The Yahwist: The Earliest Editor in the Pentateuch

CHRISTOPH LEVIN

Levin@lmu.de

Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, D-80539 München, Germany

I

Recent Pentateuch research has again come to center on the long-familiar fact that the Pentateuch narrative rests on a sequence of individual narrative compositions. In the non-Priestly text, six separate narrative groups can be distinguished: (1) the primeval history (Genesis 2–11), which has to do with the origin of the world and humankind; (2) the history of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Genesis 12–36); (3) the story of Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 37–50); (4) the narrative about Moses (Exodus 2–4); (5) the history of the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and their wanderings through the desert (Exodus 12 through Numbers 20), to which the death of Moses may also have belonged (Deuteronomy 34*); and (6) the story about the seer Balaam (Numbers 22–24).

The diversity of the material indicates that it was only at a later stage that these groups were linked to form the continuous narrative we have today. At present the view is gaining ground that the compositions were joined together not in a single literary step but in several stages, and that this fusion took place at a late period. One reason is that, according to ancient Israelite tradition, the history of God's people began with the exodus from Egypt. Consequently it is assumed that the great OT history also originally began with the book of Exodus. According to this view, the stories of the patriarchs and the primeval history were put in front of the account of the exodus only later.[1] The Documentary Hypothesis, which assumes that there

---

English translation by Margaret Kohl. Many thanks to Prof. Bernard M. Levinson for his very helpful suggestions.

[1] Considerations along these lines can be found already in Gerhard von Rad, "The Problem of the Hexateuch" (1938) in idem, *The Problem of the Hexateuch, and Other Essays* (trans. E. W. Trueman Dicken; New York: McGraw, 1966), 1–78, esp. 50–67; also in Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (1948; trans. B. W. Anderson; Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1972), 46–62. See recently Markus Witte, *Die biblische Urgeschichte: Redaktions- und theologiegeschichtliche*

are sources that run right through the Pentateuch, is incompatible with a solution of this kind. Not a few of today's scholars consider that this hypothesis is now super-seded.[2] Instead, Deuteronomistic[3] or late wisdom writers[4] are made responsible for fusing the different blocks of tradition. This view can claim support inasmuch as explicit cross-references in the Pentateuch have clearly been introduced subse-quently, and at a late date;[5] one example is the explicit references to the tradition of the patriarchs in the books of Exodus to Deuteronomy.[6]

Another solution sees the Priestly source as providing the historiographical scaffolding into which the non-Priestly narratives have been inserted at a later point, not having formed a separate source of its own before that.[7] This revival of the supplementary hypothesis once more attributes to the source P the position of the basic document that nineteenth-century research rightly denied to it.

Until a short time ago, however, the Documentary Hypothesis was also called into question because of the Priestly source, since the literary coherence in the patriarchal narratives is so weak as to suggest that there was no independent writ-ten source here, but that the P material represents a reworking of the older text.[8]

Beobachtungen zu Genesis 1,1–11,26 (BZAW 265; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1998); Konrad Schmid, *Erzväter und Exodus: Untersuchungen zur doppelten Begründung der Ursprünge Israels innerhalb der Geschichtsbücher des Alten Testaments* (WMANT 81; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1999); Jan Ch. Gertz, *Tradition und Redaktion in der Exoduserzählung* (FRLANT 186; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000); Reinhard G. Kratz, *The Composition of the Narrative Books of the Old Testament* (trans. J. Bowden; London/New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 279–82.

[2] See *Abschied vom Jahwisten: Die Komposition des Hexateuch in der jüngsten Diskussion* (ed. J.Ch. Gertz et al.; BZAW 315; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2002); and my critical review of this vol-ume, "Abschied vom Jahwisten?" *TRu* 69 (2004): 329–44. See also recently *A Farewell to the Yahwist?* (ed. Thomas B. Dozeman and Konrad Schmid; SBLSymS 34; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), and my contribution to this volume: "The Yahwist and the Redactional Link between Gene-sis and Exodus" (pp. 131–41).

[3] See, e.g., Erhard Blum, *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte* (WMANT 57; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1984); idem, *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch* (BZAW 189; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1990).

[4] See, e.g., Witte, *Die biblische Urgeschichte*.

[5] Shown by Rainer Kessler, "Die Querverweise im Pentateuch" (Theol. diss., University of Hei-delberg, 1972); Rolf Rendtorff, *The Problem of the Process of Transmission in the Pentateuch* (1977; trans. J. J. Scullion; JSOTSup 89; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 84–85.

[6] See Thomas Römer, *Israels Väter: Untersuchungen zur Väterthematik im Deuteronomium und in der deuteronomistischen Tradition* (OBO 99; Freiburg [Switzerland]: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990).

[7] Thus, e.g., Eckart Otto, *Das Deuteronomium im Pentateuch und Hexateuch* (FAT 30; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000); idem, "Pentateuch V: Literatur- und Religionsgeschichte des Penta-teuch," *RGG* 4th ed. (2003), 6:1097–1102.

[8] See Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Reli-gion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 301–21; Rendtorff, *Problem of the Process;* Blum, *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte.*

The Priestly source alone is not suited to serve as the basis for the narrative of the whole Pentateuch, even if there are still good reasons for the assumption of an originally independent literary thread.

The composition of the Pentateuch hangs not on a single thread but on a cord plaited together from two strands, the Priestly source and the Yahwist's history. This cord makes it possible for the work as a whole to avoid falling apart when one of the two threads is torn or missing, which is the case several times.

It is certainly true that the material in the books of Genesis to Numbers that does not derive from the Priestly source provides us with a more or less coherent narrative. Even if this coherence cannot have existed when the transmission began because of the disparity of the material, it will not have been produced merely through the late cross-references. There are good reasons why earlier scholars read the non-Priestly Pentateuch as a literary unity.[9] This is especially true for the Yahwist, whom earlier research rightly recognized as providing the basis of the narrative.[10] It is no counterargument to say that the explicit cross-references between the book of Genesis, on the one hand, and the books of Exodus to Deuteronomy, on the other, are only late. Those references are no more than the stucco on a long-existing building. They are not the supporting beams that hold the construction together. The stucco is external and strikes the eye. But for the stability of the building, it is the supporting beams that are important. Consequently the question about a redaction (or editing process) of the non-Priestly narrative that is at the same time pre-Priestly and non-Deuteronomistic is inescapable. If a redaction of this kind were to be found, it would be the best proof that the Documentary Hypothesis (in the form of the two-source hypothesis, P and J)[11] is still the solution that best fits the literary history of the Pentateuch.

For a long time scholars saw the development of the pre-Priestly Pentateuch not as a question of redaction, or editorial, history but as a problem about the history of the transmission. The narrative foundation of the Pentateuch was interpreted as a composition that drew on current oral tradition. The diversity that can

---

[9] For a survey of the research, see my *Der Jahwist* (FRLANT 157; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 9–35.

[10] This view was emphatically von Rad's. See his *Problem of the Hexateuch.* Even if his presuppositions about the transmission history have meanwhile been cogently refuted, the conclusion, taken as a redaction-history hypothesis, meets the facts with astonishing accuracy.

