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. (16.2-4)

Sarah, stung by Hagar’s contempt, harasses her until the pregnant Hagar runs away. She is on her way to Egypt when the angel of Yahweh overtakes her and sends her back, promising that he will greatly multiply her offspring. She complies and Ishmael is born.

In the second story (21.8-20), this one from the Elohist, Sarah resents the relationship of Ishmael with the child Isaac and successfully petitions (in this she is supported by God) Abraham to cast out “this slave woman and her son”—as Trible points out, robbing Hagar of her name and denying Ishmael’s relation to Abraham. The departure anticipates Abraham’s in Chapter 22, when he sets out to sacrifice Isaac. In neither case is Sarah present.

**Isaac**

Things ultimately turn out well for Ishmael. As for Isaac, he still faces the ordeal when God tests Abraham in Chapter 22:1.19 (another Elohist narrative), a tersely and riveting story. It begins:
After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.”  
He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.” (22.2)

The story baffles and intrigues many. Is it an early witness against child sacrifice? Is it a test as to whether Abraham’s trust is more in his finally given child or in Yahweh? The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard has written a masterpiece based on this story: *Fear and Trembling.*

In any case, Isaac is born and survives. Sarah dies (there is a delightful account of Abraham’s bargaining for land in which to bury her, 23.1-20). A wife is secured for Isaac—again, a long and masterful example of story-telling in 24.1-67. Abraham marries again and has other children and dies (25.1-11). After a notation on the descendants of Ishmael (25.12-18), we are in position to live through the Jacob cycle of stories.

### Ancestral History/ Isaac and Rebekah: Genesis 26

Red identifies the “Yahwist” or “J” source; green the “Elohist” or “E” source, and purple the “Priestly” or “P” source. Sections left in black are either mixed or not able to be identified.

26.1-33   Isaac and Abimelech  
26.34-35   Esau’s Hittite Wives

Somewhat surprisingly, there is very little about Isaac and Rebekah in Genesis. Whether he will be born and once born allowed to live is part of the Abraham-Sarah cycle, as is the beautiful story about her selection as his wife. Then, in the Jacob-Rachel-Leah stories, Rebekah appears in the birth of her two sons Jacob and Esau; and Isaac and Rebekah are in the story of the deception of Isaac to obtain the blessing. But other than that, there is only Chapter 26. There we have the promise of the land to Isaac and his descendents (vv 1-5), the Isaac version of the wife-as-sister story (vv 6-11), and a conflict-resolution story about a well.

### Ancestral History/ Jacob, Rachel and Leah: Genesis 25, 27-30

Red identifies the “Yahwist” or “J” source; green the “Elohist” or “E” source, and purple the “Priestly” or “P” source. Sections left in black are either mixed or not able to be identified.

25.19-28   The Birth and Youth of Esau and Jacob (19-20: “P”)  
25.29-34   Esau Sells His Birthright  
26.1-33   Isaac and Abimelech  
26.34-35   Esau’s Hittite Wives  
27.1-40   Isaac Deceived by Rebekah and Jacob; Isaac Blesses Jacob  
27.41-45   Jacob’s Departure (First Version) to Haran  
27.46-28.5   Jacob’s Departure (Second Version) to Paddan-aram  
28.6-9   Esau Marries Ishmael’s Daughter  
28.10-22   Jacob’s Dream at Bethel (J 13-16, 19)  
29.1-14   Jacob Meets Rachel  
29.15-30   Jacob is Deceived by Laban, Marries Leah, then Rachel (J/E/P)  
29.31-30.24   The Birth of Jacob’s Children (by two wives and two maids) (J/E)  
30.25-43   Jacob Prospers at Laban’s Expense (J/E)  
31.1-21   Jacob Flees with Family and Flocks (1,3, J/2,4-18a,E, 18b,P)  
31.22-42   Laban Overtakes Jacob (25,27,J/19-24, 26 28-45, E/J)  
31.43-32.2   Laban and Jacob Make a Covenant(46-52,J/53-55,E)  
32.1-3   The Angels of Mahanaim  
32.3-21   Jacob Sends Presents to Appease Esau (3-13a, J/13b-31, E)  
32.22-32   Jacob Wrestles at Peniel  
33.1-17   Jacob and Esau Meet (1-4,6-10,12-17, J/5,11,E)
33.18-20 Jacob Reaches Shechem (except 18b, P)
34.1-24 The Rape of Dinah—but extremely complex
34.25-31 Dinah’s Brothers Avenge Their Sister—but extremely complex
35.1-8, 14-15 Jacob Returns to Bethel (J/E)
35.9-13 God’s Appearance at Bethel
35.16-26 The Birth of Benjamin and the Death of Rachel (J/E/22b-26, P)
35.27-29 The Death of Isaac
36.1-14 The Descendants of Esau (Edom)

Overview

Things are a little different when we get into the Jacob-Rachel-Leah (actually, Jacob-Esau-Laban) cycle of stories. In the Abraham-Sarah narratives, the focus was on the three-fold promise, with special emphasis on the promise of offspring. Will the offspring ever come? Mixed with this are the instances where, by carelessness or impatience, the humans threaten the promise. In the Jacob cycle, all these stories are either about conflicts or tribulations, epitomized by the wrestling at the river Jabbok in Chapter 32.

