

EXAMINING THE PENTATEUCH

Today we hope to look at the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament.

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

The Jews believed that they were the work of Moses and in many Bibles they still appear as the five books of Moses.

One thing we can almost certainly say about them is that they were not written by Moses.

If we allow for the fact that he might have looked up the events before he was born and written Genesis. He would have to have been someone very special in order to compose the events and details of his own death as narrated in the book of Deuteronomy!

So let's look again objectively at these five books.

Genesis and Exodus seem to present us with interesting narratives.

Leviticus is almost entirely full of detailed legislation for Jewish customs.

Numbers contains some history.

Deuteronomy purports to be a sermon by Moses to the people of Israel just before they entered the Promised Land.

So in a sense the books don't puzzle us. We can begin reading Genesis and see a progression through to the middle of Exodus.

The commandments of the latter part of Exodus. Leviticus and most of Numbers, may not enthrall us, but we can understand why they are there. They are in short the commandments of God to the Israelite people. A bit long-winded, but logical.

It is even possible to get on with Moses' words in Deuteronomy. It is not difficult to see what he is getting at and on the face of it his advice is relevant.

It is the superficial integrity of the writings that cause a problem.

Sooner or later in Old Testament theology the question arises, why not accept the books simply as they are?

Whoever the final editor of those books was, he did a splendid job. He produced five acceptable pieces of literature with a reasonable structure. And final structure is something which is often overlooked.

What we must do first is to examine carefully that structure.

I want to show you something else and that is my contribution to the day's refreshments.

MY TORAH CAKE

The most obvious way to cut this cake is downwards. So if we cut it into five portions they will look like this.

You will notice that each part is composite. It has layers. You may also notice that the layers continue into the next piece of cake and the next and so on.

Because you are all reasonably familiar with this type of cake, if my puzzlement was genuine you would be able to enlighten me by showing that despite the fact that I am cutting it in traditional fashion, I am not fragmenting it the way it was made.

Now I am not a culinary expert but I believe the cake was made by putting together three blocks of sponge cake, placing layers of jam between them and wrapping the whole thing up in marzipan.

Presumably everyone would agree that while that is the way it is made, it is not necessarily the way it is presented either for sale or for eating.

Much the same is true of the Torah or first five books of the Old Testament. We are used to seeing them split up into recognisable blocks of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

In reality I believe the same sources of information are found in each of the books of the Torah.

We continue to call these sources by the name given to them by the scholars who first identified them.

The sources are J or Jahwist source
the E of Elohist source
and the P or priestly source

Now for those of you who may have been doing some crafty reading. You may have found that a fourth source is also identified the D source.

This stands for a Deuteronomic source (roughly confined to the book of Deuteronomy).

HOW WE ISOLATE THESE SOURCES.

The easiest to isolate is D since it consists for the most part of the book of Deuteronomy with its very distinctive style and theological point of view.

The Priestly document is also relatively easy to discern and there is widespread agreement about its contents. It has a recognisable style and displays many characteristic features such as a fondness for genealogies, lists of people's names.

It also contains an elaborate description of Israel's sacral institutions, the covenant, circumcision, sabbath, sacrifice and so on, the origins of which are traced back to creation and the primeval history. One of its main contributions though is an almost independent account of the work of Moses at Sinai.

When these two documents have been removed, what remains is a general narrative which is itself composite. The most important narrative in this general narrative is known as J, since it regards the divine name Yahweh, (Jehovah) as having been known since primeval times and in addition shows a keen interest in the southern tribe of Judah. The author of this document is accordingly usually referred to as the Yahwist.

The J strand in this general narrative is extensive and in many places can be isolated from the surrounding material with reasonable certainty. For example, the creation story complex in Genesis 1-3 can be divided into the P story (Gen 1:1 - 2:4) and the J narrative (Gen 2:4b - 3 end). But it is not always so easy to isolate J, for it has been closely interwoven with a document known as E, because he uses the divine name "elohim" for God up to the revelation of the divine name, Yahweh, to Moses and in addition shows an interest in northern Israel (Ephraim).

The presence of these two sources is well illustrated by the story of the maltreatment of Joseph by his brothers in Genesis 37.

In part of the story, Joseph is cast into a pit and left to die, but is then found by a band of passing Midianites, who bring him to Egypt and sell him into slavery.

The strand of the narrative that relates this is E.

On the other hand, the same chapter relates that he was actually sold by his brothers to some passing Ishmaelites and this derives from the J source.

