Man in Revolt: A Study in the Primaeval History of the Book of Genesis

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IT is commonly accepted, in the light of literary and historical criticism, that much of the material of the book of Genesis is mythological. Archaeological discovery and the decipherment of ancient scripts have made available similar materials from Egypt and Mesopotamia, as well as from the ancient Canaanite city of Ugarit, some of which have shed valuable light on the biblical parallels.

Such mythological material is particularly abundant in the first eleven chapters, the Primaeval History. Its purpose is, in part, that of filling in a gap by relating the origins of things in symbolic form where the authors lacked more precise, scientific information. This interest in origins appears to have played an important part in the formation of the Pentateuch. The whole Pentateuch may be regarded as a story of the origins of Israel, of its religion, and of its Law. According to von Rad, its form is due to the crystallization of oral tradition around a credal scheme comprising the Exodus, the Lawgiving, and the Entry into Canaan, all of which are explained by the promise to the Patriarchs.[1] He views the Primaeval History as having been prefixed to the original material by the first literary author, and composed by him out of various oral materials which he was the first to assemble.[2] This further study of origins, the beginnings of the world, of mankind, of civilization, was intended by this author to provide a wider background for the other stories of origins.

The literary composition of the Primaeval History is considerably simpler than that of many other parts of Genesis. Two strata only, the earliest and the latest, J and P, are represented in it. Some scholars have attempted to demonstrate the presence of matter from other strata such as E within these chapters,[3] while others have alleged the compositeness of J[4] or of P[5] or of both, but such theories are, at least in the opinion of this writer, not entirely

1. See particularly his *Das formgeschichtliche Problem des Hexateuchs. Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom alten und neuen Testament*, Folge IV, Heft 26, (Stuttgart, 1938).

2. *Das erste Buch Mose*, in *Das Alte Testament Deutsch*, Bd. 2 (Göttingen, 1953), pp. 15 ff.

3. Cf. Mowinckel, *The Two Sources of the Predeuteronomic Primeval History (JE) in Genesis 1–11* (Oslo, 1937); Hölscher, *Geschichtsschreibung in Israel* (Lund, 1952).

4. Beginning with Budde, *Die biblische Urgeschichte* (Giessen, 1883); for more recent examples see Gunkel, *Genesis*, in the *Göttinger Handkommentar* (5th ed., Göttingen, 1922), and Simpson, *The Early Traditions of Israel* (Oxford, 1948), the latter of which modifies the theory by postulating extensive glosses on the original source documents before they were combined.

5. Cf. von Rad, *Die Priesterschrift im Hexateuch literarisch untersucht und theologisch gewertet. Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom alten und neuen Testament*, Folge IV, Heft 13 (Stuttgart-Berlin, 1934).

convincing. Of these two strata J is predominant in the narrative sections, whereas P is heavily weighted with genealogy and contains very little narrative apart from the first Creation Story (1:1–2:4a) and considerable parts of the Story of the Deluge (6:1–9:17 *passim*). Such, in fact, is the distribution of the P elements, that it would appear to be at least a tenable hypothesis that they, instead of forming, as the great majority of critics have held, a literary source parallel to J, are a series of later expansions of and additions to J's original material by a redactor.

However their literary relationship be explained, J and P are very similar in their treatment of mythological materials. But with their obvious interest in origins their real pre-occupation is theological. They are concerned with expounding the dealings of God with the world and with mankind. Thus they have harnessed their myths to great theological themes, Creation, Sin and its Penalty, and Redemption.

Of these themes the second is of particular interest partly because of the predominance of J materials, partly because of the way in which their author has dealt with them. The treatment of this theme supplies us with excellent examples of how the Yahwistic writer, while conserving the form which his stories had in oral tradition, by means of skilful arrangement and deft narrative touches and emphasis in dialogue, proclaims his understanding of the ways of God with man. The contribution of P, on the other hand, is very limited, being confined to his sections of the Story of the Deluge and very slight touches elsewhere. He adds little in the way of theological insight to J's penetrating discussion of man's revolt against God and its fearful consequences.

I

The Story of the Temptation in the Garden, chapter 3, is entirely from the hand of the Yahwistic writer. Though its connections with non-Israelite mythology are far from clear, it is undoubtedly a very ancient myth. It has been suggested that its original form was very similar to the Greek Prometheus story, with the motif of man wresting some forbidden secret from the gods and being accordingly punished.[6] In the current form of the story there are certain internal difficulties. The tree of knowledge is central to the story and crucial in the episode of the temptation; the role of the tree of life is by no means clear. In the previous chapter both trees are mentioned (2:9), but the former tree only is forbidden to men (2:17) and is thus spoken of in the dialogue between the woman and the serpent (3:3–5). The tree of life re-appears in connection with man's expulsion from the Garden (3:22). Many scholars[7] have sought to explain this feature as due

6. Cf. Hans Schmidt, *Die Erzählung von Paradies und Sündenfall* (Tübingen, 1931), where it is suggested that the original secret was of a sexual nature, a view apparently shared by C. A. Simpson in *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. I, p. 497.

