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GENESIS 4-11: NOTES FOR THEOLOGICAL STUDENTS

These stories seemed easy enough when we read them as children. They became harder as we grew in scientific knowledge while our children's view of Noah and his smiley-animal ark retreated into a world of infant make-believe. Then we hit mainstream theological study and we lost our orientation completely. Or at least, some of us did. So let's look at the main difficulties, hoping it will help you understand what lies behind my approach to the text when in front of the church on a Sunday morning.

The understanding of Genesis was greatly influenced by two works, written around a hundred years ago: Wellhausen's documentary hypothesis in which the Pentateuch is viewed as being comprised of several sources (J, P, E, and D), and Gunkel's suggestion that the material of the book should be read as a saga, an ancient poetic story dealing with persons and events in the past which was passed along orally through the generations. Of course, the material is prose literature, not oral poetry, nevertheless much modern commentary is still based on those two hypotheses. From these two ideas has come the modern dissection of the text into ancient sources which, it is argued, were put together at a much later date. They represent later Israel, not early Israel. This has helped fuel the abandonment of belief in any element of historicity at all. The stories are seen as myths.

There was a reaction to that view, notably from Alt, Noth and Albright, seeking the events behind the texts, even if the events were rather different to what was recorded. A further development looked at Biblical theology as being rooted in history : a salvation-history driven by A God Who Acts. Wright, von Rad and de Vaux were prominent in this viewpoint. But this view has not prevailed. Weippert and Gottwold, for example, argued that Israel never arrived in Palestine at all because it had never left. The Exodus and Conquest was really just a peasant revolt against Canaanite overlords. This and similar points of view are reflected in much modern Old Testament writing and have even reached our TV screens in the recent series "It Ain't Necessarily So", trashing any idea of historical events behind the Biblical stories.

How far does the evidence compel us to accept these modern approaches to the text? Brett comments, "Pluralist condition of contemporary Western culture is reflected in microcosm in professional research on the Bible." So expect different opinions. But be careful; when the main virtue seems to be "question all authority" you could too easily end up rejecting an authority which is really on your side. Well, you pay your money and you take your choice, but I remain convinced of the authority of Scripture.

The Documentary Hypothesis

It's pretty convincing isn't it? There certainly do seem to be several sources each with their own vocabulary and original storyline. At a later date these sources would have been strung together, and indeed some may even have been written specifically for the purpose. The dates usually proposed are: In Solomon's reign (10th century), in Josiah's reign (seventh century), during the exile (6th century). post exile (6th/5th century). I do not have a problem with the basic proposal itself. Later texts such as the books relating to the monarchy often refer the reader back to other texts which have clearly formed the basis for the canonical scriptures. There is no reason to suppose that everything in any book of the Bible had one, single source. The only objection that I can see an evangelical having to the general assumption of the documentary hypothesis is the association of the Pentateuch with Moses. If you believe that the Book of Moses was written by him rather than just associated with him, then I guess you have no choice but to reject the hypothesis and suggest some other explanation for the apparent presence of different sources in the text. For myself, I never believed that Moses wrote about his own death (although I have heard someone passionately defend that Moses did describe his own demise before walking off up the mountain and dying), and therefore I always assumed that there was a canonical editor or editors involved.

But I remain unconvinced that the J, P, E, D hypothesis is necessarily correct in detail. Brevard Childs states: "It is not at all obvious that all the priestly material formed an independent source before its being joined with JE"ⁱⁱⁱ The different blocks of material do not always lead easily into the next. In the section we are studying, the first P block (1:1-2:4a) does not easily lead to the second (5:1-28). The use of Adam as first a generic and then a proper name seems strained. Furthermore, there is no evidence that the different sources were unrelated previously. And finally, as far as I am concerned some of them may well have had their origins in the time of Moses. He seems to have been a very careful administrator, literate and aware of the need to preserve the history of his people. So much of the patriarchal narratives do fit in with the culture of the early second millennium BC that it is difficult to believe that the texts do not have their origin near that time. Just how or when the material came to form the Pentateuch as we know it is another question, and no date impresses itself upon me as being the obviously correct one. If you don't mind, I will not even hazard a guess at when the Pentateuch came into being as canonical scripture. It may well have undergone a complex development over a long period of time.

The Structure of Genesis 1:1-11

I think most people would agree that the structure of the book of Genesis is based around the genealogical formula, "these are the generations (toledoth) of . . ." You will find the formula, with some variation in 2:4, 5:1, 6:9, 10:1, 11:10, 11:27, 25:19, 36:1(9) and 37:2. Within that structure, the opening chapters sit naturally. The different sources (whatever they were) now form "a continuous, coherent, meaningful narrative, constructed out of a large number of independent short and long tales and genealogical narratives which had been at the disposal of the Toledoth structure of Genesis."ⁱⁱⁱ However, within this overall structure the narrative does have its own point of focus. I will deal with this later.