Moreover, unlike the Abraham-Sarah stories, the deity is largely absent from the narratives about Jacob. The major exceptions are the four special manifestations of Yahweh or Elohim, called theophanies. The two special appearances are at the major transitions in the overall narrative—one when Jacob is fleeing from Esau and going to Laban, the other when he is fleeing from Laban and is about to reencounter Esau.

The scholarly approach is also different. Literary analysis was in some ways at its best in the primordial or primeval stories and the Abraham-Sarah narratives; tradition analysis does its best work in the Jacob-Rachel-Leah cycle. Whereas literary-historical analysts seek to identify sources (such as “J,” “E,” and “P”) that were combined to form the present Book of Genesis, tradition analysts are interested in the process by which individual stories and other literary units evolved over time and how they became united with others to form cycles or clusters of stories. They have found the story of Jacob to be especially amenable to their interests and methods.

The story of Jacob follows the story of Abraham and Sarah, and precedes the story of Joseph. Covering roughly eleven chapters of the Book of Genesis (25.19-36.43), it is a coherent story, much more than that of Abraham and Sarah. It goes like this: after a troubled birth with his brother Esau, Jacob extorts his brother’s birthright, and with his mother deceives the blind Isaac into giving Jacob the blessing due to Esau. Jacob then flees for fear of Esau’s retaliation, and goes to live with his uncle Laban in the land of his ancestors. On the way he is encountered by the deity at Luz, which he renames Bethel (“house of God”). He works for Laban and marries both of his daughters, Leah and (his true love) Rachel. They and their maids bear him eleven sons (Benjamin is born later) and a daughter. After further trickery against one another on the part of Laban and Jacob, Jacob slips away with his wives, children and possessions to return home. He is pursued by Laban, but they conclude a treaty. About to face Esau, Jacob has an encounter with a strange man who turns out to be a deity—the place is Penuel (after Peniel, “face of God”), and Jacob’s name is changed to Israel. He and Esau meet and are surprisingly reconciled, though each goes his own way.

The tradition analysts noticed, however, that there are two accounts of Jacob’s leaving home. In the first (27.41-45) he goes to Haran; in the second (27.46-28.5) he goes to Paddan-Aram. In one the motive is fear of Esau; in the other it is to preserve the blood line by marrying a daughter of Laban. (In this respect, one recalls the determination of Abraham to get a wife for Isaac from his ancestral home in Haran.) If this latter motive is coupled with the fact that Esau is never mentioned in the stories about Laban, Leah and Rachel, the Jacob-Laban stories appear to be independent of the Jacob-Esau stories.

The tradition analysts concluded that there were originally two independent cycles of stories: the Jacob-Esau story (25.19-27.45 and 32.3-33.17) bracketing the Jacob-Laban story (27.46-32.2). In addition they saw the appearances by a deity (called theophanies) at Bethel (28.10-22) and at Penuel (32.22-32) as distinct and
independent of one another. They then wanted to know what earlier traditions lay behind each of these cycles of stories and divine appearances, and how they came together.

On the Jacob-Laban stories, a central component—consistent with the motive of having the right children by the right women—is the birth of Jacob’s sons. Given the fact that, according to many scholars, there were originally two confederations of tribes that eventually came together under David to form a nation, and that this union was always tenuous and lay behind the division of the kingdom after Solomon died, the birth of the twelve sons by two different wives who were in competition with one another reflected the actual tribal situation.

Also, they found a surprising clue to this cycle of stories in its closing verses, where Jacob and Laban make a territorial treaty. They saw this and also all the struggle between Jacob and Laban as reflecting later disputes between Israel and Aram (Syria). It was especially important, consequently, that this part of the story of Jacob occur in Paddan-Aram (Syria) and not Haran (Mesopotamia).

The Jacob-Esau stories, by contrast, are located in the area on either side of the Jordan, and reflect another set of conflicts. Actually tradition analysts were able to identify a layering of traditions of conflict. A classic story of conflict between brothers (of the Abel-Cain sort), is retold to mirror the struggle between two ways of life vying for the same territory—that of shepherd and hunter. And this in turn is retold as the conflict between Judah and Edom/Seir (Esau’s being “red” plays off the word Edom and his being “hairy” plays off the word Seir). And this finally becomes the story of Jacob and Esau.

