PARALLEL GUIDE 2

The Book of Genesis

Summary: This chapter discusses the formation of the first books of the Old Testament and presents the *documentary hypothesis*—the theory that separates four different possible sources which underlie the formation of the first five books of the Bible. The chapter also shows how literary categories of myth, legend, saga, and history appear in the Bible.

Learning Objectives

- Explain why scholars believe the Pentateuch has at least four sources
- Learn the main features of the four sources, J, E, D, and P
- Discover the chief developers of the documentary hypothesis
- State the difference between myth, legend, saga, fairy tales, and history
- Look for other literary typologies in the Old Testament

Assignments to Deepen your Understanding

1. Develop your own definitions of symbol, myth, saga, analogy, anthropomorphism, story, legend, history, and hermeneutics. Write down some examples of each.

2. As you begin this course, you are asked to relate your spiritual autobiography. What would you say differently if you relate your life's story as history, as a legend, or as a myth? In the news look for accounts that illustrate the difference between *Historie* and *Geschichte* today.

3. Each source has its own peculiarities which make it possible to identify the author. Look at something you have written or at an essay or story and identify characteristics which identify the author.

4. In your notebook write down definitions for *Elohim*, Jahweh, Yahweh, anthropomorphism, saga, legend, history, myth, and hermeneutics. Now write in two columns, one titled *Historie* and one titled *Geschichte*. Under the first, write down factual events that mark the record of your life such as date and place of birth. In the *Geschichte* column, write down some significant events such as your first airplane ride, your first date, the death of someone important to you, or your remembrance of an earthshaking event.

Notice any difference in the way the events are described. Does this give you a feel for the difference among ways of recording the past?

Preparing for Your Seminar

One way to explain the purpose of the program is to say that we study the story of the people of God so that we may more nearly be persons of God. Implied in this approach is the conviction that knowledge of the Christian heritage must be con-

nected with personal knowledge and your experience of the world around you (your culture).

Look at the work you have completed. Decide what you would like to share if the opportunity presents itself. What questions do these bring to the forefront about the nature of your religious experience and your faith as a Christian? What great themes emerge for you that shape your faith and life or suggest an opportunity to rethink it? List some of these in your notebook.

The study of the Bible often raises more questions, some of them difficult ones, that pertain to how we perceive ourselves and our relationship to one another and to God. You will come to these questions many times during your course of study. They may challenge some of your assumptions. Your seminar is the place to bring them. Remember that ultimately your studies urge you to be a pilgrim on your own journey of discovery, knowing that you have some worthy companions along the way in the seminar group to which you belong. Bring these to your seminar.

Additional Sources

Anderson, pp. 18-27, describes in brief the documentary hypothesis and also discusses "history" as an interpretation of events. Although his comments are directed toward the Book of Exodus, they hold true for any part of the Old Testament. Page 25 has a helpful chart relating the development of the oral and the written traditions to the historical events which they parallel.

The "Introduction" to von Rad deals with the documentary hypothesis and describes in brief some of the characteristics of the Pentateuchal writer. (He prefers to include the book of Joshua and to speak of the "Hexateuch," or the "six books," instead of the Pentateuch.) The word hermeneutical, which appears as a section title, refers to the "interpretation" of scripture. Exegesis has to do with what the text itself says, and hermeneutics has to do with interpreting that which the text says to present-day audiences. On page 32, two German words are printed in parentheses after the English word "history": *Historie* and *Geschichte*. Each is translated into English as "history," but *Geschichte* means events in human history as they are seen to be meaningful, or interpreted events, whereas *Historie* refers to the factuality of recorded events. Notice in particular the footnote marked with an asterisk on page 32.

Another excellent commentary on Genesis is Walter Brueggemann's *Genesis* in the "Interpretation" Series (John Knox Press, 1982). Brueggemann's commentary is particularly for people who interpret the Bible in the church, and therefore takes into account the use of Genesis in the liturgical and confessional tradition of the church and the book's significance for Christian theology and ethics.