7. E.g. Simpson in *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. I, p. 496. The opposite view, that the tree of life is integral to the story, is maintained by Humbert in *Études sur le récit du Paradis et de la Chute dans la Genèse* (Mémoires de l'Université de Neuchatel, XIV, 1940).

to conflation of literary sources; others have contented themselves with supposing that the author drew on parallel versions of the same myth current in oral tradition. Among the marks of primitiveness may be mentioned the naive picture of the Deity taking a walk in the Garden in the cool of the day (3:8).

Despite such marks of primitive origins, there can be no doubt that the Yahwistic writer has harnessed the story to a theological purpose. This is apparent from the motive with which the serpent beguiles the woman to eat of the forbidden tree—"You will be like God," or "You will become godlike" (3:5). As for the consequences of man's disobedience, the writer has presented them with great skill. First of all, man has been alienated from his Maker. The man and the woman hide from Yahweh's presence after their transgression of His command; the penalty of their transgression is their expulsion from the Garden. Yet their alienation is not complete, in that they remain the object of His care. Furthermore, man has been alienated from himself. The writer suggests this by the vivid symbol of the shame felt by the man and the woman at their own nakedness, as well as their sense of guilt in Yahweh's presence, and their eagerness to blame others for their sinful act. In addition, there is the mutual alienation of the sexes, in that woman's subjection is part of her penalty—

> Your desire shall be for your husband,
> and he shall rule over you. [3:16]

Besides, man is alienated from the creation of which he is part. Between him and the serpent there is bitter enmity—

> I will put enmity between you and the woman,
> and between your seed and her seed;
> he shall bruise your head,
> and you shall bruise his heel. [3:15]

The serpent, a creature of Yahweh and thus intrinsically good, has become a symbol of evil, the visible embodiment of its presence in the world. A further instance of man's alienation from nature is to be seen in the frustration wherewith his work, the very means whereby he subsists, is cursed. In contrast with the fertile oasis in which he has hitherto lived and which has was appointed to tend (2:15) the man now learns that

> Cursed is the ground because of you;
> in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
> thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you;
> and you shall eat the plants of the field.
> In the sweat of your face
> you shall eat bread. [3:17–19]

The woman's vocation of motherhood is cursed, for

> I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing;
> in pain you shall bring forth children.
> [3:16]

Over all human endeavour hangs the final frustration of death—

> Till you return to the ground,
> for out of it you were taken;
> you are dust,
> and to dust you shall return. [3:19]

The characteristic *adam-adamah* (man and soil) theme of the Yahwistic creation story is thus resumed, but with what a bitter sting! Of course neither the Yahwistic author nor his successor, the priestly writer, had any notion of existence after death other than the conventional doctrine of Sheol, where, in the words of a later writer,

> man lies down and rises not again;
> till the heavens are no more he will not awake,
> or be roused out of his sleep. [Job 14:12]

II

The theme of sin and judgment is continued in the Cainite Cycle in chapter 4, which is also in its entirety from the hand of the Yahwistic author. This cycle was in all likelihood originally separate from the Story of the Temptation, though the author has linked them and integrated them with each other. As for the various myths and legends of which it is composed, they themselves were probably of disparate origin, but were unified in oral tradition around the central figure of Cain.

The first and best known of these elements is the Story of the Fratricide. In its original form it may have had some resemblance to the Roman legend of Romulus and Remus, and like it have been devoid of moral implications. The rivalry between Cain and Abel may reflect strained relations between herdsmen and farmers, the former being the victims. In its present form, however, the fratricide is represented as being motivated by Cain's jealousy over Yahweh's rejection of his own sacrifice in favour of that of Abel. Thus man, having already transgressed Yahweh's command, in the next generation becomes a murderer. The consequence is the institution of blood revenge, at one and the same time a penalty for Cain's crime and a means of protection for him. The privilege of tilling the soil even under the irksome conditions allowed to Adam is denied to Cain, who is thus compelled by the hostility of nature itself to become "a fugitive and wanderer on the earth" (4:12).