The two theophanies (at Bethel and at Penuel) also reveal a similar kind of layering. To begin with, because the deities of the Israelites were not attached to places, but to persons (the “Shield of Abram,” in Genesis 15.1; the “Fear of Isaac,” 31.42, 53; the “Mighty One of Jacob,” 49.24) and adopted Canaanite shrines when they settled in or conquered the area, these stories were originally localized cult legends which were expanded to serve Israelite needs.

In the case of Bethel (28.10-22), the first layer of the story has to do with a pillar that marked a sacred place (a Canaanite practice). The second layer tells of a stairway or ramp to and from heaven, and explains the name of the place “Bethel” (“house of God”). Both of these probably antedate the period of the ancestors, including Jacob (Abram visited Bethel, 12.8). Later an oracle was attached to the story, in which the promises of land and progeny are extended to Jacob, along with divine protection. And there is finally the brief mention of the tithe, which may have become part of pilgrimages to the site.

The account of the divine appearance at Penuel (32.22-32) provides an even clearer instance of layering. This is the story of Jacob wrestling with “a man” through the night, receiving a new name (Israel), a blessing, and a limp. He names the place “Peniel,” “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” The limp explains a dietary prohibition against eating the thigh muscle. The story contains three aetiologies: explanation of the name of the place, explanation of Jacob’s new name, and an explanation of a dietary prohibition. The layering is identified in this way: the name of the place is probably Canaanite (pre-Israelite), to which the story of Jacob’s new name is added during the Israelite period, and the explanation of the dietary prohibition is added at the time of the Exile.

So we have two distinct cycles of stories related to Jacob (the Jacob-Esau and the Jacob-Laban), and two independent theophanies—what was the process by which they were brought together to constitute the present story of Jacob?

The two cycles of stories related to Jacob reflect a geographical area related to the name Jacob that had two distinct interests (much as one could speak of eastern Carolina and western Carolina both being called “Carolina”). One had to do with the origin of the twelve tribes from two mothers and the border conflicts with Aram (Syria). The other had to do with conflicts first between shepherds and hunters, then between Judah and Edom. At some point the interest of the whole area outweighed the importance of the different cycles of stories, and one story emerged. The Jacob-Laban stories now provided an interlude during which Esau could “cool down.” The two theophanies, each with geographical importance, provided the linkages for bringing the two
cycles of stories together. One (Bethel) tells of an experience of Jacob as he leaves home for Laban’s house, and the other (Penuel) of Jacob’s experience as he is caught between Laban and Esau, and does not know what to expect from the latter.

What this method reveals is that all social texts and practices, including those of religion, change over time as needs and realities change, while preserving the insights and achievements of the past.

*Jacob and Esau (25.21-28; 25.29-34; 27.1-40; 27.41-45; 33.1-17)*

Three stories relate the competition and conflict between Jacob and Esau, which necessitates Jacob’s fleeing. The first is about their birth.

21 Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. 22 The children struggled together within her; and she said, “If it is to be this way, why do I live?” So she went to inquire of the LORD. 23 And the LORD said to her, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.”

24 When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. 25 The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. 26 Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau’s heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. 27 When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. 28 Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

(25.21-28)

Esau is born first, but not without a fight (“Jacob” in Hebrew means “He takes by the heel” or “He supplants”). The subsequent conflict is rooted in parental preferences, overlaid by cultural distinctions (hunter-tent dweller), and anticipating ethnic or national differences (two words characterizing Esau are “red,” in Hebrew a play on “Edom,” and “hairy,” a play on Seir).

There follow two well-known stories about Jacob’s securing what belonged to Esau—first his birthright, then their father’s blessing. The first is short and terse.

29 Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. 30 Esau said to Jacob, “Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!” (Therefore he was called Edom. 31 Jacob said, “First sell me your birthright.” 32 Esau said, “I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?” 33 Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. 34 Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright. (25.29-34)

Esau (Edom) is portrayed as brutish. Many commentators have commented on the rapid succession of Hebrew verbs used to describe him: “he ate and he drank and he rose and he went his way.” Moreover, the verb used by Esau to ask for the “red stuff” and translated “let me eat,” is rendered “let me gulp down” by Alter. It “occurs nowhere else in the Bible, but in rabbinic Hebrew…is reserved for the feeding of animals” (Alter, p. 129).

The other is the conspiracy by Rebekah and Jacob to deceive the blind husband and father Isaac into giving his blessing, intended for Esau, to Jacob. It is a long and beautifully constructed story. Jacob is still grasping.