Chapter 2

THE BOOK OF GENESIS

The Book of Genesis is in many ways one of the most important books in the Old Testament. Although it is the first book in the Bible and speaks of things that happened in ancient times, it is a mature statement of the main features of Israel's faith. It was edited in its present form at a time when Israel had lived through some of the most important events in her life and had come to some of her deepest understandings of her relationship to God. Many of us learned the stories in Genesis when we were young, and we may think of them as "Bible stories" for children. As we study them, we see that they give very deep insights into human nature and lead us to look at our lives in ways we may not have done before.

In this lesson we first look at a matter that affects our study not only of Genesis, but of all of the Pentateuch. This is called the *documentary hypothesis*. We have chosen to use this hypothesis as the basis for our study. After that, we outline the major sections of Genesis so that you can put the detailed study of the next few lessons in a context.

Biblical References

When we refer to passages in the Bible, we use the following system:

1) The name of the book comes first, usually abbreviated; Genesis is written as Gen., Exodus as Exod., etc. Sometimes, when we are studying only one book, the name of the book will be left out.

2) After the name of the book, the number of the chapter is given. Gen. 1 means the first chapter of Genesis.

3) A colon (:) follows the chapter number and precedes the number of the verse. Gen. 1:5 indicates the fifth verse of the first chapter of Genesis.

4) If we refer to more than one chapter, the numbers refer only to chapters (so Gen. 3, 4 means chapters three and four of Genesis; Gen. 3-6 means chapters three through six of Genesis). The chapter and verse numbers for each chapter are indicated by the use of the colon (so Gen. 2:4-3:24 means from the fourth verse of chapter two of Genesis through the twenty-fourth verse of chapter three).

5) If we want to refer to several verses or chapters without limiting the reference to particular ones, the symbol ff. is used. Gen. 4:1ff. means verse one of chapter four of Genesis and several verses following.

6) The letter "a" or "b" following a verse number means the first or the second half of that verse. Gen. 2:4a means the first half of the fourth verse of chapter two of Genesis.

7) When it is clear which chapter of a book is referred to, verse numbers may be

given by using the letter "v." or, if there are more than one verse, "vv." Thus, v. 3 refers to verse three of the chapter being considered. Vv. 3-8 refers to verses three through eight of that chapter.

The Documentary Hypothesis

For a long time it was generally assumed that the Old Testament was a complete unity, all of it the dictated word of God. Even though the Book of Deuteronomy describes Moses' death, the Pentateuch was thought to have been written entirely by Moses under God's direct guidance. Moses apparently foresaw his own death since it is described in the Pentateuch.

In CE 1685 a French priest, Father Simon, noted that the two stories of creation in Genesis 1 and 2 seem to contradict each other. He also noticed that there were some strange repetitions throughout the whole Pentateuch. Other people had noticed this, of course, but Father Simon noticed one thing further: there was a regular variation in the name for God. You can see this if you look at your NRSV *Oxford Annotated Bible*. Look at Gen. 1. Notice that the divine name is "God" throughout this chapter and over to Gen. 2:3. In Gen. 2:4-3:24, the divine name is "the LORD God." Then in Gen. 4:1ff. the divine name is simply "the LORD."

These are English translations of two different Hebrew words. "God" in part of the Old Testament is the word the translators have used when the Hebrew word '*elohim*, "the gods," appears. (*Elohim* is plural. We deal later with the question of why the Bible, which teaches belief in one God, should use a plural. For now we can say that the reference in Genesis is to the one God of Israel, even when the word used is *Elohim*.) The translation "the LORD," identified in the OAB by the use of larger and smaller capital letters, occurs when the Hebrew text uses God's personal name. The name is always written in the Hebrew text in such a way as to remind the reader that one is not to pronounce God's name. The consonants, when put into our alphabet, are YHWH. By inserting two vowels, some people have decided God's name was probably *Yahweh* (pronounced YAH-way). This is a strange word. It most likely comes from the Hebrew verb "to be." We study this further when we get to the Book of Exodus.

The Four Sources of the Pentateuch

Other Old Testament scholars, following Father Simon's lead, noticed that if you marked off the sections which used the name Elohim and those that used the name Yahweh, there were other points of similarity in each group. This suggested that there might have been two ancient documents, one of which used the name *Elohim* and the other Yahweh, and that these two documents might have been woven together by some editor (or editors) to create the text we now have. To identify the two documents, scholars call the one using the name *Elohim* the E *document* and its author (or the group which assembled it) the *Elohist* or *E writer*. In German "YHWH" is transliterated "JHVH," so the document using this name is called the *J document* and its author the J *writer* or sometimes the *Yahwist*. The Germans transliterated JHVH as Jehovah.