[11] From the start—that is, from the eighteenth century onwards—the Documentary Hypothesis was so evident that scholars came to apply it again and again to the separate sources. This led to hypotheses such as E (the "Elohist"), N ("Nomadenquelle" [Nomad source]), L ("Laienquelle" [Lay source]), and others. This approach has clearly proved to be mistaken. The fusion of sources as suggested in the Documentary Hypothesis is not the rule in OT literary history but very much an exception. See Paul Volz and Wilhelm Rudolph, *Der Elohist als Erzähler: Ein Irrweg der Pentateuchkritik?* (BZAW 63; Giessen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1933).

be detected behind today's text was put down to popular narrative tradition.[12] This approach reflects the influence of romanticism; the activity of collectors such as the Brothers Grimm and others at that time suggested a model. But even in the nineteenth century, people became aware of tensions that can be explained only in literary terms. Since the 1960s the internal lack of unity has come to be explained as the result of the redaction history.[13] It is emerging ever more clearly that the Yahwist is an editorial collection with a distinctive literary profile that has fused older written sources into a new whole.[14] Editorial compositions of this kind do not stand at the beginning of the history of a literary culture. Numerous indications point to the period after the end of the Judean monarchy, that is to say, the sixth century B.C.E.[15]

[12] An example of this view is Hermann Gunkel's famous commentary *Genesis* (1901; trans. M. E. Biddle from 3rd ed., 1910; Mercer Library of Biblical Studies; Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1997).

[13] See Rudolf Kilian, *Die vorpriesterlichen Abrahamsüberlieferungen literarkritisch und traditionskritisch untersucht* (BBB 24; Bonn: Hanstein, 1966); Renate Friebe, "Form und Entstehungsgeschichte des Plagenzyklus Exodus 7,8–13,16" (Theol. diss., University of Halle, 1967); Volkmar Fritz, *Israel in der Wüste: Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen der Wüstenüberlieferung des Jahwisten* (Marburger Theologische Studien 7; Marburg: Elwert, 1970); Erich Zenger, *Die Sinaitheophanie: Untersuchungen z. jahwist. u. elohist. Geschichtswerk* (FB 3; Würzburg: Echter, 1971); Peter Weimar, *Untersuchungen zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Pentateuch* (BZAW 146; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1977).

[14] I do not agree with John Van Seters's approach in rejecting the concept of an editor J; see his *Der Jahwist als Historiker* (TS 134; Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1992); and his *The Edited Bible: The Curious History of the 'Editor' in Biblical Criticism* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006). The inconsistencies in the Yahwistic source make a separation between narrative and editorial text inescapable. The tensions are literary, even textual, in kind and do not fit the concept of a renarration of traditions by a historian. Because of the lack of differentiation, the "Yahwist" emerges as a literary collection with no distinctive profile; many texts are attributed to him that earlier research rightly saw as non-Yahwistic. For discussion, see Bernard M. Levinson, "Is the Covenant Code an Exilic Composition? A Response to John Van Seters," in *In Search of Pre-exilic Israel: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar* (ed. John Day; JSOTSup 406; London: T&T Clark, 2004), 272–325, esp. 284–88 and 315–17; Jean-Louis Ska, "A Plea on Behalf of the Biblical Redactors," *ST* 59 (2005): 4–18.

[15] Thus Levin, *Der Jahwist.* An outline of the thesis is also to be found in my book *The Old Testament: A Brief Introduction* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 61–70. Ernest W. Nicholson (*The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century: The Legacy of Julius Wellhausen* [Oxford: Clarendon; Oxford/New York; Oxford University Press, 1998], 161–65) presents a perfect and sympathetic outline, related to the summary in *Der Jahwist*, 414–35 ("The Yahwist's message"). Unfortunately he does not refer to the redaction-critical proof. My thesis is not initially based on tendency criticism but on analytical literary criticism, form-critical arguments, and language. Nicholson's most important objection is that the universalism of J can be found already in Amos and Isaiah (pp. 165–69). If this is true (and there are good reasons for doubting that the respective texts go back to the eighth-century prophets themselves) the universalism of J is just one feature among many others.

II

Let us look more closely at the different blocks of narrative tradition.[16] The *primeval history* (Genesis 1–11) rests on a narrative about the origin of human beings, an anthropogony. Like the Babylonian epic about the creation of the world, the *Enuma elish*,[17] this primeval history begins with an account of the state of the world before creation, the great "Not Yet": "When no plant of the field was yet in the earth" (Gen 2:5)—when there was still no vegetation. In Genesis, unlike in Babylonian mythology, the first act is not the creation of the gods. Here creation begins with the human being (Genesis 2–3). A single God goes to work like a potter. After he has blown breath into the nostril of the man he has created, he plants a garden for him in Eden, in the east. Afterwards God creates the animals, and finally the woman, out of the man's rib. Even the clothing, which distinguishes the human being from other living things, comes from God.

The first two human beings produce a son, Cain (Genesis 4). With Cain a series of generations begins that leads to Noah and his three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.[18] Into this tribal list all kinds of notes have subsequently been interpolated about the differentiations of the arts of civilization: the raising of cattle and arable farming, urban building, music, wrought-iron work. The series leads into the so-called table of nations (Genesis 10), which classifies the peoples in the world of that time according to the place in which they lived and their language, and links them with each other genealogically.[19] At this point the description of the primeval era merges into an account of the historical world. The list of peoples was an already-existing entity, for it is divided according to the four regions of the world, which do not match the "three" of Noah's sons. Since Assyria is mentioned but not Babylon

---

[16] The outline given here follows the detailed literary-critical analysis in *Der Jahwist*. Since 1993, however, a number of changes have occurred (and others may still follow). My present view of the J source may be seen from the English translation: http://www.at1.evtheol.uni-muenchen.de/service/texte/index.html. The translation omits all non-Yahwistic text and marks the difference between the pre-Yahwistic sources and the editor's own contribution.

[17] *COS* 1:111; *ANET,* 60–61.

[18] Unfortunately the sequence is interrupted between Lamech and Noah. However, the gap can in all probability be closed on the basis of the parallel thread in Genesis 5 (P), since the lists of the ancestors in the Priestly source rests on the Yahwist's account in Genesis 4, as Karl Budde has clearly shown (*Die Biblische Urgeschichte (Gen. 1–12, 5)* [Giessen: J. Ricker, 1883], 89–182).

[19] Usually the table of the nations counts as part of the Priestly source. This is a mistake that is due to the *toledot*-heading in Gen 10:1 through which the redaction J/P imitated the Priestly heading system in order to fit the pentateuchal sources together, thus producing a doublet to Gen 11:10. The Yahwistic parts of the chapter do not form a coherent text but are additions to the original table of nations. This proves that the table belongs to the pre-Yahwistic sources, not to the Priestly source. The Priestly writer did not focus on geographical and historical details such as are presented here.

and Persia, the seventh century would seem to be a plausible date for the composition. The interest in the countries of the west is striking.