5 Then Rebekah took the best garments of her elder son Esau, which were with her in the house, and put them on her younger son Jacob; 16 and she put the skins of the kids on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck. 17 Then she handed the savory food, and the bread that she had prepared, to her son Jacob.
So he went in to his father, and said, “My father”; and he said, “Here I am; who are you, my son?”  
Jacob said to his father, “I am Esau your firstborn. I have done as you told me; now sit up and eat of my game, so that you may bless me.”  
But Isaac said to his son, “How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son?” He answered, “Because the LORD your God granted me success.”  
Then Isaac said to Jacob, “Come near, that I may feel you, my son, to know whether you are really my son Esau or not.”  
So Jacob went up to his father Isaac, who felt him and said, “The voice is Jacob’s voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau.”  
He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau’s hands; so he blessed him.  
He said, “Are you really my son Esau?” He answered, “I am.” (27.15-24)

One has sympathy for Esau, and his hatred of Jacob.

Rebekah fears for Jacob’s life and at her urging he flees toward Haran. (In the Priestly version, the motive is for a non-Canaanite wife, to be found in Paddan-aram.) Rebekah never sees him again.

The First Theophany: Jacob at Bethel (28.10-22)

The narrative now has a bridge story (28.10-22), telling what happens to Jacob as he flees from Esau. There will be another bridge story as Jacob returns in 31.19-32.32, especially 32.22-32. Both contain an encounter with the deity (a theophany). In this story, Jacob arrives at “a certain place” and is in a liminal state. What does the future hold? There is a stone, then a “ramp” (traditionally but inaccurately “ladder’) with messengers from God going up and down, a promise from Yahweh, a pillar, a naming of the place “Bethel,” and a vow—but the focus of the appearance is the promise. There is a traditional part (offspring, land, and blessing) and something new (the promise of Yahweh to be with Jacob):

And the LORD stood beside him and said, “I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” (28.13-15)

What is special interest is the vow Jacob makes:

“If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you.” (28.20-22)

Commenting on this vow, Robert Alter says:

Jacob, however, remains the suspicious bargainer—a “wrestler” with words and conditions just as he is a physical wrestler, a heel-grabber…he wants to be sure God will fulfill His side of the bargain before he commits to God’s service…” (Genesis, p. 150, note of verse 20)

Jacob and Laban (29.1-31.55)

Jacob arrives in Haran. The next section of the narrative tells of his dealings with his uncle Laban. These stories (wrapped around accounts of the birth his children) are marked by deception throughout. The first of the Jacob-Laban stories in about Jacob’s marriages. Jacob had met Rachel at a well (29.1-14)—remember Abraham’s servant and Rebekah—and agrees to work seven years in return for her. Laban agrees, but then deceives and cheats Jacob (in a kind of poetic justice):

Then Laban said to Jacob, “Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?”  
Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the elder
was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. 17 Leah’s eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful
and beautiful. 18 Jacob loved Rachel; so he said, “I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter
Rachel.” 19 Laban said, “It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man;
stay with me.” 20 So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days
because of the love he had for her.

21 Then Jacob said to Laban, “Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed.” 22
So Laban gathered together all the people of the place, and made a feast. 23 But in the evening he took
his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob; and he went in to her. 24 (Laban gave his maid Zilpah to
his daughter Leah to be her maid.) 25 When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, “What
is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?” 26
Laban said, “This is not done in our country—giving the younger before the firstborn.” (29.15-26)

Jacob then works another seven years for Rachel.

Before we get to the second of the Jacob-Laban stories, there are the stories about the birth of Jacob’s
children (30.1-24). The form they take is a competition of sorts between the two wives Leah and Rachel, and
their respective concubines (Zilpah and Bilhah). The sequence:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offspring</th>
<th>Born of Leah</th>
<th>Born of Zilpah</th>
<th>Born of Rachel</th>
<th>Born of Bilhah</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reuben</td>
<td>Born of Leah</td>
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<td>Simeon</td>
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<td>Judah</td>
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<td>Dan</td>
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<td>Born of Zilpah</td>
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<td>Issachar</td>
<td>Born of Leah</td>
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<td>Zebulon</td>
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<td>Dinah</td>
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<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
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<td>Born of Rachel</td>
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One of the interesting stories within this tale has to do with mandrakes—which were considered
aphrodisiacs and having the virtue of promoting fertility.

In the days of wheat harvest Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them to his
mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, “Please give me some of your son’s mandrakes.” 15 But she said
to her, “Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband? Would you take away my son’s
mandrakes also?” Rachel said, “Then he may lie with you tonight for your son’s mandrakes.” 16 When
Jacob came from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him, and said, “You must come in to
me; for I have hired you with my son’s mandrakes.” So he lay with her that night. 17 And God heeded
Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. (30.14-17)

The second narrative on the dealings of Jacob and Laban (30.26-43) has to do with the manner in which
Jacob outmaneuvers Laban’s maneuvering on the matter of wages. Laban agrees to pay Jacob with “every
speckled and spotted sheep and every black lamb, and the spotted and speckled among the goats;” then proceeds
to hide all animals with such markings.