This "Toledoth Structure" gives a non-chronological flow to the text. Time is not measured in absolute dates but in the schematized pattern of descendents. Ancient documents rarely bore any clue as to when they were written. In Genesis the genealogies share the same characteristics as Babylonian and Sumerian lists (vertical, segmented, and suggesting very long life spans). In neighbouring nations these lists gave socio-political legitimacy to the rulers and people groups. However, in the Bible they have theological significance, relating generations to the promises of God and showing how God's intervention subverts normal orders. e.g. Cain, Ishmael, Esau, Manasseh lose their first-born rights. Similarly the prostitute Rahab appears in Jesus' genealogy, thus subverting what would normally be considered the normal human practice and demonstrating the intervention of God in human affairs.

For me, the most important point to make is that once incorporated into the canonical scripture, the sources may well serve a different purpose from their original one. Take the two creation accounts in the opening chapters. Originally, one supposes, independent accounts, they now have a strong relationship with each other. J has become subordinated to P, because it now portrays the human race as the vehicle of the toledoth. Whatever their pre-biblical existence, now that they are in the canonical book they shape and redefine each other. This is quite conscious on the part of the redactor. It is an integral part of the divine inspiration of scripture, and, frankly, it excites me! The Bible is the Word of God as we find it, not as it originally existed in its many sources. We will come back to this point at the end.

Maximalist v Minimalist.

I find it helpful to make a mental line. At one end I put the most ardent of fundamentalists who declares that the Old Testament stories are literal, infallible truth and every single detail is pure history exactly as it happened. At the other end I put the theologians who declare that there is no useful historical facts to be gleaned from the Old Testament texts at all.^{iv} Most of us fit somewhere in between.

Nevertheless, it is true to say that most of the books we read as theologians remind us that "it ain't necessarily so." There are the odd anachronisms, also the difficulties in finding archaeological evidence for

the conquest, the fall of Jericho, the Davidic and Solomonic Empires, etc. We must compare them, also, with epic poems in the style of Aghat or Kirta (Ugarit), the Gilgamesh Epic (Mesopotamia) or Homer, although the differences might well be more important than the similarities. In such a climate, the Genesis stories are seen, in some way, as purely mythical. That, of course, is very postmodern. Compare it with the Booker-winning prize *Life of Pi* which tells both a “story which will make you believe in God” and a parallel modern one.^v Having abandoned any concept of absolute truth we find truth, partially, everywhere. There is not the need to see the Biblical tales as anything other than literary masterpieces. So they are, but it will become clear during the course of the studies that I believe them to be rooted in history. Yes, I do agree with Brett when he claims that “the laconic style of Genesis, and its opacities and ambiguities, suggest that we can engage with it only partially: we can never exhaust the peregrinations of its meaning.”^{vi} But Childs is surely correct when he argues that “no part of Genesis can be called “history” in the narrow, modern usage of the term because of the tangential relationship to objective reality, even though different historical elements are evidenced throughout the book in varying degrees.”^{vii}

And there are plenty of theologians, historians and archaeologists around who find ample evidence for the essential historicity of biblical stories. You will find me referring to the New Chronology proposed by David Rohl who redates the history of the ancient world. He argues that the generally accepted chronology of the ancient times has two main difficulties: it produces a “dark age” from which very little material is found and it bases itself on a very questionable identification of Pharaoh Shishak of the Bible with Shoshenk I of the 21st Dynasty. Many of the Egyptian dynasties, he says, were co-existent and not consecutive. This shortens the period by about 300 hundred years, explains why there is a “dark age” (it represents decades rather than centuries) and places Solomon in the late bronze age rather than the iron age IIA, while the Exodus comes out at around 1450 B.C. when there is evidence of substantial destruction in Palestine, including Jericho. You can buy his (expensive books) or visit his very beautiful web site, and even join the usergroup and eavesdrop on PhD students around the world as they struggle to make it all work.^{viii} It doesn't. At least not yet.^{ix} I find his arguments against the Old Chronology to be powerful, but his reconstruction unconvincing. It is one of the facts of life that if you use his material in an essay it will be marked down and if I use it in the pulpit I will be congratulated!

To conclude, I think there is a real challenge to us here to argue that the Biblical stories are grounded in real events, have their origin near the time it happened and bear witness to the intervention of God in history. As Jesus is God's incarnation of history, so is scriptural narrative. It reflects the culture and language of its day. It is not “history” as you and I would write it today and we must read it as it was intended to be read. Which begs the question, how were these stories meant to be read?

The Purpose of Genesis 4-11

There are two different approaches we can take to the first chapters of Genesis. Von Rad saw 1-11 as a prologue to the rest of the book.^x It links Israel's election to world history. It is a story of increasing alienation from God until Abraham's call which turns out to be the crucial event. On the other hand, Westerman argued that you cannot subordinate Creation to Abraham's call. The chapters do not form a human (horizontal) development, but a Godward (vertical) dimension.^{xi} I think we have to choose between them.