In the genealogy which follows the Story of the Fratricide man's downward path continues. His moral deterioration is connected with his advance in civilization. Curiously, Cain, who in the previous story was condemned to be a fugitive and a wanderer, figures as the first city-builder (4:17), a legend which must have originated independently of that of his expulsion from the cultivated land. Cain's genealogy ends with Lamech and his three sons Jabal, Jubal, and Tubal-cain, who are here represented as the originators of the three professions of herdsman, musician, and smith. Lamech himself is depicted not only as the first polygamist, but also as the ultimate

in blood-thirstiness. Not satisfied with the ancestral institution of blood revenge in its original form, he is credited with this fierce outburst—

> Adah and Zillah, hear my voice,
> you wives of Lamech, hearken to what I say:
> I have slain a man for wounding me,
> a young man for striking me.
> If Cain is avenged sevenfold,
> truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold. [4:23f.]

To such lengths has man's *hubris* gone!

III

But the climax of iniquity has yet to come. The Yahwistic writer includes a striking piece of un-reconstructed mythology, the story of the miscegenation between the *b'ne elohim*, "the sons of God," the members of the heavenly court, with the daughters of men (6:1–4). In its origins this myth is clearly parallel to the stories of the amours of Olympian deities with earthly women, but has been toned down to become an explanation of the supposed existence of giants in past ages. "The Nephilim were on earth in those days, and also afterwards, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men, and they bore children to them" (6:4). In the hands of the Yahwistic writer the myth receives a new significance. Not only is the incident used to provide an explanation for the abridgement of the generous life-spans with which tradition credited man's earliest ancestors; it has become the prelude to the Deluge. For the author it was "the last straw," the culmination of man's sin. In the immediate sequel we are told that "Yahweh saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth," to which J adds the significant theological reflection, that "every imagination of the thoughts of his mind was only evil continually" (6:5). A similar statement is put into the mouth of Yahweh Himself after the end of the Deluge (8:21). No writer in the Old Testament comes closer to stating a doctrine of original sin. Its theologically advanced nature has moved many critics to assume that this statement of the thorough corruption of human nature is a later gloss. Yet, since it shows no affinity with any other pentateuchal stratum, its exclusion from the text of the Yahwistic writer appears to be based on an arbitrary limitation of the author's theological originality. Parallels to this thought are exceedingly rare within the Old Testament. The Priestly writer contents himself with stating that before the Deluge "all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth" (6:12). Among prophetic statements that of Isaiah at his theophany is typical, "I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:5), but nothing more than the realities of a concrete situation is implied. In the penitential psalm *par excellence*, the *Miserere*, the poet states,

> Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
> and in sin did my mother conceive me.
> [Psalm 51:5]

While he confesses that he is a sinner from the very first moment of his existence, the poet scarcely implies a general doctrine of the inherent sinfulness of human nature or of any aspect of it, let alone its hereditary transmission. The terminology of the Genesis passages re-appears in Ben-Sira, where the term *yeçer* (rendered "imagination" by the R.S.V. in Genesis 6:5; 8:21) appears in the statement that God "has left man in the hand of his own inclination" (Ecclesiasticus 15:14). This, however, seems to imply no more than the later rabbinical doctrine that man has both an inclination (*yeçer*) to good and an inclination to evil. A full doctrine of original sin does not appear until later apocalyptic writings with their radical pessimism. Typical of their statements is that of 2 Esdras 4:30—"a grain of evil seed was sown in Adam's heart from the beginning, and how much ungodliness it has produced until now, and will produce until the time of threshing comes."

Thus the writer has prepared for the Deluge, and given it moral justification. Sinful humanity is obliterated; only Noah and his family are spared, because he is the exception—"I have seen that you are righteous before Me in this generation" (7:1).

IV

The myth of the Deluge, however, does not conclude the theme of man's sinfulness. J's note of pessimism re-appears soon after he has related the new beginning after the Flood. Noah has been depicted as a conspicuously righteous and godly man; yet in his family is heard the jarring note of Ham's filial impiety. In the ancient tale recorded by the Yahwistic author Noah is credited with the origin of viticulture and with the discovery of the intoxicating properties of wine. Neither the author nor his source intended thereby to cast any aspersions on Noah's character. Modern times supply us with a close parallel to this tale of discovery in the case of the experiments with chloroform conducted by Sir James Hope Simpson, in the course of which he and his assistants discovered its anaesthetic properties by being overcome by its fumes. The Yahwistic author tells us how Ham takes advantage of his father's stupor to mock his nakedness, an act which to the Hebrew sense of propriety was highly offensive. Ham's sin becomes the occasion of the divine curse upon the Canaanites, whose ancestor he is, and of the blessing upon Shem, Israel's ancestor, and on Japheth.