Just as in the ancient Babylonian Atramhasis epic, the transition from the primeval history to history proper is interrupted by the great *flood* (Genesis 6–9).[20] Before humankind spreads throughout the earth, chaos returns once more. Noah survives because of the solicitous care of the God Yahweh. The hero of the flood becomes the second father of humankind. That the story of the flood was interpolated later is shown by the detail that, unlike Utnapishtim, the hero of the flood in the Gilgamesh epic, Noah neglects to take the craftsmen with him into the ark.[21] The details about cultural history in Genesis 4 aim to describe the origins of the civilization of the day and do not take into account the fact that after the flood everything begins again from the beginning.[22]

With the *second* block of the narrative tradition, the *history of the patriarchs* (Genesis 12–36), we find ourselves in another world. The chief characters in the action are seen as individuals, judging by their names: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They are grandfather, father, and son. On a closer look, we see that the composition is based on three great, artistically embroidered narratives: the wooing of a bride for Isaac (ch. 24); Jacob's theft of a blessing (ch. 27); and Jacob's marriage with Laban's daughters (chs. 29–30). With only a few stitches (see Gen 24:67aβ; 25:21bβ, 24, 25*, 26a, 27–28, and Gen [27:42–45;] 28:10) these narratives are joined into a narrative sequence. All the events take place in the framework of the family; moreover, the continued existence of the family is their real subject. What is narrated is solely the sequence of the generations: marriage, descendants, and inheritance. We have to read the story of the patriarchs in its earliest nucleus as the history of a particular family, and as that alone. What is striking is the broad geographical horizon. Abraham settles in the steppe, in the direction of Egypt (Gen 20:1); Isaac in Beer-sheba, on the southwest border of Judah (Gen 28:10); but the country where their relatives live is northern Syria.

Sarah, Abraham's wife, is at first childless (Genesis 16). She therefore gives Abraham her maid as his wife, with whom he begets Ishmael. When at last Sarah becomes pregnant, Abraham casts off the maid and her son (ch. 21). The very next scene describes how Sarah's son Isaac acquires a wife (ch. 24). Abraham, who knows that his end is near, commands his servant to take a long journey into Syrian Mesopotamia, where he is to woo Rebekah, the daughter of his brother Nahor.

Rebekah bears twins (Genesis 25). In the story, the birth is followed immediately by the quarrel of the grown-up sons about the inheritance of their father (ch.

---

[20] *COS* 1:130; W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-Ḫasīs: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969).

[21] Thus the account of the flood on the eleventh tablet of the Gilgamesh epic, line 85 (*ANET,* 72–99; *COS* 1:132).

[22] Julius Wellhausen, *Die Composition des Hexateuchs* (1885; 4th ed.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1963), 10.

27). With the help of his mother, the younger twin, Jacob, steals a march on his elder brother, Esau, and receives the blessing of the firstborn from Isaac, who is blind and on his deathbed. To avoid Esau's vengeance, Jacob flees to Haran, to Laban, Rebekah's brother (Gen 28:10). There he desires Laban's younger daughter, Rachel, for his wife (ch. 29). Since he is unable to pay the bride-price, he engages to serve Laban for seven years. When the seven years are up, the wedding is held. On the morning after the wedding night, Jacob discovers that Laban has brought him the wrong woman—his older daughter, Leah. Laban excuses himself on the grounds of custom: "It is not so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn" (29:26). At the end of the bridal week he gives Jacob the younger daughter, Rachel, into the bargain. This leads to further complications. In order to free himself from Laban, Jacob chooses to flee (ch. 31). Laban catches up with him, and in the end the two come to an agreement, according to which Laban is given rights of ownership over the women, but Jacob the right of use.[23]

Surprisingly enough, this family story has later been embroidered into a kind of history of national origins. The story of Abraham was supplemented by the tradition about Lot (Genesis 19). This tells that what is now the Dead Sea was once the city of Sodom, which was destroyed because of the wickedness of its inhabitants. Lot, having escaped the inferno, begets with his two daughters his sons Moab and Ammon, who become the ancestors of the monarchies east of the Jordan. More important are a number of aetiologically key scenes in chs. 31–35 that were added later, forming an appendix to the original narratives about Jacob. When he returns from Laban, Jacob gives the mountains of Gilead their name (ch. 31) and founds Mahanaim east of the Jordan (ch. 32), as well as the place Luz, and builds Rachel's tomb near Ephrath (ch. 35). It is only from this point that Jacob counts as the progenitor, or tribal father, of Israel. It is remarkable that in the story of the patriarchs, developed in this way into a national history, Judah does not appear.[24] All the key scenes take place in the northern kingdom of Israel, including Gilead, or in its sphere of influence east of the Jordan.

The most important episode of this kind is the story about Bethel (Genesis 28), which was later inserted at the point of intersection between the cycles of the Jacob–Esau narratives and the Jacob–Laban narratives. Jacob is supposed to have founded the royal sanctuary of the northern kingdom on his flight to Haran. He dreams about a ladder between heaven and earth, which he calls not merely "Beth-El" ("House of God") but "Gate of Heaven" (28:17). Read with a tiny change as "Gate of the gods" (Akkadian *Bāb-ilī*), the dream can be related to Etemenanki, the Tower of Babel, "the house of the foundation of heaven and earth." Apparently a

---

[23] See Levin, *Der Jahwist*, 237–44.

[24] This is a difference compared with the original narratives, in which Beersheba is an important dwelling place (Gen 28:10). In Gen 13:18; 23:2, 19; 35:27 Mamre is equated with Hebron/Kiriat-arba; but these are quite evidently late glosses; cf. Gen 25:9; 49:30; 50:13. In fact we do not know where Mamre was situated.

Mesopotamian tradition has been transformed into the story of the founding of the Israelite sanctuary.[25] This change may be no earlier than the eighth or seventh century. It is striking that in this cultic saga, and elsewhere too, the monarchy plays no part.[26] We have to conclude from this that the narrative establishing the national history came into being only after the end of the northern kingdom, which fell to the Assyrians in 722. It could derive from members of the upper class who had fled to Judah on the conquest of Samaria.

With the *third* of the narrative blocks, the *story of Joseph and his brothers* (Genesis 37; 39–45), we return to the family sector. In its oldest form this is a fairytale. Like many examples of the genre, it begins with a family conflict. The father favors the youngest son and excites the jealousy of the brothers. They sell Joseph into Egypt. There, at the end of a path full of humiliations, he rises to become the first man in the state after the pharaoh. Behind the scene with "Potiphar's wife" and her attempt at seduction is the Egyptian fairytale about the two brothers, which dates from the end of the Nineteenth Dynasty.[27] Later, the Joseph story was developed into a novella that interprets the changing fortunes of its hero as an example of Yahweh's guidance.

Of the *fourth* narrative block, the *stories about Moses*, only the beginning is extant (Exodus 2–4). Allegedly born a Levite, Moses is exposed in a basket in the Nile and is adopted by the pharaoh's daughter (2:1–10). This is intended as an assertion of his Israelite origin, in contrast to his Egyptian name (which, paradoxically, is explained through a Hebrew etymology). When it becomes known that Moses has intervened as an avenger in a conflict, he is forced to flee from the pharaoh (2:16–22). In Midian, in northwest Arabia, he marries into the priest's family. After the pharaoh's death, Moses returns to Egypt (Exod 2:23aα; 4:20a). Here the source breaks off; it provides evidence for the interest in the outstanding priestly figure who is later linked with the memory of Israel's early period. Moses's rank is shown by the fact that the account of his exposure in the Nile draws on the story about the origin of King Sargon of Akkad, a story known to us in a Neo-Assyrian version.[28]

---

[25] See Nabopolassar's building inscription for Etemenanki, the Tower of Babel, *TUAT* 2/4:490–93.

[26] One may argue that an antimonarchical tendency can be found in the OT (and that the patriarchal narratives may represent this tradition). A closer look, however, shows that all the related texts reflect the concept of theocracy that emerged only in postexilic Judaism under the conditions of the Persian Empire. In ancient Israel, as throughout the ancient Near East, people could not imagine any (religio-)political concept other than monarchy. See recently Reinhard Müller, *Königtum und Gottesherrschaft: Untersuchungen zur alttestamentlichen Monarchiekritik* (FAT 2.3; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004).