But that day Laban removed the male goats that were striped and spotted, and all the female goats that
were speckled and spotted, every one that had white on it, and every lamb that was black, and put them
in charge of his sons; 36 and he set a distance of three days’ journey between himself and Jacob, while
Jacob was pasturing the rest of Laban’s flock. (30.35-36)

But Jacob is not to be outwitted:
Then Jacob took fresh rods of poplar and almond and plane, and peeled white streaks in them, exposing the white of the rods. He set the rods that he had peeled in front of the flocks in the troughs, that is, the watering places, where the flocks came to drink. And since they bred when they came to drink, the flocks bred in front of the rods, and so the flocks produced young that were striped, speckled, and spotted. Jacob separated the lambs, and set the faces of the flocks toward the striped and the completely black animals in the flock of Laban; and he put his own droves apart, and did not put them with Laban’s flock. Whenever the stronger of the flock were breeding, Jacob laid the rods in the troughs before the eyes of the flock, that they might breed among the rods, but for the feebler of the flock he did not lay them there; so the feebler were Laban’s, and the stronger Jacob’s. Thus the man grew exceedingly rich, and had large flocks, and male and female slaves, and camels and donkeys.

The upshot is that once again—this time because Laban’s sons resent Jacob’s success—Jacob, his wives and children, and what he has amassed, must flee. Laban pursues and overtakes them, accusations are made, the wonderful incident of Rachel and the household gods is reported, and finally Jacob and Laban make a treaty.

Jacob and Esau (32.1-33.20)

Now there is only Esau to face, and the narrator sets this scene with great skill. Jacob anxiously anticipates the meeting with Esau. He sends gifts ahead, and places his family and possessions between him and his brother. What will be the outcome?

The Second Theophany: Jacob at Penuel (32.22-32)

Alone Jacob in another supremely uncertain state, wrestles through the night with an anonymous being, is wounded, and renamed Israel—“for you have striven with God and men, and have won out.” It epitomizes Jacob and his story. All that he has done, through all his struggles and conniving, is not reprimanded but praised. The story is told this way:

The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” Then the man said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

This passage has three etiologies—the name of the place, the name “Israel,” and the dietary prohibition. It is a favorite with tradition analysts, as noted above. This is roughly how they analyze the text, showing how an old pre-Israelite story about the name Penuel, was used as an explanation story of the name “Israel,” and subsequently to explain a dietary law.

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<th>Genesis 32:24-32</th>
<th>Etiology of Name of Penuel [Pre-Israelite (Canaanite?)]</th>
<th>Etiology of Name of Israel [Israelite]</th>
<th>Etiology of Dietary Prohibition [Period of the Exile?]</th>
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<td>24 Jacob was left alone; and a man</td>
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34
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Jacob and Esau Continued (33.1-17)

The meeting goes unexpectedly well. Jacob “went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother. But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.” (33.4) Still, at Esau’s suggestion that the two groups travel on together, Jacob resists and they go their several ways. Does suspicion continue?

From there the Jacob-Leah-Rachel cycle of stories winds down. Jacob returns to Shechem (33.18-20), then to the site of the first theophany, Bethel (35.1-15) and the Priestly account of the name change from Jacob to Israel. Rachel dies as she gives birth to her second son Benjamin (35.16-20). Isaac dies (35.27-29); both Jacob and Esau buried him.

In the midst of all of this, there is the story of the rape of Dinah by Shechem, and the revenge exacted by her brothers (Chapter 34, between Jacob’s stay at Shechem and at Bethel). It seems to have no place in the overall narrative. One thing is certain, in this story the sons of Jacob assume leadership over the father, a theme that will be played out in the story of Joseph, to which we turn next.

Ancestral History/ Joseph: Genesis 37-50

Red identifies the “Yahwist” or “J” source; green the “Elohist” or “E” source, and purple the “Priestly” or “P” source. Sections left in black are either mixed or not able to be identified.
Overview

The story of Joseph is familiar and well-told. He is hated by his brothers (not without reason), who sell him into slavery in Egypt (reporting him dead to Jacob). At this point the story of Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar is told. In Egypt he is bought by an Egyptian official named Potiphar, who eventually makes him overseer of his house. An ill-fated interchange with Potiphar’s wife lands him in prison, where once again he gains a responsible position. There he interprets the dreams of two of Pharaoh’s servants who are also in prison, then later the dreams of Pharaoh himself—all about seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. Once again Joseph achieves great responsibility and power, second only to Pharaoh.

The famine comes, and extends to Canaan, where Jacob and his family live. Jacob sends ten of his sons (Rachel’s other son Benjamin is kept at home) to Egypt to buy grain. They encounter Joseph whom they do not recognize, though he knows them. He sets a trap of sorts which force them to bring Benjamin back on a second trip—then creates another situation which allows him to enslave Benjamin in Egypt. At this point, Judah intercedes of Benjamin’s behalf and Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, with the first of two assurances that what they did to him was intended by God to “preserve life.” Jacob then brings his whole family to Egypt, where he blesses all his sons and dies. Joseph dies in Egypt. Anticipating the exodus, he extracts a promise to have his bones brought out at that time.