An act of human insolence with far-reaching effects, not just for a single people or group of peoples, but for the whole of mankind, is related in the Babel Story (11:1–9). Here too we find what is apparently crude mythology, for Yahweh is represented as descending to earth to find out what men are doing (11:5). It would seem that the report of a huge, unfinished temple tower in Mesopotamia gave rise to the story that its construction and that of the adjacent ruined city were stopped by divine intervention. Subsequently, the multiplicity of languages and the dispersal of mankind over the earth were explained as due to this same intervention of the Deity.

At what stage the various elements were combined into the present version of the story is uncertain. The seeming internal inconsistencies have led to attempts to dissect this story into parallel versions belonging to separate literary sources.[8] Such attempts, however, are often based on false antitheses and are hardly necessary to explain the narrative. Whatever its origins, for the Yahwistic author the story of this prototypal skyscraper, which he relates with all its primitive touches, serves to illustrate the thesis which he has put into the mouth of Yahweh after the Deluge—"the imagination of man's mind is evil from his youth" (8:21). After the Deluge, no less than before it, sinfulness is universal, and its effects involve the whole of mankind.

The literary author of the J document has thus out of a variety of disparate myths and stories constructed a remarkably coherent theological picture of man's revolt against his Maker and of its terrible consequences.

V

It has been common in the past for specialists and non-specialists alike to dismiss the earliest writer of the Pentateuch as one whose religion was primitive and naive. They have frowned upon his extensive use of myth and legend, his retention of so many of the more vivid features of such materials, and, above all, his failure to delete what appear to be crassly anthropomorphic descriptions of Deity. Such an estimate fails to do justice to his creative genius. The author of the J document did not despise the available materials of myth, legend, and folk tale, nor was he controlled by them, but selected from them and arranged them in a very significant and profound theological pattern. One who out of such materials could construct a prologue to the story of Yahweh's dealings with Israel which would relate them to His dealings with mankind and with the world was no mean theologian. In principle, whatever subordinate position might be conceded to non-Israelite deities, he views Yahweh, Israel's God, as the universal and supreme Deity.

The Yahwistic writer had asserted the goodness of all that Yahweh had created by utilizing the vivid imagery of the Garden myth to depict the perfect environment which He provided for man when He created him. At the same time he saw the dark shadow of sin encroaching upon man's primaeval bliss, and used the series of myths beginning with the story of the Forbidden Tree to give an arresting picture of the gathering gloom as man progressively becomes entangled in the toils of his own iniquity. And so man's sin brings upon him inevitable punishment. Yet this writer describes how the divine mercy is operative side by side with the divine wrath. Not only does Yahweh continue His loving care towards man in his state of rebellion, but step by step He makes provision for man's redemption. Thus the great drama of judgment and annihilation in the Deluge becomes the occasion for a new start for humanity in the person of Noah. The series of

8. Cf. Gunkel, *Genesis*, pp. 93 ff.; Skinner: *Genesis* (New York, ICC, 1910), pp., 223 f.

chosen persons, beginning with Seth and continuing through Noah, sets the stage for the election of Abraham, Israel's ancestor, to be the one through whom "all the families of the earth will bless themselves" (12:3). The author knows the universality of sin; he looks forward to a universal redemption.

The Yahwistic writer's theological outlook dominates the Primaeval History. The priestly writer, whether he is viewed as being the author of a parallel and independent work, or as expanding the Yahwistic work by the addition of a running commentary, has followed the precedent set him centuries earlier. While in other matters he has much to add to the work of his predecessor, on the subject of sin and its consequences he is content to re-affirm the insights of J.

If this view of the Yahwistic writer as a profound theologian is correct, it has important consequences for scholarship. Possibly the early date usually assigned to the J document must be revised. On the other hand, a reconsideration of the common view of the pre-prophetic religion of Israel may be indicated. Scholarly reconstructions have concentrated on the lower levels of that religion, the prevalence of syncretism with Canaanite Baalism, the common assimilation of the practices and beliefs of Yahwism to those of the fertility cults.[9] The existence of a higher level of Yahwism, of a faith such as that of the author of the oldest strand of the Pentateuch, has commonly been ignored.[10] Thus the prophets are made to appear as radical innovators who proclaim their message in a religious vacuum. On our interpretation of the Yahwistic author the prophets have much in common with him. They are seen as appealing to the true meaning of Israel's tradition much as he had understood it, and as drawing from it new inferences which led to the ultimate triumph of ethical monotheism in Israel. Thus their claim to represent the pure form of Israel's religion is signally vindicated.

9. E.g. Oesterley and Robinson, *Hebrew Religion.*

10. See, however, Welch, *The Religion of Israel under the Kingdom* (Edinburgh, 1912), pp. 11 ff., Muilenburg in *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. I, pp. 314 f.