[27] *ANET,* 23–25; *COS* 1:40; *AEL* 2:203–11.

[28] The story of the exposed child is widespread; see the survey in Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary* (trans. W. C. Linss; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989) on Matthew 2. The closest parallel, however, is the birth legend of Sargon of Akkad; see *ANET,* 119; *COS* 1:133.

The *fifth* great unit of tradition describes the *exodus* of the Israelites *from Egypt* and their *wanderings through the desert*. The path begins in the delta palace of Ramses II (Exod 12:37) and finds its provisional end on the southern border of Judah, in Kadesh (Num 20:1a), or in Shittim, the place from which the spies set out (Num 25:1a; Josh 2:1). Along this narrative thread, a series of episodes has been strung dealing with the living conditions in the desert: the bitter water in Mara and the palm oasis of Elim (Exodus 15), the food provided for the people through quails and through a scale-insect secretion called manna (Exodus 16).

The oldest thread in the wilderness narratives was later supplemented by the *miracle at the sea*, which describes the downfall of the pursuing pharaoh (Exodus 14–15), and by the scene on the *mountain of God*, which later, in the course of a long literary development, became the place where the OT law was given (Exodus 19ff.). Here again we find the figure of Moses, now assuming the role of the leading priest, who proclaims the oracle of salvation before the battle begins (Exod 14:13–14), and who alone is allowed to approach the deity on the mountain (= sanctuary). The notes about the deaths of Miriam (Num 20:1b) and Moses (Deut 34:5*) may also have belonged to this strand of tradition.

Before this conclusion to the narrative, as a *sixth* narrative block, the story about the seer *Balaam* has been interpolated (Numbers 22–24). Balaam is hired by the Moabite king Balak to curse Israel but blesses it instead. This reflects the dispute between the northern kingdom of Israel and Moab southeast of the Jordan, which for a time was Israel's vassal state. Here too the date is established through a nonbiblical source: a Balaam tradition in Aramaic dating from the eighth/seventh century was discovered in 1967 at Tell Deir ʿAlla in the Jordan Valley.[29]

III

Considering the redaction of the Deuteronomistic History, Martin Noth spoke of the "evidence that the work is a self-contained whole."[30] To support his view Noth mentions a number of common characteristics that hold the work together. Similarly, characteristics of redactional composition can be found in the earliest ongoing stratum of the narrative in the Pentateuch, characteristics that shape the work into a literary unity with its own distinct meaning.

The *first* of these characteristics has to do with the *choice of sources.* The fragmentary nature of some of the narrative blocks, and even of individual stories, is evident, for example, the Abraham narratives and the original story of Moses, which suddenly breaks off after Exod 4:20. This shows that the material that has been col-

[29] *COS* 2:27.
[30] Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History* (trans. J. Doull et al. from the 2nd ed., 1957; JSOTSup 14; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), 4.

lected in the Pentateuch is what remains of a still greater wealth of literary tradition that has otherwise been lost. What is extant rests on a selection, and the viewpoints determining it can be described. Since these viewpoints affect all six blocks of tradition in the same way, they provide evidence of the work's editorial coherence.

The main guiding principle in the choice of sources can be easily detected. All the narratives with a single exception are set outside the country of Israel and Judah. They depict the main actors as *strangers:* Hagar in the desert (Genesis 16); Lot in Sodom (Genesis 19); Abraham's servant in Mesopotamia (Genesis 24); Isaac among the Philistines (Genesis 26); Jacob in Haran (Genesis 29–30); Joseph in Egypt (Genesis 39–45.); in Egypt too, later, the Israelites (Genesis 46–Exodus 1); Moses in Midian (Exodus 2); the people on their journey through the desert (Exodus 12–Numbers 20). That this is the rule is shown by the exception: for the purposes of the stories about Abraham (Genesis 12–22), which are set in the Israelite mountains, the country of Israel has been artificially declared a foreign land by way of the distinction between Israelites and Canaanites: "At that time the Canaanites were in the land" (Gen 12:6). This comment is matched by the promise: "To your descendants I will give this land" (Gen 12:7). The Israelite possession of the land is thus supposed still to lie in the future. With the help of this fiction, Abraham too now lives in a foreign country.

The work as a whole relates a history of exile. In order to emphasize this, the sources used have been painted over with vivid colors. The narrative as a whole begins with the expulsion from paradise and ends, as far as we can see, before the gates of the promised land. The road to an alien land is a terrible fate, for it runs counter to a fundamental anthropological fact: the essential ties of the human being (Hebrew אָדָם) with the earth (Hebrew אֲדָמָה). This fundamental premise is the theme of the creation narrative (Genesis 2) in the edited version we have today: the human being is created from the earth, and at the end of his life he will return to it. The trees in the garden and the animals too originate from the earth—indirectly the woman also, since she has been fashioned out of the man's rib. The task set for the human's existence is "to till the ground from which he was taken" (Gen 2:5; 3:23)—that is to say, to settle down as farmer. For the relationship between human beings and the earth to be disturbed is a curse. This is what the interpolated scene about the fall tells us (Genesis 3). "Death is threatened for non-observance, but what follows . . . is not death or social extinction but exile."[31]

Cain's fate is still worse. Because he has soaked the earth with his brother's blood, a curse drives him away from the cultivated land (Genesis 4). From now on he wanders over the earth "a fugitive and a wanderer." Yet to exist as a stranger can also be God's charge, as is the case with Abraham: "Go from your country and your

---

[31] Joseph Blenkinsopp, "A Post-exilic Lay Source in Genesis 1–11" in *Abschied vom Jahwisten,* ed. Gertz et al., 49–61, esp. 51.

kindred and your father's house" (Gen 12:1). In this case the charge is linked with the promise of Yahweh's support and blessing.

In these stories the conditions in which the stranger exists are described in sometimes drastic terms. As someone with fewer rights than the others, he lives among an indigenous majority from whom he is ethnically and religiously divided. Lot experiences the inhabitants of Sodom as a horde of unbridled evildoers who do not hesitate to assault sexually the guest he has taken into his house. At the expense of his two virgin daughters, he tries to pacify the lustful crowd, but the attempt fails: "They said: 'This fellow came to sojourn, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them.' Then they pressed hard against the man" (Gen 19:9). Isaac has reason to fear that he will be murdered by the Philistines for the sake of his wife, who is a desirable beauty (Gen 26:7). Through the false accusations of his Egyptian master's wife, Joseph lands in prison (Genesis 39). The pharaoh compels the Israelites in Egypt to forced labor, with the declared purpose of decimating them (Exodus 1). When his plan fails, he commands the midwives to kill the newborn sons of the Hebrews.

In this situation special values and forms of life develop. The less the individual feels in harmony with the majority of those around him, the greater the importance of family and kindred. Marriage with the indigenous population is forbidden, and the segregation is strictly observed. Internal disputes are settled with a reminder of the common bond between the contenders. When a quarrel about grazing rights breaks out, Abraham deems it right to say to Lot: "Let there be no strife between you and me, for we are kinsmen" (Gen 13:8); and in exemplary fashion he gives Lot first choice of the land. Great importance is attached to the sequence of generations. In order to portray this, the natural sequence of marriage, procreation, and birth is disturbed with unnatural regularity. Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel—all are at first barren, until through Yahweh's influence the heir is born.[32] This stylistic device shows that the mere continuance of the family is in itself intended to count as a proof of Yahweh's efficacious help.