Furthermore the E source describes the patriarch Reuben (the ancestor who gave his name to one of the future northern Israelite tribes) as the one who saved Joseph from death., while the J source, with its southern, Judean, interpretation, depicts the patriarch Judah as having done so!

By suggesting the existence of two originally separate documents, which have been closely interwoven in this narrative, some sense can be made of a story which on the surface appears confusing.

The date of the documents was determined largely with reference to D, for at an early stage in the scholarly investigation of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy was identified with the book of the law found in the Temple at Jerusalem in 621 BC and made the basis of the reformation by King Josiah (2 Kings 22-23).

DATE WHEN THE EDITORS WROTE

It was then concluded by comparing the documents, that D was an advancement on J and E, one of the main considerations being that Deuteronomy demands the centralisation of worship at one sanctuary (Jerusalem) while J and E still accepted a multiplicity of sanctuaries where Israel might worship God. So J and E were earlier than D.

The P source presupposed such centralisation of worship and therefore belongs to a later period than D.

As with most theories there is an element of truth in that sort of division, but today few scholars would categorise the dubious passages with those criteria. But it's a reasonable starting point.

There are a couple of important factors to bear in mind in this business:

The first is that the writers J E P and D whoever they were, were not authors, they were editors of existing material which they found in the oral tradition. The implication of that is that if I say, the J author actually completed and published his work in the year 940 BC that would tell you nothing about the age of an each individual part of his work.

The second point is that given the first point it is also true that stories were not recorded simply for historical value, although I tend to think, especially with the J source that there was an element of that in his motive, but stories were usually recorded so that the readers could extract lessons from them.

I don't want to get involved today in the primeval history Genesis 1-11. But those chapters will serve to illustrate what I have just said.

You must have noticed that Genesis 1- 3 contains not one but two creation stories.

Genesis 1:1 -2:4a belongs to the P source

Gen 2:4b - end of chapter 3 comes from the J source.

Although very different in style both stories bear uncanny resemblance to creation myths found in countries around the Eastern Mediterranean and Persian Gulf - otherwise known as the Fertile Crescent. Archaeologists have discovered vast amounts of clay tablets at a number of sites which show that myths of the type found in Genesis stretch back well into the 3rd millennium BC.

On the other hand notice what functional theological stories we have in those first three chapters. Not only do the two creation narratives tell us a lot about the way in which the authors conceived God, the first gives instant validity and credibility to the keeping of the Sabbath. It was something done by God at creation. with that the reader must draw his own conclusions.

The second rather earthy story of Adam and Eve. It tackles head on fundamental questions of existence. Why must man work, why do we experience guilt, why do men and women prefer to wear clothes, why are we so suspicious of snakes. why must we one day die?

The sources of J E P and D are traceable I believe through the narratives and regulations of the first five books of the Bible.

ARCHAEOLOGY

I am a great fan of archaeology. It brings out my desire to unearth and discover relevant evidence. We are never going to get back to these Old Testament characters simply by reading the Bible. Does the earth beneath our feet hold any clues that could help us. Like Indiana Jones it would be remarkable if we could discover the Ark of the Covenant. I am not so keen on the Grail.

I'd settle for the tomb of Moses or even the coat of Joseph.

Archaeology is like lighting a candle in a very large cave.

The candle only gives a very small area of light and although we often think we can see beyond the limit of the beams, our vision is usually distorted and our sense of distance flawed. And so we start to supplement with our imagination about things we would like to think we have seen.

An archaeologist cannot excavate enormous areas. He can often only sink pits in quite a small area. The sample he takes is very small.

However additional factors must be allowed for:- such as what happens if there has been earth movement.

Or if the place where he has excavated is on the site of a house with a cellar?

It is unusual for an archaeologist to find a complete object. More often than not he or she only finds broken pieces of potter. Through experience it may be possible to suggest that this may be part of a bowl or a jug. Then it is up to the archaeologist to say what the object may have been used for. Possibly it may be decided that the artefact had a cultic significance. That's where the imagination starts to come in.

Consider for a moment what an archaeologist of 2000 years hence will make of our teapot. A Phallic symbol. Especially if it bears the inscription. "Who's going to be mother?"

Archaeology in Palestine will be able to substantiate the position and location of buildings. It will verify the existence of sites, dwellings, temples etc. But it is unlikely to yield documentary evidence which sheds much light on the lives of historical personalities found in the pages of the Old or New Testaments.

We are unlikely to find reference to characters such as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, because at the end of the day they were ordinary people.