The section in Gen. 2:4-3:24 in which both names are used—Yahweh *Elohim*, translated "the LORD God"—might then be a passage in which the two sources had been so long woven together that it was impossible to separate them.

Further study showed that this two-source hypothesis was not enough. There were sections using "*Elohim*" which were in many ways different from the rest of the E document. Usually these showed a great concern for things having to do with the temple worship and the rights and duties of the priests. Often they also contained long lists of generations of people, the *genealogies*, such as in Gen. 4:18ff. (Notice that Gen. 2:4 suggests that all of Gen. 1:1-2:3 is a genealogy "of the heavens and the earth.") Because of its concern with the priesthood of the temple, scholars came to call this document the P *document* and its author the *Priestly writer* or simply *P*. An important part of P is "the Law" which Ezra read to the people of Jerusalem.

One other source, the D *document*, was also discovered. This source refers to the "new Law" which was supposedly discovered in the Temple in 621 BCE under King Josiah, probably the Book of Deuteronomy, which is Greek for "the second Law." The work of the D writer is found not only in the Book of Deuteronomy but also scattered throughout the rest of the Pentateuch, except in the Book of Genesis.

Thus we have at least four documents out of which the Pentateuch is composed: J, E, D, and P. The last two (D and P) are probably more accurately *recensions* (re-SEN-shuns) or revisions of the existing text with new material added. According to the documentary hypothesis, these documents drew upon oral traditions and some old written sources but they also contained original material written by the authors of the documents themselves.

In its early forms, the documentary hypothesis assumed that the J document was written some time after the reign of King David. This assumption was made because so much of J's effort seems aimed at showing that the reign of David was the fulfillment of the promise which God made to Abraham but which Abraham did not live to see. Perhaps a hundred years later the E document was composed. Some time later still a *redactor* (someone who takes already existing documents and edits them to make a common document) wove J and E together.

Then, in 621 BCE, "the Law" was found, and sometime after the fall of the southern kingdom in 586, another redactor took the already existing JE combination and wove D into it. After the return from the Exile, Ezra appeared and persuaded the people to accept "the Law," which was the *Priestly Code* with its interpretation of the history of the covenant. This P document was either woven into JED by a final redactor or, more likely, written as a framework for the existing Pentateuch. It probably never existed as an independent source. Subsequent Old Testament scholars, following this hypothesis, have found much material that they feel does not fit the characteristics of any of these sources and have postulated other additional sources. Eventually the list of sources with their subdivisions becomes so long it ceases to be helpful.

Whatever the many variations of the source theory, there is now a recognized emphasis on the continuance of the oral tradition alongside developing written forms. Allowing for variations, the present consensus seems to be that oral traditions from different areas were gradually compiled, written down, and combined to form the Pentateuch and that the documentary hypothesis as outlined here can be used as a

general description of the process, provided one does not allow it to become too rigid a scheme.

Dates and Characters of the Sources

In order to be able to place the ideas expressed in the four sources within some kind of historical context, we should have some rough dates for them. These dates are not exact, partly because the documents developed over a period of time. The dates we shall use are the times by which, we can assume, the development of each was complete.

J dates to about 950 BCE. E is probably one or two centuries later; 850 BCE is a good date for it. It must have been fairly well established by the time of the prophet Hosea (750 BCE), for he quotes from it. The greater part of D was probably completed around 650 BCE since, if it was discovered in 621, it had to have had some time to develop. P, dated from the Book of Ezra, would be around 400 BCE, although more likely it comes from the post-exilic period, c. 538-450 BCE.

As we trace these sources in the Pentateuch, we notice the particular points of view which they express. As we indicated, J shows the reign of King David as the time of the fulfillment of the promises God made to Abraham. Abraham did not live to see his children become a great nation living in the promised land; but according to J this is what happened under David. E is concerned with teaching the faith of Israel by telling its history. Usually only fragments of E are preserved, the J narrative being the main account. D teaches a special theology of history, which we study later. P contains long genealogies and instructions for worship, as well as etiological (describing causes) narratives; P's theology is also highly developed.