One of the essential elements of the Genesis accounts, indeed of the whole of Old Testament theology is the theme of “promise and blessing.” No one, in my opinion, has brought this out more clearly than Walter C. Kaiser Jr.^{xii} This promise of God dramatically narrows down to just one family in Genesis 12. By telling the story of exile in Egypt and struggles in the Promised land, the canonical authors firstly lead us to identify with the “chosen family” as to imply that we, too, are the family of faith, the chosen ones inheriting God's promise and blessing. The reason is plain: the promise to the patriarchs was not fulfilled and so became eschatological, looking forward to the Exodus and beyond. Beyond to what? To when the canonical form

of the Pentateuch came into being, certainly, but beyond, to its readers and eventually to the New Testament's startling announcement that as people of faith we, too, are heirs of the promise like Abraham.

It is my opinion, that the "narrowing down" of the promise in the book of Genesis makes the canonical shape pivot around the call of Abraham, and, therefore, subjugates the first eleven chapters to this moment. Put simply, I think von Rad was correct, Westerman wrong. Chapters 1-11 are a unit. God did not cease to work after six days. There was a purpose hidden even in the most distant and murky eras and dynasties of the human race.^{xiii}

Conclusion

I will not be dividing the text into its original sources, even if I thought it possible to do so. I find that an irrelevant exercise, by and large. I will be treating the stories as prologue to the call of Abraham. That means I assume they have been selected because of their relevance to God's ongoing promise to humankind which is going to come to its dramatic milestone in chapter 12. I will do my best to indicate some kind of ancient time and place in which the stories took place, but I will not dwell unduly on that. There is too little information, our knowledge of the period is too limited, there is too much disagreement among scholars and the canonical scriptures are altogether too focused on the storyline for me to be able to define time and place with any certainty. Yet, are these stories that will make you believe in God? I trust so.

Peter James Cousins, Bangor, January 2003

ⁱ Mark G. Brett, *Genesis: Procreation and the politics of identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p1

ⁱⁱ Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*. (London: SCM press, 1979) p. 147

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas L. Thompson, *The Origins and Traditions of Ancient Israel: The Literary Formation of Genesis and Exodus 1-23*. Journal for the Study of Old Testament Supplementary Series 55 (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1987), p. 78

^{iv} For example, "The pentateuchal narratives are of little use for the study of the history of ancient Palestine." Niels Peter Lemche, *Prelude to Israel's Past: Background and Beginnings of Israelite History and Identity* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998) p. 227

^v Yann Martel, *Life of Pi*, British Edition (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2002) p. x

^{vi} Brett 2000, p4

^{vii} Childs 1979, p158

^{viii} David Rohl, *A Test of Time* (London: Century, Random House, 1995), *Legend: The Genesis of Civilization* (London: Random House, 1998), *The Lost Testament: From Eden to Exile - the Five Thousand Year History of the People of the Bible* (London: Century, Random House, 2002). His homepage is <http://www.nunki.net/>. You may like to read Kenneth Kitchen's denouncement of Rohl (*You are 98% rubbish. Go Away*) on <http://www.nunki.net/PerRenput/index.html>. To join the New Chronology Discussion Group go to <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/NewChronology/>

^{ix} Strangely enough, the determination of Iron or Bronze Age is not defined by the metal but by types of pottery. Iron was used in the Bronze Age and vice versa. Pottery cannot be carbon dated, so it comes down to the style of pottery used. Even then there was overlap of style between cultures. And as pottery can turn up in later strata, a statistical analysis is needed. I think we have to leave the final conclusion to the experts!

^x G. von Rad *Genesis* London and Philadelphia: Old Testament Library rev. ed 1972

^{xi} C Westerman *Genesis 1-11* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House and London: SPCK 1984)

^{xii} Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979). It is available from <http://www.amazon.co.uk> at £13.98 plus postage. I have failed to locate it in the UK for inter-library loan, but I suggest you try if you feel you would like to read it. You are welcome to borrow my copy, but it is the Portuguese translation!

^{xiii} Just in case you are wondering what other commentaries I am using, here they are with the most used first in the list:

Helmut Thielicke, *How The World Began: Man in the First Chapters of Bible*, tr. John W. Doberstein (London & Cambridge: James Clarke, 1964)

Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Series (London: IVP, 1967)

Francis A. Schaeffer, *Genesis in Space and Time* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973)

Ellen Van Wolde, *Stories of the Beginning: Genesis 1-11 and Other Creation Stories*, tr, John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1996)

Ernest Lucas, *Genesis Today* (London: Scripture Union, 1989)

James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* (London: SCM Press, 1992)

Henry Wansbrough, *Genesis*, The People's Bible Commentary (Oxford: The Bible reading Fellowship, 1996)

Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, Old Testament Library, tr. John H. Marks, 2nd ed. rev. (London, SCM Press, 1963)

John Calvin, *Genesis*, tr. John King (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975)