There are differences from what has gone before. Joseph is not an ancestor in the same sense as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He receives no promises of offspring or land. But his story, which occupies roughly a fourth of the Book of Genesis, plays an essential part of the larger story. That story is of a people who are led out of slavery in Egypt to the land of Canaan which had earlier been promised to them. Joseph’s story is the vehicle by which that people get to Egypt in the first place. Without it, or something similar, there would be no exodus, the defining event of Israelite consciousness.

But Joseph’s story has another meaning. The deity is referred to as being present at points, but no longer directly in action or words; this is primarily a human drama through and through. It is about how its characters become wise through experience. Each incident is a turn in events that ultimately produces a change in the persons involved. This makes it different from the previous cycles of stories. There is no overarching plot in the Abraham-Sarah stories, and no character development. In the Jacob-Leah-Rachel cycle, there is some plot, but no character development. But in the Joseph story, there are both. Events produce awareness in the brothers and wisdom in Joseph. In short, the story of Joseph has a plot and character development—it is, as several commentators have remarked, a novella.

What this means is that the most helpful scholarly approach to Joseph’s story is genre or form analysis, albeit of a very large amount of material. Source analysis—the identification of underlying sources such as J or E or P—has proved difficult and not very helpful. Nonetheless, there are some obvious indicators of these sources. Some passages refer to Joseph’s father as “Jacob”, while others call him “Israel.” The “Jacob” passages highlight the role of Reuben; the “Israel” passages stress the position of Judah. A good example is Genesis 42-43:

**Genesis 42.36-38 [Jacob/Reuben] Genesis 43.1-10 [Israel/Judah]**

And their father Jacob said to them, “I am the one you have bereaved of children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and now you would take Benjamin. All this has happened to me!” Then Reuben said to his father, “You may kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you. Put him in my hands, and I will bring him back to you.” But he said, “My son shall not go down with you, for his now the famine was severe in the land. And when they had eaten up the grain that they had brought from Egypt, their father said to them, “Go again, buy us a little more food.” But Judah said to him, “The man solemnly warned us, saying, ‘You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you.’ If you will send our brother with us, we will go down and buy you food; but if you will not send him, we will not go down, for the man said to us, ‘You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you.’” Israel said, “Why did you treat me so badly as to tell the man that you had another brother?” They replied, “The man questioned us carefully about ourselves and
brother is dead, and he alone is left. If harm should come to him on the journey that you are to make, you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol.”

our kindred, saying, ‘Is your father still alive? Have you another brother?’ What we told him was in answer to these questions. Could we in any way know that he would say, ‘Bring your brother down?’” 8 Then Judah said to his father Israel, “Send the boy with me, and let us be on our way, so that we may live and not die—you and we and also our little ones. 9 I myself will be surety for him; you can hold me accountable for him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever. 10 If we had not delayed, we would now have returned twice.”

The focus on Judah and Reuben is shown earlier in the account of the brothers’ harmful actions toward Joseph. In this instance, Judah is coupled with the Ishmaelites, while Reuben is related to the Midianites:

So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. 18 They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. 19 They said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer. 20 Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.” 21 But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, “Let us not take his life.” 22 Reuben said to them, “Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him”—that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. 23 So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; 24 and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. 25 Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. 26 Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? 27 Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers agreed. 28 When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt. 29 When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes. 30 He returned to his brothers, and said, “The boy is gone; and I, where can I turn?” 31 Then they took Joseph’s robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. 32 They had the long robe with sleeves taken to their father, and they said, “This we have found; see now whether it is your son’s robe or not.” 33 He recognized it, and said, “It is my son’s robe! A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.” 34 Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. 35 All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, “No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.” Thus his father bewailed him. 36 Meanwhile the Midianites had sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials, the captain of the guard. (37.17-35)

The emphasis on the acquisition of wisdom drawn from experience—as compared with the pursuit of promises received from a deity—has led several commentators to place its composition in Solomon’s court. Solomon was renowned for wisdom, and he appears to have been fascinated with Egypt, one of the sources of wisdom in his day and a model for the increased cosmopolitanism of his reign. Gerhard von Rad, in an extensive discussion of the subject and specifically the narrator’s knowledge of Pharaoh’s residence, writes (Genesis, pp. 434-435):

A more probable assumption is that the narrator was thinking of the conditions of his own day with respect to Pharaoh’s residence. No one can deny that he has a good and very competent working knowledge of Egyptian conditions; but this is essentially the knowledge of his own day. In Solomon’s days especially, there was lively commerce with Egypt, not only political but also in the realm of universal culture.
Joseph and His Brothers (37.1-36)

Joseph’s brothers hated him. We have seen this fraternal hatred before—Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau. The story of Joseph gives us several specific reasons. He tattles on his brothers (“Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father,” 37.2). He receives preferential treatment (again with earlier parallels)—the famous coat of many colors (or, “ornamented tunic,” JTS, or “long robe with sleeves,” NRSV), unsuited for work.