Both J and E are anthropomorphic, but with some differences. ("Anthropomorphism"— from the Greek words *anthropos*, "human," and *morphe*, "form" or "shape"—means the use of human characteristics like anger, compassion, thinking, and speaking to describe God.) Of course, we must recognize that as human beings, all our language is "filtered" to at least some degree by our humanness. The characteristics of God apart from humanity (called God's "asiety") are something impossible for us to know. Whether we speak of God's "spirit," as in Gen. 1 or God's "mighty hand" in Exod. 15, we are always at least one step removed from "objective" language about God. The J writer is more direct about descriptions of God and God's activities. For J, God comes down and speaks to humans face to face. The E writer does not like this; no human being can see God and live! E uses intermediaries for the divine appearance to people. Angels and appearances of God in dreams are characteristic of E. (Note: "angel" and "messenger" are the same word in Hebrew. Biblical "angels" are not the same lovely white-winged creatures we see on greeting cards. One word in Greek also carries both meanings, "angel" and "messenger.")

Both J and E also deal with God's use of natural phenomena, such as the plagues which were visited upon Egypt as described in Exodus. For JE—and it is not always possible to separate them—it was a strong east wind which blew back the sea so that the Israelites could escape the pursuing army of Pharaoh in the Exodus. For the P

writer, however, it was the supernatural rod of Moses which divided the water. P is likely to use miracles to account for what happens at the hand of God, whereas J and E are more content to see God using nature. For all the Biblical writers, the focus is on *what* God has done, rather than the *manner* in which an event occurred.

J is very much interested in stories which explain all sorts of things: how a place got its name, how a certain custom came about, and, of course, how "it all" began. P is predominantly concerned with the law and the ritual of the Temple, although P also has stories of origins.

There are many other specific features which are characteristic of these writers. For example, both J and P call the sacred mountain Sinai while E calls it Horeb; J calls the inhabitants of Palestine Canaanites while E calls them Amorites. These minor variations need not concern us greatly, however. They simply indicate that we should be careful not to become confused when obviously the same place or person or event is described differently in different places in the Bible.

The Significance of the Source Theory for Biblical Studies

There are repetitions and contradictions in many biblical stories. There are two complete creation stories, for example. The story of the Flood has many contradictions. This will not bother us if we remember that the stories as we now have them are often composed of parts from two or more different sources. Similarly, the requirements that appear in different lists of laws are sometimes conflicting. This simply means that different times and circumstances have required different laws. Contradictions or conflicts, which are quite troublesome if one thinks of the Bible as one single document dictated by God directly, cause no trouble if one recognizes that the Old Testament, as we have it today, combines material from many sources.

Why did the various editors not remove the contradictions? We tend to think in terms of orderliness and logic. This was not a characteristic of the Hebrew mind. It is not that the ancient Hebrews were not intelligent enough to notice these things. Rather, they were able to be comfortable with them, and they were able to see the value of looking at the same thing from different points of view. Tradition is very strong, and these accounts come from very long-standing oral traditions. The editors often did not think it was right to set themselves up as judges, discarding a form of the story or forcing some pattern upon the different traditions to make them say the same thing. They simply included the different forms and thereby saved for us accounts which give us a richer picture and deeper meaning than we would otherwise possess.

Outline and Literary Form of Genesis

In this section we give an outline of the Book of Genesis to familiarize you with the kinds of stories it contains. Throughout our study of Genesis we use the word "story" to refer to the biblical account. A "story" may be entirely fictional, as "the story of Tom Sawyer" or "the story of Jack and the Beanstalk." But a "story" can also be factual, as "the story of the invasion of Normandy." "Story" is a neutral word: it does not indicate whether the events it describes really happened or did not. There are other words which biblical scholars use, however, which must be explained in order to prevent misunderstanding. This section also contains a discussion of the words "myth," "legend," and "saga." It is especially important that the word "myth"

be understood in the technical sense in which it is used in biblical study, since its popular meaning is so different. We look at this technical meaning a bit later on.