Religion too is determined by the conditions of the family. Yahweh has cast off his ties with the land of Israel and Judah. The relationship to him is no longer mediated through the fact that his worshipers settle in the place where this god has his given sphere of influence. The determining fact is now that the clan, the extended family, worships Yahweh. Yahweh becomes "the God of the fathers" who is "characterized not by a firm link with one place, but by a continuous connection with one group of people."[33] Wherever his followers happen to be, he proves his efficacy and

---

[32] Even the pregnancies of Eve (Gen 4:1), Hagar (birth oracle, Gen 16:11), and Leah (Gen 29:31) are put down to Yahweh.

[33] Albrecht Alt, "The God of the Fathers" (1929) in idem, *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (trans. R. A. Wilson; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966), 1–77, esp. 23.

confers blessing: "I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land" (Gen 28:15). Jacob is given this promise in Bethel and he responds, full of astonishment: "Surely Yahweh is in this place; and I did not know it" (v. 16). If the scene takes place in the sanctuary of the northern kingdom, it also means resistance to the claim of the temple in Jerusalem to be the sole legitimate cultic site for Yahweh's worshipers.[34] For life in the dispersion, it was vital to put an end to any confinement to the central sanctuary, a limitation that had been elevated to the rank of doctrine only at the end of the seventh century, under King Josiah.[35]

IV

The *view of history* is the *second* sign of a planned unity. It has been fashioned by the redaction on the basis of selected sources and with the help of its own linguistic methods. It again makes plain the initial situation to which the Yahwist is reacting: the alien status of the Israelites.

The threat hanging over the alien has an external side, which reaches from the exposure to trickery in material and legal affairs to physical violence; and it has an inward one, which touches a person's self-esteem. At that time this was reflected in religious ideas. What the majority thinks and does seems of necessity to have a higher claim, and it requires great self-assurance, or the force of circumstance, to refuse worship to the country's gods.

A situation of this kind cries out for compensation. That is why the Yahwist's work recounts salvation history. In this history, Yahweh—in origin the dynastic god of the two minor Palestinian kingdoms of Israel and Judah—is described as "the God of heaven" (Gen 24:3, 7) who directs the destiny of everyone. What we see taking place here is a profound transformation in the history of religion. It is a striking fact that we otherwise meet this OT title only in writings dating from the Persian period, where it has as a model Ahura Mazda, the Persian god of heaven. As the god of heaven, Yahweh nevertheless remains bound to his restricted origin. The special relationship to his worshipers in the closer sense still exists—indeed it becomes the real subject of the account.

The work traces the history of the people of Israel from the beginning of the world down to the threshold of the conquest of the Palestinian land. For this purpose the already existing blocks are sewn together by means of a continuous geneal-

[34] For detailed argumentation, especially with regard to the altar law of the Covenant Code, see Christoph Levin, "Das Deuteronomium und der Jahwist" in idem, *Fortschreibungen: Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament* (BZAW 316; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2003), 96–110.

[35] The historical link between the earliest Deuteronomic law (Deuteronomy 12–26) and Josiah (639–609 B.C.E.) may still be considered the most probable.

ogy:[36] Abraham now counts as the descendant of Shem, from the table of nations (Gen 10:21). Moses having been born as the son of a Levite (Exod 2:1) is incorporated into the genealogical line of Jacob in that Levi is declared to have been one of the sons of Jacob (Gen 29:34).

Because a general anthropogony is placed at the beginning, God's people are from the outset put in relation to the rest of humankind as a whole, in the sense that they are set over against all the others. With occasionally shocking logic, the division between the people who belong to Yahweh and the great majority, who are far from him, runs right through the work. The cleft begins with the sons of the first human being. Both sons bring Yahweh an offering. "And Yahweh had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard" (Gen 4:4–5)— no reason for this being given. When, as a result, Cain becomes a murderer, he is cursed (vv. 11–12). Afterwards the first man begets another son, Seth, through whom Yahweh gets a new group of followers: "At that time men began to call upon the name of Yahweh" (v. 26). Noah descends from Seth, and in him Yahweh's partiality is intensified to an unsurpassable degree: he is the only one who finds "favor in the eyes of Yahweh" (Gen 6:8), when all human beings are drowned in the flood.

After the fall of the first human being, existence is subject to a curse: "Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life" (Gen 3:17). But things do not rest there. When Noah is born, his father, Lamech, declares: "Out of the ground that Yahweh has cursed this one shall bring us relief from our work" (5:29). And after the flood Yahweh does in fact resolve: "I will never again curse the ground because of man" (8:21). With this pronouncement he affirms that the curse is lifted. For Noah and for those who are his, the curse is no longer in force; in its place is an abundance of blessing.

Although the majority who are far from Yahweh are annihilated in the flood, this does not prevent the division of humankind from continuing afterwards, just as the flood too is repeated in spite of the promise—this time as a rain of fire on Sodom. Among Noah's sons, a curse is laid on Ham/Canaan because of an indecent act. In the table of nations, Nimrod is numbered among Ham's sons. "The beginning of his kingdom was Babel, Erech, and Akkad, all of them in the land of Shinar" (Gen 10:10). This Mesopotamian empire counts as the realm of evil. Egypt too is supposed to be the descendant of Ham, as are, of course, the Canaanites, under whom Abraham and Lot are said to have lived as strangers. In Shem, "the father of all the children of Eber" (= all the Hebrews) the group of those who belong to Yahweh stands over against the sons of Ham (v. 21). In spite of all the differentiations in the table of nations, at the end of the primeval history humankind is divided into two according to a simple pattern, before Yahweh scatters it over the earth, because of the tower of Babel.

[36] See Noth, *Pentateuchal Traditions*, 214–19 ("Genealogies").

The line of blessing and the line of curse run counter to each other until the end of the work. The blessing is expressed in the wealth of Abraham and Lot, and in the birth of Isaac, which Yahweh brings about contrary to all human capacity. It is expressed in the angel's care for Hagar in the desert, in response to which she acknowledges: "You are a God of seeing" (Gen 16:13). It is expressed in Yahweh's support for the hard-pressed Lot, and in the terrible punishment inflicted on the wicked indigenous population, from whom Lot is brought safely away.

Yahweh crowns the journey of Abraham's servant with success. In the Philistine town of Gerar, he promises Isaac the blessing which he fulfills a hundredfold in the year of famine, so that the Philistines envy Isaac, and their king Abimelech acknowledges: "We see plainly that Yahweh is with you" (Gen 26:28). Jacob now lays hold of his father's blessing, not just through deception but also with Yahweh's help: "Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Cursed be every one who curses you, and blessed be every one who blesses you!" (Gen 27:29). Under Jacob's care, Laban's cattle multiply greatly. When Joseph is living in the Egyptian's house, his master sees "that Yahweh was with him" (Gen 39:3), and he puts Joseph in charge of his property. "From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, Yahweh blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of Yahweh was upon all that he had, in house and field" (v. 5). Even when Joseph is in prison, the warder "committed to Joseph's care all the prisoners who were in the prison" (v. 22), and when the pharaoh elevates Joseph to a great position, he does so with the words: "Only as regards the throne will I be greater than you" (Gen 41:40).

The fate of the Israelites in Egypt changes for the worse, since because of Yahweh's blessing the people have become more numerous and stronger than the Egyptians themselves. But Yahweh foils the attempt to decimate them through the imposition of forced labor. He sees their misery and comes down to lead them to a land flowing with milk and honey, going before them in the form of a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire. The Egyptians try to prevent the exodus, but they suffer the same fate as the victims of the flood and the inhabitants of Sodom: they are destroyed. Moses's Midianite father-in-law hears of this and can only acknowledge: "Blessed be Yahweh, who has delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians. Now I know that Yahweh is greater than all gods" (Exod 18:10–11).