The most we can hope for is some verification of the actions of kings or a discovery of a palace that we didn't know existed.

Outside Palestine in surrounding countries, archaeology has much to tell us about how contemporary civilisations ordered their lives. Very often this throws light on an Old Testament custom, but sadly it only throws light on the custom - we cannot know that the Israelites used the custom in exactly the same way.

Our conclusion must be, that sadly archaeology does not prove the Bible to be true.

So far all that I have said may be interpreted as fairly destructive stuff.

Genesis wasn't written by one man and we shouldn't split up the Bible the way we were brought up to do.

And archaeology must be treated with considerable reserve.

So within these first five books - where do we look for the action.

Where is the pulse. What makes them tick.

The answer I think is Moses and the Exodus.

Passover

Exodus

The meeting with God on Mount Sinai.

That's exciting stuff. It is where the Israelite image began.

What kicked them off into believing they were the elect people.

It was that fundamental understanding that at some time in their history, God had chosen them as a nation, delivered them from the hand of Pharaoh, led them through the Red Sea and brought them to the holy mountain of Sinai, where they had experienced the presence of God, albeit via a mediator, Moses.

That's all good stuff. It's what wound the Jews up. It gave them purpose and a sense of identity. It is where it all began!

Well hang on a minute. what are Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his twelve sons all about, to say nothing of Joseph?

Let's look at the stories and see.

Within those chapters of Genesis.. that is chapters 12-50 there is a good deal more of the J source than there is of the other three.

A good deal more information about the ancestors of Israel was available to the J editor than there was to the others. In fact some people have even suggested that J was a bit of a trend setter who wrote down the stories of

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the others merely chipped in when they had something to offer which would make the narratives more acceptable.

GENESIS 15 COVENANT example

Eg Genesis chapter 15 has a story of the covenant between God and Abraham. Well its a bit makeshift, pretty primitive and definitely pre Israelite.

Such cavalier treatment of such a sacred subject like covenant would undoubtedly have brought on an attack of nervous dyspepsia in the P school of thinking. You couldn't have Abraham doing unthinkable things with sacrificial animals and winding up with a covenant agreement. It would be like as unthinkable as an evangelical supporter for the ordination of women holding a revival meeting at Walsingham and claiming that he had received a vision from the Lord. So chapter 17 of Genesis has an account of the covenant between God and Abraham as it was conceived by the P author.

I am not quite as sceptical as that. I tend to think that each of the sources had at its disposal a definite corpus of material on the major characters of Genesis. And from this they drew their information. But I think the J source had a vast fund of information.

The stories about these Patriarchs tend to go in blocks.

ABRAHAM STORIES

There is the Abraham and Lot stories in chaps 13-14

Abraham and the covenant chapter 15

Abraham and Ishmael stories

Abraham and Isaac stories

Abraham and the destruction of the town of Sodom

Later sagas of Abraham

JACOB CYCLE

Here I owed my categories to Roland de Vaux *The Early History of Israel*

Then in terms of Jacob

We have the Jacob and Esau stories

the Jacob and Laban stories

The Jacob at Shechem and Bethel

and the Jacob and Israel stories

ISAAC?

At this point you may ask what about the Isaac stories? After all the sequence is Abraham is the father of Isaac and Isaac is the father of Jacob. And Jacob is the father of the twelve sons of Jacob whose names eventually become embodied in the twelve tribes of Israel.

ISAAC PROBLEMS Two problems here

1. I am not entirely sure if there ever were any independent Isaac stories

Yes there are a few funny stories about Isaac in Genesis 21. Well yes there are. They bear an uncanny resemblance to almost identical stories about Abraham in chapter 13!!

The rest of the Isaac stories seem to belong not so much to a group of Isaac stories but stories belonging either to Abraham or Jacob.

In the proposed sacrifice of Isaac on Mt Moriah Genesis 22. the central character is

Abraham and it is Abraham's faith which takes the stress.

Even the finding of a wife for Isaac in chapter 24 is initiated by Abraham and the entire legend has a familiar ring about it - or at least it will have by the time you have read a similar account connected with Jacob in chapter 29 and Moses in Exodus 2.

Or the stories about Isaac are entwined with the struggle between Jacob and Laban

PATRIARCHAL CHRONOLOGY

2. I am not sure that the chronology which we take for granted in Genesis is as accurate as the final editor would have us believe. I would ask the question was there ever a relationship at all between Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? Could these not have been separate traditions, gathered from different locations and welded into a readable story by the J editor.