The Book of Genesis presents us with major themes that are developed throughout the rest of the Bible. Although the stories are about the earliest imaginable matters—the creation of the world and the most ancient events in the life of humankind—they were not necessarily the oldest stories told in the oral tradition. The Book of Genesis contains some of the most mature thought of the Israelite scholars. The first chapter, for example, is the creation story as told by the P writer, about 400 BCE. That would make it one of the last stories written, even though it appears as the opening chapter of the Bible and tells about the beginnings of all that is. Some material in the stories, however, is very ancient. One of the tasks of the student of the Bible is to distinguish between ancient materials and the purposes of the later writers as they edit and retell the stories. The point in such study, for those of us approaching the Bible from faith standpoints, is not so much to find "the original" version, as to learn what each viewpoint has to teach us today.

The Outline of Genesis

Gen. 1-11—The myths of creation, sin, and judgment

1:1-2:4a is the first creation story. It is a very carefully worked out bit of writing showing the highly developed thought of the Priestly writer. We study it closely in order to see how much has been packed into this very short story.

2:4b-3:24 is the second creation story, including the story of what is usually called the "fall" of Adam and Eve. It is mainly the work of the J writer, but E is so completely mixed in with it that it is impossible to separate them. We assign it to the Yahwist.

These first three chapters should be seen as a single unit dealing with the creation and fall of humankind. Even though they are from two different sources, the final editor (usually called the redactor) has rounded out the material into a unit with a single purpose.

Chapter 4 is the story of Cain and Abel and shows one of the most basic results of sin—the taking of human life. It is from J.

Chapter 5 is a genealogy from P, from the first man, Adam, to Noah.

Chapters 6-9 contains the story of the Flood, a blending of two accounts of the same basic story which may seem confusing.

Chapter 10 is another P genealogy.

Chapter 11 is the story of the Tower of Babel from the J document.

These first eleven chapters are a unit in themselves. They describe the state of human affairs: we are created in the image of God but, because of sin, although life goes

on, it gets nowhere. The effects of sin are seen reaching out in ever widening circles until humanity is completely confused and scattered over the earth. With chapter twelve, the beginning of the story of Abraham, a new theme is introduced: *redemption*. Meaning and purpose are introduced into the story by the act of God beginning the work of bringing humankind forward to the goal for which God created it.

Gen. 12-25:18 is the story of Abraham and the covenant that God made with him.

Gen. 25:19-36:40 is the story of Jacob. The biblical author seems to consider it the story of Isaac, because as long as the father is living, it is considered his family's story. We shall see that Isaac has very little to do in the story and that the main character is Jacob.

Gen. 37-50 is the story of Joseph (the family of Jacob). With this story, the people of Israel are brought into Egypt, where the Book of Exodus will take up the story to describe their slavery and their escape under Moses.

Myth

You probably noticed that we called the first eleven chapters of Genesis "the *myths* of creation, sin, and judgment." When you saw that word, what did you think? For most people today the word *myth* calls to mind *fairy tales*, stories for children which grown-up people know are not true. This is not what the word means when it is used in biblical studies or in any study of the religions of the world. In the scholarly field called history of religions, "myth" means a story about the god or gods in a particular culture. But this is not an accurate enough definition, since the whole Bible is about God and God's relationship with creation; it is made up mostly of materials other than myths.

One way of talking about myth is to think of it as a special form of literature. From this point of view, a myth is first of all a *story*—that is, it tells of actions that are done by someone. But it is different from most stories in that we are not supposed to think that the action happened at some place and at some time that is just like other places and times. The time and the place are left a mystery. Even if the place is named in the story and is well-known, it will seem different, changed, and timeless. This is because the myth speaks of things that have to do with the god or gods, and everything is different, more important, timeless and mysterious when it is touched by the divine. Therefore, it is pointless to ask if the things really happened as they are described in a myth. When we say "really happened," we usually mean happened in the everyday way that common things happen. This is not the case in a myth.