Finally, when God's people approached their later dwelling place, "Moab was in great dread because they were many" (Num 22:3). King Balak bids the seer Balaam: "Curse this people for me, since they are too mighty for me" (v. 6). But Yahweh commands him: "You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed" (v. 12b).

V

In all this a *third* characteristic emerges—a theological *leitmotif* that holds the work together from beginning to end, from the curse in Genesis 3 and 4 down to

Balaam's blessing in Numbers 24. This guiding theme is the history of *blessing.* In earlier exegesis the promise to Abraham in Gen 12:2–3 was read as a kind of motto for the Yahwist: "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 him who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."[37] The history of God's people in contrast to the rest of the (generally hostile) peoples is presented as the effect of Yahweh's blessing. But this was not what was actually historically experienced. The work of the Yahwist offers a counterpicture to reality as it is. This can be grasped from the promises. They are not just directed to the characters in history as it is here narrated; they are directed beyond these figure to readers in the present. The exemplary fulfillment of the promises, as it is described, for example, in the birth of son and heir, or in Yahweh's helpful guidance in a foreign land, in loneliness, desert, and hostility, as well as in the experiences of deliverance, is designed as an encouragement to hope here and now. The fictitious nature of the account is shown by the enumerated riches in which Yahweh's blessing takes material form, as it were.[38] The huge herds, the multitudinous servants, and all the other possessions are a narrative of wishful thinking. We can therefore call it more than chance that the work as we have it loses itself at the end in the wilderness, so to speak. That is to say, it does not lead out of the utopia. The account remains a history of faith.

VI

All the points we have considered suggest that the narrative composed in this way did not leave the already existing sources untouched but linked them and commented on them by way of editorial additions. In these additions a *fourth* overall characteristic emerges: *language and style.* The Yahwist redaction can be recognized from a whole series of individual touches, through which it has its own distinctive literary signature.

From the eighteenth century onwards, the names for God, "Yahweh" and "Elohim," were considered the prime characteristics through which the sources could be differentiated. It is for this reason that we talk about the oldest continuous source as being the work of the "Yahwist." As time went on, this starting point proved to be insufficiently specific, since the older narratives occasionally use "Elohim" as a term for God, while the many later additions continue to use "Yahweh." In fact there are numerous other stylistic features besides the criterion of the divine names. Earlier exegetes were aware of this and compiled actual lists of such features, which

[37] Hans Walter Wolff, "Das Kerygma des Jahwisten" (1964), in idem, *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament* (TB 22; Munich: Kaiser, 1973), 345–73, esp. 351–54.
[38] Genesis 13:2, 5; 24:35; 26:12; 30:43; 32:5; Exod 12:35, 38.

defined the work's stylistic coherence.[39] It was not yet recognized, however, that these same stylistic features pointed to an editor, not an original author, as was then assumed.[40] Naturally, the criterion of language must not be applied mechanically. In its use of language, the redaction draws upon its sources, just as it influences the linguistic choices of later authors and the texts that were subsequently added to the Pentateuch.

Here are a few examples of how the editor dealt with his sources:[41]

1. *Genesis 19:3.* He [Lot] urged them [the three men] strongly; so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he made them a feast, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. 4 But before they lay down, the men of the city [...] surrounded the house; [...] 5 *and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them."* 6 Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, 7 *and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly.* 8 *Behold, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof."* 9 But they said, "Stand back!" *And they said, "This fellow came to sojourn, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Then they pressed hard against the man* [...], and drew near to break the door. 10 But the men put forth their hands and brought Lot into the house to them, and shut the door.[42]

2. *Genesis 26:1.* Now there was a famine in the land. [...] And Isaac went to Gerar, to Abimelech king of the Philistines. 2 *And Yahweh appeared to him, and said,* [...] 3 *"Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you, and will bless you."* [...] 6 *So Isaac dwelt in Gerar.* 7 When the men of the place asked him about his wife, he said, "She is my sister"; for he feared to say, "My wife, *lest the men of the place should kill me for the sake of Rebekah; because she is fair to look upon."* 8 When he had been there a long time, Abimelech king of the Philistines looked out of a window and saw Isaac fondling Rebekah his wife. 9 So Abimelech called Isaac, and said, "Behold, she is your wife; how then could you say, 'She is my sister'?" Isaac said to him, "Because I thought, 'Lest I die because of her.'" [...] 11 So Abimelech warned all the people, saying, "Whoever touches this man or his wife shall be put to death." 12 *And Isaac sowed in that land, and reaped in the same year a hundredfold. Yahweh blessed him,* 13 *and the man became rich, and gained more and more until he became very wealthy.* 14 *He*

---

[39] See especially Heinrich Holzinger, *Einleitung in den Hexateuch* (Freiburg/Leipzig: Mohr Siebeck, 1893), 93–110.

[40] Levin, *Jahwist*, 399–408.

[41] The editor's additional text is printed in italics. Later non-Yahwistic expansions are omitted and marked by [...].

[42] For a detailed analysis of Genesis 19, see Levin, *Jahwist*, 159–70.

had possessions of flocks and herds, and a great household, so that the Philistines envied him.[43]

3. *Genesis 28:12.* And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. 13 *And behold, Yahweh stood above it and said, "I am Yahweh, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac.* [...] 15 *Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land."* [...] 16 *Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely Yahweh is in this place; and I did not know it."* 17 And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." 18 So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone which he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. 19 He called the name of that place Bet-El.[44]

4. *Genesis 39:1.* And Joseph was taken down to Egypt, and [...] an Egyptian bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him down there. 2 *Yahweh was with Joseph,* [...] 3 *and when his master saw that Yahweh was with him,* [...] 4 *Joseph found favor in his eyes and attended him,* and 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 Yahweh blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of Yahweh was upon all that he had, in house and field.* 6 [...] *Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking.* 7 And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph, and said, "Lie with me."[45]

5. *Exodus 3:1.* Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, *the priest of Midian;* and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness, and came [...] into the desert. 2 *And the angel of Yahweh appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush;* and he looked, and lo, a bush was burning, yet the bush was not consumed. 3 *And Moses said, "I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burning."* 4 *When Yahweh saw that he turned aside to see,* God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here am I." 5 Then he said, "Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 7 *Then Yahweh said, "I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry* [...] 8 *and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land."*[46]

---

[43] For a detailed analysis of Genesis 26, see Levin, *Jahwist*, 201–6.

[44] For a detailed analysis of Genesis 28, see Levin, *Jahwist*, 216–20.

[45] For a detailed analysis of Genesis 39, see Levin, *Jahwist*, 274–78.

[46] For a detailed analysis of Exodus 3, see Levin, *Jahwist*, 326–33; compare also Levin, "The Yahwist and the Redactional Link between Genesis and Exodus," in *A Farewell to the Yahwist?,* ed. Dozeman and Schmid, 137–41.