…when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him. (37.4)

Then there are Joseph’s two dreams (37.5-11) intimating that his father and eleven brothers were to bow before him. Ironically this turns out to be true by the end of the story, but here it only further incenses the brothers. They “hated him even more” (37.8). Given the chance they set about to do him in.

So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. 18 They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. 19 They said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer. 20 Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.” (37.17b-19)

Indeed!

As we have seen above, at this point both Reuben and Judah, each in his own way, seek to save Joseph. The best they can do: he is sold and ends up in Egypt. The brothers succeed by means of the robe soaked in goat’s blood in convincing Jacob that Joseph is dead (37.31-35). This deception, by the way, is but another in a long series that permeate the Book of Genesis—Abraham claiming Sarah to be his sister (twice), Isaac making the same claim of Rebekah, Jacob pretending to be Esau, Laban passing off Leah for Rachel, Jacob’s ruse on the animals, Rachel’s hiding Laban’s family gods. And we are not through, if we count the ways in which Joseph concealed his identity from his brothers later on (Genesis 42-45).

Judah and Tamar (38.1-30)

Deception (as well as ingenuity) by Judah’s daughter-in-law Tamar plays a determining role in the fascinating story (Genesis 38) about Judah’s intercourse with her. Twins are born, and one—Perez—is the line which, according to Ruth, produces David:

18 Now these are the descendants of Perez: Perez became the father of Hezron, 19 Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab, 20 Amminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon, 21 Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed, 22 Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David. (Ruth 4.18-22)

And for Christians, the line that produces Jesus:

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

2 Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, 3 and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, 4 and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, 5 and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, 6 and Jesse the father of King David. (Matthew 1.1-6)

Joseph in Egypt: The House of Potiphar (39.1-23)

According to the Yahwist, it is the Ishmaelites who bought Joseph (37.28), and they sell him to Potiphar, an Egyptian official. Joseph fares well and is put in charge of Potiphar’s house. Here we have the first mention of the deity in the Joseph story (39.2). But the deity does not speak or act, as with Abraham especially but also Jacob—it functions only as an explanation of events (the sole exception is 46.2-4). Whereas in the earlier
cycles, the deity acts in spite of human actions, in the Joseph story, it is interpreted as acting through what humans do.

2 The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man; he was in the house of his Egyptian master. 3 His master saw that the LORD was with him, and that the LORD caused all that he did to prosper in his hands. 4 So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him; he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. 5 From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the LORD blessed the Egyptian’s house for Joseph’s sake; the blessing of the LORD was on all that he had, in house and field. (39.2-5)

This view of the way the deity is present continues throughout the rest of the story:

1 But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer. 22 The chief jailer committed to Joseph’s care all the prisoners who were in the prison, and whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. 23 The chief jailer paid no heed to anything that was in Joseph’s care, because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper. (39.21-23)

37 The proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants. 38 Pharaoh said to his servants, “Can we find anyone else like this—one in whom is the spirit of God?” 39 So Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has shown you all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. 40 You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only with regard to the throne will I be greater than you.” 41 And Pharaoh said to Joseph, “See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.” (41.37-41)

4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come closer to me.” And they came closer. He said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. 5 And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. 6 For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. 7 God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. 8 So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. (45.4-8)

8 Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, “We are here as your slaves.” 19 But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? 20 Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. (50.18-20)

The experience of Joseph with Potiphar’s wife (39.6b-18) is frequently compared with an Egyptian tale, “Story of Two Brothers,” and reinforces the idea that the story of Joseph is influenced by Egyptian culture. But its importance for the story is that it shows for the first time that Joseph is a person of character:

Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking. 7 And after a time his master’s wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, “Lie with me.” 8 But he refused and said to his master’s wife, “Look, with me here, my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand. 9 He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” 10 And although she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not consent to lie beside her or to be with her. (39.6b-18)

Still, she concocts a scenario for her husband that enrages him and sends Joseph to prison.

**Joseph in Prison (39.20-41.36)**

In prison, Joseph again fares well, and for the same reason:
And Joseph’s master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined; he remained there in prison.  

But the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer.  

The chief jailer committed to Joseph’s care all the prisoners who were in the prison, and whatever was done there, he was the one who did it.  

The chief jailer paid no heed to anything that was in Joseph’s care, because the LORD was with him; and whatever he did, the LORD made it prosper.  