I tend to think that the differences are geographical rather than chronological - and I mean by that - the stories owe more allegiance to the centres at which they were remembered than they do to any time scale placed on them by a later editor.

This is much easier to see in the case of Jacob. The Jacob stories are very tied to geographical locations.

1. Jacob and Esau stories which some believe display hints of the nature of the relationship between later Israel and Edom, which took place in the region of Beersheba.

2. Then there are those stories of Jacob that are connected with the sanctuary at Bethel, where Jacob had the amazing vision of the angels going to and from heaven. Probably in this group we should include the stories that are located at the adjacent sanctuary of Shechem.

3. Then thirdly there are the stories of Jacob's escapades with his uncle Laban in far distant Haran - way up in the north. De Vaux isolated a fourth group of stories which concentrated on the personality of Jacob once his name had been changed to Israel.

Whoever this amazing character Jacob really was and I always think of him as a sort of Semitic equivalent of Till Owlglass the 14th century practical joker, beautifully captured in Richard Strauss' symphonic poem *Till Eulenspiegel* - a total scamp. Although I am not for a moment suggesting Jacob was hanged, he undoubtedly had his wicked side.

He tricks the dumb old Esau at least twice, defrauding him of his birthright and his blessing.

Then just as one feels that he has met his match with uncle Laban who hands over the wrong daughter at the wedding ceremony, Jacob responds by producing the eponymous ancestor of the Jacob's sheep. What an absolute bounder.

And it is out of all this that the J author has welded together a continuous story and into which he injects the origins of the nation. From the two wives Leah and Rachel along with their concubines come the twelve sons and of course a daughter who are the later Israel.

Time won't exactly permit us to pause and drool over isolated fragments, but read sometime that most moving of accounts of the birth of Benjamin and the death of Rachel in chapter 35. There is great majesty and poetry in the Hebrew where Rachel with her parting breath calls the child benoni son of my sorrow and unable to bear this Jacob renames him son of the right hand ben jamin. "And there he laid to rest Rachel and Jacob set up the pillar of Rachel's tomb, which is there to this day"

JOSEPH

It would I suspect be very unkind if I failed to mention the Joseph sagas. Since the rise to fame of Mr Timothy Rice and Mr Andrew Lloyd Webber, there must be few children who are unable to tell you that Joseph had an amazing Technicolor dreamcoat.

Well not quite what the Hebrew says, but close.

With the Joseph stories one is entering upon a totally different form of literature from anything we have seen in Genesis before. It is a long rambling saga which gives the impression of being a prototype soap. It's all there intrigue, violence, sex and nostalgia.

"Ah things are not the same now that Joseph isn't here!!!"

These chapters from 37-50 have really to be read in one go. It's like a novel , once you have started it, it is very difficult to put it down because the material is hardly episodic. Frankly I wonder if that is all it is intended to be story material into which has been woven the descent into Egypt of Jacob and the remainder of the family.

Much have been made of Egyptian parallels to this story, such as the tale of two brothers. I am not terribly impressed by these. Nor do I think the purpose of the chapters is found in the wisdom tradition. Joseph does have certain similarities with the later Daniel in his ability to interpret dreams, but I don't believe the author was trying to bring out the education of the wise through times of hardship in this story. It is a yarn and a most fitting conclusion to the book of Genesis.

RELIGION OF THE PATRIARCHS

Before we conclude this first part of the Torah, I would like to consider the question of the religion of the characters we have been discussing.

This is a bit of a thorny one.

If the focal point of Israelite religion really is the Exodus and the giving of the Law on Mt Sinai. Who were the Patriarchs really worshipping. Because "by the name YAHWEH I was not known to them."

The name of God is indeed a conundrum in itself, but basically let us accept the most usual translation of the Hebrew. I will be who I will be. Yahweh is supremely a god of action. A God who realises the plight of the people and who comes to save them from the wiles of Pharaoh.

But let's not panic over this one, but rather take it all in our stride and see what's involved. From the moment when solid historical individuals seem to appear in the pages of Genesis. Before anyone does a tap tap tap on the table and asks what I mean by solid historical individuals, I will explain my rather slack use of the term. I mean by that the personalities of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as opposed to the quasi mythical Adam, Cain, Able, Noah and ship's company...

PATRIARCHS THEMSELVES

So from the moment when solid historical individuals appear we start to read about a special relationship being set up between God and the individuals concerned.

First Abraham, then Isaac and finally Jacob.