The editorial language does not derive from the literary creativity of an individual author. Instead, it reflects a particular social milieu: the king's court. This is not surprising because extensive editorial work of this kind was possible only with official support, either from the royal court or, in postexilic times, from the temple. One characteristic phrase deriving from this milieu is "to find favor in someone's eyes" (מצא חן בעיני). We find this twenty-six times from the flood to the wanderings in the desert, and fifteen of these instances can be put down to the Yahwistic editor.[47] In this way the phrase is something of a linguistic fossil characteristic of the editor's style. Its context was the relation between someone high up on the social scale, generally the king, and someone of inferior rank. It therefore reflects its origin, which was courtly speech. In the relevant dialogues, the person of inferior status addresses the other as "my lord" and refers to himself not as "I" but as "your servant."[48]

As a member of the court, the editor is also quite familiar with speech forms customary in the administration of justice. At an important point he uses the accusatory formula: "What have you done?" (Gen 3:13; 4:10). He is acquainted with the king's prerogative to pronounce a death sentence (Gen 2:17; cf. 26:11) and with the formal charge (Gen 43:6) and the appeal (Gen 16:5). He frequently uses the legal institution of the hue and cry in the construction of key scenes.[49]

The editor is familiar too with the language of the royal cult. He cites typical phrases of the individual lament which originate in the prayer of the king, as can be seen from Neo-Assyrian parallels. He also uses elements of the salvation oracle, which is the response to the lament, given to the king:[50] the reassurance formula "Fear not!" (Exod 14:13),[51] the formula of support "I am with you" (Gen 26:3, 28; 31:3; 39:2, 3, 21, 23), and the self-introductory formula "I am Yahweh" (Gen

[47] Genesis 6:8; 18:3; 19:19; 30:27; 32:5; 33:8, 10, 15; 39:4, 21; 47:29; Exod 3:21; 12:36; 34:9; Num 11:11. The other examples have been influenced by the editor: Gen 34:11; 47:25; 50:4; Exod 11:3; 33:12, 13 (twice), 16, 17; Num 11:15; 32:5.

[48] Genesis 18:3–5; 19:18–19; 32:4–5, 18; 33:8, 15; Exod 34:9; Num 11:11.

[49] Genesis 4:10; 18:20; 19:13; 27:34; Exod 3:7; 14:10; 15:25; 17:4; Num 11:2. See Hans-Jochen Boecker, *Redeformen des Rechtslebens im Alten Testament* (WMANT 14; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1964); Isac L. Seeligmann, "Zur Terminologie für das Gerichtsverfahren im Wortschatz des biblischen Hebräisch" (1965) in idem, *Gesammelte Studien zur Hebräischen Bibel* (FAT 41; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 293–317.

[50] This is shown by Assyrian and Syrian examples. See Hans-Jürgen Zobel, "Das Gebet um Abwendung der Not und seine Erhörung in den Klageliedern des Alten Testaments und in der Inschrift des Königs Zakir von Hamath," *VT* 21 (1971): 91–99; Manfred Weippert, "Assyrische Prophetien aus der Zeit Asarhaddons und Assurbanipals," in *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions: New Horizons in Literary, Ideological, and Historical Analysis* (ed. F. M. Fales; Orientis Antiqui Collectio 17; Rome: Istituto per l'Oriente, 1981), 71–111.

[51] See Joachim Becker, *Gottesfurcht im Alten Testament* (AnBib 25; Rome: Biblical Institute, 1965), 50–55; Martti Nissinen, "Fear Not: A Study on an Ancient Near Eastern Phrase," in *The Changing Face of Form Criticism for the Twenty-First Century* (ed. Marvin A. Sweeney and Ehud Ben Zvi; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 122–61.

28:13).[52] The revelation to Jacob in Bethel is presented as a cultic encounter with God (Gen 28:13a, 15a, 16). The same is true of Moses's encounter with God on Sinai (Exod 34:5, 9a).

There is an evident proximity to the school of courtly wisdom. We might describe the editor's language as "deictic." One example is the phrase "see that" (ראה כי). In itself, the phrase is not remarkable: it occurs frequently elsewhere and is prominent in the first creation account.[53] In combination with other phrases, however, its frequency points to the Yahwistic editor.[54] This editor frequently uses direct speech, and his dialogues would be at home in the classroom: "Tell me!" (Gen 24:23, 49; 29:15; 32:29; 37:16). Salient are the many questions that occur in the dialogue: "Who?," "What?," "Why?,"[55] and especially "Where?": "Adam, where are you?" (Gen 3:9) and "Where is Abel your brother?" (Gen 4:9) are only the most famous examples of a stylistic device that is used several times at the transition between the editor's source text and the interpreting dialogue that he adds immediately afterward. This frequent pattern is distinctive of the Yahwist.[56]

The editor often brings the dialogue down to basic principles, which apply independently of the scene described and are designed to make the reader transfer the point to his own experience of life. They underline the efficacious presence of Yahweh. Many of them have an ethical trend. "It is not good that the man should

[52] See Walther Zimmerli, "I Am Yahweh" (1953) in idem, *I Am Yahweh* (trans. D. W. Stott; Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 1–28.

[53] This is the "formula of approval": "And God saw that it was good" (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). See Werner H. Schmidt, *Die Schöpfungsgeschichte der Priesterschrift* (3rd ed.; WMANT 17; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1973), 59–63.

[54] Genesis 3:6; 6:2, 5; 16:4, 5; 26:28; 29:31; 39:3; 46:30; Exod 2:2; 3:4; Num 24:1.

[55] As examples: "Yahweh said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, and say, Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?'" (Gen 18:13); the servant to Rebekah: "Whose daughter are you? Tell me" (Gen 24:23); "But Isaac said to his son, 'How is it that you have found it so quickly, my son?' He answered, 'Because Yahweh your God granted me success'" (Gen 27:20); "And Laban said to Jacob, 'Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?'" (Gen 29:15); Jacob to Laban: "But now when shall I provide for my own household?" (Gen 30:31); "And he said to him, 'What is your name?' and he said, 'Jacob'" (Gen 32:27); "Then Jacob asked him, 'Tell me, I pray, your name.' But he said, 'Why is it that you ask my name?'" (Gen 32:29); "And Esau said, 'What do you mean by all this company which I met?'" (Gen 33:8); "The man asked Joseph, 'What are you seeking?' 'I am seeking my brothers,' he said, 'tell me I pray you, where they are pasturing the flock'" (Gen 37:15); "Then Judah said to his brothers, 'What profit is it if we slay our brother and conceal his blood?'" (Gen 37:26).

[56] Other examples: The angel of Yahweh: "Hagar, maid of Sarah, where have you come from and where are you going?" (Gen 16:8); the three men to Abraham: "Where is Sarah your wife?" (Gen 18:9); the Sodomites to Lot: "Where are the men who came to you tonight?" (Gen 19:5); Esau to Jacob's servant: "To whom do you belong? Where are you going? And whose are these before you?" (Gen 32:17); Joseph to the man in Shechem: "I am seeking my brothers; tell me, I pray you, where they are pasturing the flock" (Gen 37:16); the priest in Midian to his daughters: "Where is he? Why have you left the man?" (Exod 2:20).

be alone" (Gen 2:18) is the first example of this kind, spoken before the creation of the woman. Many others follow: "I will bless you so that you will be a blessing" (Gen 12:2); "Is anything too hard for Yahweh?" (Gen 18:14).[57]

An especially effective didactic method is the scheme of announcement and fulfillment. The facts are not simply described as such. Important events are regularly preceded by a promise.[58] Negative events are announced too—the flood, for example (Gen 6:5–7*), and the destruction of Sodom (Gen 18:20–21). The threat to the hostile party means a promise of protection for the Israelites. The space of time between the announcement and the event heightens the suspense. The Yahwist is in fact the inventor of the genre "promises to the patriarchs." All other instances of the genre are later. His work is intended to awaken hope, and its goal is faith. It offers a view of history that is religious through and through. Readers are intended to interpret their own lives in expectation of Yahweh's acts and support.