There Joseph is no longer the dreamer; he becomes the interpreter of dreams. First there are the dreams of two fellow prisoners, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker of Pharaoh (40.1-23), and ultimately the dreams of Pharaoh (41.1-36). Now another dimension of Joseph shows up. Not character as with Potiphar’s wife—now something more like humility. He attributes his interpretations to God.

Joseph as Vizier of Egypt (41.37-57)

Once again Joseph is elevated to a position of responsibility and power:

So Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has shown you all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only with regard to the throne will I be greater than you.”  

And Pharaoh said to Joseph, “See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.”  

Removing his signet ring from his hand, Pharaoh put it on Joseph’s hand; he arrayed him in garments of fine linen, and put a gold chain around his neck.  

He had him ride in the chariot of his second-in-command; and they cried out in front of him, “Bow the knee!” Thus he set him over all the land of Egypt.  

Moreover Pharaoh said to Joseph, “I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt.”  

Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-paneh; and he gave him Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, as his wife. Thus Joseph gained authority over the land of Egypt.  

So out of adversity, Joseph achieves success. He can even name his two children accordingly:

Before the years of famine came, Joseph had two sons, whom Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, bore to him.  

Joseph named the firstborn Manasseh. “For,” he said, “God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father’s house.”  

The second he named Ephraim. “For God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes.”  

Were it not for the promise of the land made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the story could well end there, and end well. But the larger drama of Moses and another Pharaoh, and the pivotal event of the exodus, requires that Jacob and his children come to Egypt. And for that to happen, the brothers must eventually confront Joseph.

Joseph and His Brothers (42.1-45.28)

The triggering event is yet another famine (recall Abraham in Genesis 12). Ten brothers (Benjamin, Rachel’s other son, is kept at home for fear “that harm might come to him,” 42.4) go to Egypt to buy grain (42.1-38). Joseph recognizes them, but they do not recognize him. His questioning confirms that there is an absent brother (Benjamin). Joseph demands that they return home and bring the other brother to Egypt as an act of good faith. In the meanwhile, Simeon is kept prisoner. For the first time we (and Joseph) witness a change in the brothers:

They said to one another, “Alas, we are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother; we saw his anguish when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen. That is why this anguish has come upon us.”  

Then Reuben answered them, “Did I not tell you not to wrong the boy? But you would not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood.”  

They did not know that Joseph understood them, since he spoke with them through an interpreter.  

He turned away from them and wept.
As the famine increases, and in spite of Jacob’s protest, Benjamin is brought to Egypt (43.1-44.34). (In comparison with Chapter 42, which is Elohist, Chapter 43 is Yahwist, and von Rad suggests they were originally two accounts of the same encounter.) As part of another ruse by Joseph, Benjamin is accused of stealing Joseph’s cup and is threatened with enslavement. At this point Judah makes an extended plea on behalf of his father Jacob that Judah remain in slavery in place of Benjamin (44.18-34). Joseph then reveals himself to his brothers, reassures them (“it was not you who sent me here, but God,” 45.8), and—with the blessing of Pharaoh and the Egyptians—makes provision to move Jacob and the family to Egypt (45.1-47.12). The Book of Genesis ends with blessings or predictions by Jacob concerning his sons (48.1-49.28), Jacob’s death and burial in Canaan (49.29-50.14), and the final reckoning of Joseph with his brothers:

15 Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph’s brothers said, “What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?” 16 So they approached Joseph, saying, “Your father gave this instruction before he died, ‘Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.’ Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.” Joseph wept when they spoke to him. 18 Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, “We are here as your slaves.” 19 But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? 20 Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. 21 So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.” In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them. (50.15-21)

Concluding Comment

What may be surprising about the Book of Genesis is the absence of what can be called spiritual matters—for example, there is no prayer, no confession, no praise, no awareness of the afterlife. This is a very this worldly book—it is principally about having children and being promised land. It is peopled with characters that are all too human, face human dilemmas, and are hardly admirable. There is generally a lack of guilt and punishment, once you get past the first eleven chapters (the so-called Primeval or Primordial History). In fact, there are often no consequences to carelessness much less malice. While it reads like a series of stories about individuals, it is actually an epic about a people.

There is the presence of a deity. This deity creates, and almost immediately experiments (for example, the creation of the animals as possible companions to the human), then adjusts when the experiments fail. Beginning with the making of clothing for disobedient and newly aware humans, through the choosing of a single family to overcome the consequences of the tower of Babel, and the many ways in which it overcomes human folly, this deity acts mainly in response to human decisions and actions, but always with set of promises and a larger purpose in view.

That is to say, this is a book about Providence. What impresses me about the Book of Genesis is the skill with which numerous stories (some of which have their own story) have been woven together to make a simple claim—that there is a divine being who works over time in spite of and sometimes through human activity to create a people on a land whose existence is to be a determining factor in the welfare of all people.