"Now the Lord said to Abraham..go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." (Genesis 12:1) No explanation is given for this initiative by God towards the patriarch . It is a call which looks for a response in obedience. Furthermore it is not a call which comes as a result of prior goodness or merit of Abraham. We refer to this call as the election of Abraham. He is chosen by God and from time to time in his life the call is reaffirmed and another dimension is added to it.

In addition to being chosen by God, Abraham subsequently learns that he is to receive from God what we call the "promise" and the "blessing"

PROMISE AND THE BLESSING

The promise is the promise of land ie Canaan

And the blessing is that his descendants shall be a great nation and will stand in a particular relationship with God.

The twin themes of promise and blessing run like a golden thread throughout the Abraham sagas. In different ways and at different times the election is ratified, sometimes through a covenant, where Abraham and God participate in a meal together, sometimes as a result of a sacrifice.

With slightly less emphasis the same point is made with Isaac.

Jacob

Jacob's contribution to this dimension of history is both distinctive and revealing. Jacob is a far less passive character than Abraham and Isaac. He eventually accepts the promise and the blessing from God, but in all senses struggles to obtain them.

At Bethel as he journeys away from his homeland to escape the wrath of his twin brother, he receives a vision. He lies down in the holy place and sees the angels of God ascending and descending from heaven. In the morning when he wakes he more than appreciates the sanctity of the spot. How awesome is this place this is none other than the house of God, the gate of heaven. How much Jacob's words are governed by the name BETHEL (house of God) we cannot be sure. But Jacob goes on not to accept God's offer but to give a conditional acceptance.

"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 may come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God."

Jabbok

The again as he returns to his homeland Jacob meets an unknown assailant, who is reckoned to be God at the Jabbok and wrestles with him all night.

As day dawns the heavenly visitor tries to get away and Jacob replies saying

"I will not let you go unless you bless me."

Jacob, whose name of course is changed to Israel epitomises the struggle which the later nation had to remain loyal to Yahweh their God. They were the heirs and possessors of the call of God, the promise of the land of Canaan and the blessing that they would be numerous and successful, but throughout their history they struggled to retain that position. This is the them and message of the prophets - that the nation should turn again to Yahweh their God. Through the writings, mainly of the J and E sources we see how this ancestor encapsulates in his own life the religious struggles of the Israelite people.

Having explored that you may now begin to see why it is so difficult to capture the real historical Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. So much of what they do, say and are, is the result of later reflection on the state of the nation and its personalities. That there were such people today, few would doubt. What is more tentative is what we can, with any measure of certainty, say about them.

WHAT EACH AUTHOR SAYS

The Jahwistic author records with confidence that God was known as Yahweh, from the beginning.

The E and P sources are in basic disagreement with this.

According to their standpoint - probably more realistically, they believe that the divine name YAHWEH was not known to the nation before the time of Moses.

Moses when he is called according to Exodus 3 ask "Who are you Lord?" The answer he receives is that he is the God of the Fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob."

But Moses continues the people will ask me what is his name?

The fact that Moses does not seem to know the name of God is emphasised again in the P account of the call of Moses in Exodus 6

"I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty (El Shaddai), but by my name "the Lord" I did not make myself known to them.

I think for once I would find E and P more reliable in this matter. J I think is somewhat idealistic in assuming that the name YAHWEH was known to the patriarchs.

The Patriarchs would have lived, worked and worshipped in what later Jews came to call Canaan and I think they would have accepted the deities the land had to offer. Throughout the pages of Genesis we hear of the...many of them local gods. possibly associated only with one shrine.

El was a supreme and almost defunct God, but manifestations are found of him in the pages of Genesis as

El Shaddai	Gen 17:1	(The God of the mountain)
El Olam	Gen 21:33	The everlasting God
El Elyon	Gen 14:22	God most high
El Bethel	Gen 31:13	God of Bethel.

In addition to this there are those who assume there were patronymic gods "The god of Abraham" "The fear of Isaac" "The mighty one of Jacob" These would be sort of clan gods, which would account for the element of personal revelation..

The patriarchal narratives will always be the happy hunting ground for the social anthropologist and the religious historian. Behind the present form of the narratives lie many old and in certain respects primitive traditions, some of which have been uneasily assimilated into Israel's faith. In their present form however, the narratives breathe a rich spirituality. There will always be differences of opinion as to how much of that spirituality is a reading back into patriarchal times of a knowledge of God which only came to Israel in her pilgrimage.

At every point in that pilgrimage we come up against the mystery of God's initiative and self revelation.