VII

I have demonstrated that a pre-Priestly and non-Deuteronomistic work shaped the narrative basis of the books of Genesis through Numbers. This work was one of the two documents that provide the literary basis of what later became the Pentateuch. In accordance with the Documentary Hypothesis we may call it the "Yahwist." What can be said with certainty about the editor who composed this work? There are a number of clues, but they do not add up to a unified picture. Each feature points in two directions simultaneously:

1. The Yahwist could claim to have put together the definitive account of Israel's origins, one that formed the nation's self-understanding. With good reason, earlier exegetes described this account as "Israel's national epic."[59] A work of this kind bears an implicit authoritative stamp. It would seem to reflect a royal court context and thus point to the Judean state prior to the exile as its home.

Nonetheless, the conditions of existence as foreigner are described so exactly and immediately that one cannot avoid seeing the author as also being in this situation. A cruel fate has driven him out of the familiar world of Palestine into the

---

[57] Further examples: "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen 4:9); "Let there be no strife between you and me; for we are kinsmen" (Gen 13:8); "You are a God of seeing" (Gen 16:13); "The thing comes from Yahweh" (Gen 24:50); "Surely, Yahweh is in this place and I did not know it" (28:16); "You are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing?" (Gen 29:15); "I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself" (Gen 33:9); "What profit is it if we slay our brother and conceal his blood?" (Gen 37:26); "Now I know that Yahweh is greater than all gods" (Exod 18:11); "Is Yahweh's hand shortened?" (Num 11:23).

[58] We find favorable announcements of this kind in Gen 2:18; 5:29; 8:21; 12:2–3; 16:11; 18:10; 26:3; 28:15a; 31:3; 37:11; Exod 3:7–8; 14:30; Num 11:23.

[59] Eduard Reuss, *Die Geschichte der heiligen Schriften Alten Testaments* (Braunschweig: Schwetschke, 1881), 251.

foreign land. The conditions that the patriarchs each time experience among an indigenous population and that the Israelites then endure under Egyptian oppression and on their wanderings through the desert reflect his own present. The doubt whether Yahweh is able to guarantee the blessing of support in the foreign country is his doubt. The hope for Yahweh's protection and, in the end, for a return reflect his own hope. What the author describes, therefore, are the conditions in which the Jewish people, scattered throughout the world, already existed.[60]

2. The language and the world of ideas have their roots in the court. The style of the dialogues contributed by the editor is that of courtly speech. The difference from the older stories about the patriarchs, which are set in the milieu of the clan, is noticeable. The writer has been trained in court wisdom. The revelatory scenes, in which Yahweh himself or his messengers play a part, follow patterns that originated in the cult of the royal sanctuary.

Nevertheless, there is no trace whatsoever of the monarchy itself. Even scenes that have a fundamental connection with national history get along without the king. The narrative about the origin of the sanctuary at Bethel is linked with Jacob. On the exodus from Egypt, it is Moses, the priest, who has the key role. The description of an early era is not aligned toward the (re)introduction of the monarchy.[61] The events as a whole remain outside the state sphere.

3. The work presupposes, in fact even if not programmatically, the exclusive worship of the God Yahweh. The term "Yahwist" is to this extent justified. The religious program, which finds expression in the confession "Hear, O Israel, Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is one" (Deut 6:4), is operative from the outset and without any reservation.[62] The whole spectrum of local gods and demons that can be found in the sources (see Gen 18:1–2; 32:25; Num 24:4) is equated without further ado with the one God Yahweh, who counts as at once the creator of the world and the universal God of heaven.[63]

---

[60] See Otto Kaiser, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (5th ed.; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1984), esp. 93–96. In the 2nd ed., from which the English translation was prepared (*Introduction to the Old Testament* [trans. J. Sturdy; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975], 82–85), Kaiser still holds the older view.

[61] This is very different from the account of the premonarchical era offered in the book of Judges. At the end of the book, at least, everything tends toward the need for a king. See Timo Veijola, *Das Königtum in der Beurteilung der deuteronomistischen Historiographie: Eine redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung* (AASF B 198; Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1977).

[62] See Timo Veijola, "Das Bekenntnis Israels: Beobachtungen zu Geschichte und Aussage von Dtn 6,4–9" (1992), in idem, *Moses Erben: Studien zum Dekalog, zum Deuteronomismus und zum Schriftgelehrtentum* (BWANT 149; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2000), 76–93.

[63] The difference from the testimonies stemming from the Jewish colony on Elephantine, the island in the Nile, is remarkable. There as late as the fifth century a goddess Anat-Bethel, a god Eshem-Bethel, and other gods are worshiped side by side with Yahu. See Bezalel Porten, *Archives from Elephantine: The Life of an Ancient Jewish Military Colony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

Nevertheless, any trace of OT prophecy is absent. There is no comparable literary work in the OT that is further removed from the later theology, which was determined by the prophets and Deuteronomism. In language and thought, therefore, the Yahwist and the Deuteronomistic Historian may clearly be distinguished from each other.[64] It is inconceivable that the patriarchs or the Israelites could turn their backs on Yahweh in order to turn to "other gods." The theological horizon involved is closer to that of the earlier psalms and the broader Syro-Palestinian mythology that was long behind them.

4. The Yahwist, just like Deuteronomy and the later Deuteronomistic History, upholds the program of a single "Israel" composed of Israel and Judah, a program that we associate with the policy of King Josiah, in the last third of the seventh century. If it is correct that the confession "Yahweh is one" is designed to overcome the religious and political opposition between Israel and Judah,[65] this goal is attained in the Yahwist inasmuch as from the outset he describes an overall history of Israel and Judah such as was later to determine the historical viewpoint of post-exilic Judaism.

Nevertheless, the Yahwist contrasts with Deuteronomy in denying the restriction of worship of Yahweh to a single cultic site, a restriction that Deuteronomy emphatically demands and that the Yahwist repudiates with equal emphasis. Instead he preaches the omnipresence of this God, showing that Yahweh lets himself be cultically worshiped in the foreign country too.

To integrate these points, one may conclude, with all due caution, that the Yahwist was a member of the courtly upper class living in the early Jewish Diaspora, who was trying to find an answer to the radical change in living conditions. The Diaspora began with the Neo-Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem at the beginning of the sixth century. The circumstances can best be seen from the deportation of King Jehoiachin and his court, following the first conquest in 597 B.C.E. It would seem reasonable to look for the origin of the work in this context. If the work originated in Babylon, that could in part explain the universal horizon and the wide acceptance of non-Israelite material. In favor of this dating is the work's opposition to a theology according to which only the Yahweh cult in Jerusalem was legitimate.

The Yahwist stands at the threshold between the Judean national religion and Judaism as a world religion. The consequence, for literary history, is a striking paradox: the Israelite national epic is at the same time the first chapter in the history of Judaism.

---

[64] John Van Seters (see n. 14 above), and Hans Heinrich Schmid (*Der sogenannte Jahwist: Beobachtungen und Fragen zur Pentateuchforschung* [Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1976]) mistakenly see the theologies of the Yahwist and Deuteronomist as closely related.

[65] Erik Aurelius, "Der Ursprung des Ersten Gebots," *ZTK* 100 (2003): 1–21, esp. 4–8.