Myths are more than just bits of literature. They speak of the important things that lie at the heart of a religion. They are not just stories about things long ago, even very mysterious things long ago. They describe the deepest matters of life at any time. The point is not that long ago something happened that caused the world to be here; the point is that the world and all that is created (and is being created) stand in a particular relationship to the god or gods, and that relationship is described in the myth. Thus, the myth says something that is true about the world now, or at least something that the myth claims is true.

Usually after we have read a myth we begin to talk about what it "means." A myth, like a good poem, says many things at the same time and on different levels of meaning. There may be a plain meaning, but there are also many shades of feeling; words may be used that bring to mind other shades of our common experience, and these make slight but important differences in the way we understand the meaning. A myth can be reread after you think you understand it, and new, deeper meanings continue to come to light.

All this is said to overcome the modern idea that myths are nothing but childish stories. They are rather the deepest expressions of truth that a culture or a people can speak. These truths cannot be simply restated in everyday street language without losing something from their meaning.

It is also a good idea to think about the difference between "fact" and "truth." A fact is, of course and by definition, true. But can everything that is "true" be reduced to factual statements? No, not at all. My love for my family cannot be proved in such a way as to make it a scientifically valid fact. This truth, which is not "fact," is much more important to my life than the verifiable fact that light travels at the speed of 186,000 miles per second. While the Bible contains innumerable facts, it is much more a book of truth.

The study of the use of myths is a very complex one. We have only begun to suggest its dimensions here. Related to it is the question of using language at all when speaking of God. After all, the only words we have in our languages are words which in the first instance refer to things of our common experience. Even the word "god" has been used to refer to things like rocks and animals, snakes, sun, stars, and moon.

Some students of the history of religions have in fact suggested that we cannot speak of God at all in terms of what God is. We can describe God only in terms of what God is not, in a negative way or *via negativa*. We find examples of the *via negativa* in words like infinite, incomprehensible, unchanging, or incomparable when they are applied to God. Each of these words is a *negation*: God is *not* finite, comprehensible, changing; not able to be compared. The *via negativa* is useful. It preserves a dimension of mystery and so fills something of the role that myths do; it prevents us from thinking that we have understood God completely. Obviously, if we can only speak of God by saying what God is not, our speech will be very limited.

Analogies have been widely used in religious language. "Father" is an example of a word used analogously of God. In an analogy we are saying that God is like something in our human experience, but God is not just like it. That is, an analogy both affirms and denies at the same time. God is like a human parent but also not like one. God as "father" is loving, authoritative, life-giving, supporting, and directing, but not, as a human father might be, the husband of a woman, a wage-earner, a sinner, or someone who may require care and support from his children as he grows old and infirm. We must also take care that not every analogy is seen as part of the *via negativa*. Many people, when using the word "father" for God, do not intend thereby to exclude any and all feminine qualities.

Symbols are also used to speak of God. They may be words, actions, pictures, carvings, or anything else that expresses something. A symbol is a subtle thing. It needs no explanation, for there is something about it that points you to the mystery of which it is a symbol. In fact, if a "symbol" requires an explanation, that is evidence that it does not "work" as a symbol for you. "Motherhood" can be a powerful symbol for a noble and mysterious aspect of human womanhood, but for some people it has become an empty expression; the "meaning" of motherhood would have to be explained to such people, because its symbolic dimension has been lost for them.

All of this, and much more, is involved in the issue of how we can speak of God. Of all the means of expression that humankind has developed, the use of myths is probably the richest. Most of the religions of the world have used them. The Greek myths about the gods and heroes of ancient Greece were more than interesting stories when they were part of the living religion of the Greek people. They described the ways in which the Greeks perceived themselves in relation to all that was powerful, awesome, and unreachable in the universe in which they lived. The thunder and lightning; the sea; the course of events in human life which moves inexplicably and yet seems to have a pattern of birth, growth, maturity, and death; the fertility of the land and of animals and humans—all these were perceived as functions of relations with divine forces, and human life was ordered in accordance with these perceptions. The myths expressed all of this. So also do the myths of other cultures.

Quite apart from the question of whether or not the gods of any myths are "true gods," the myths describe how people perceive their own lives and actions under the conditions of their existence in the world. Is the world a fearful place in which we must always be on our guard? Is it a kind of playground for vast powers beyond our knowledge or control? Are we important or simply playthings for powers superior to us? Are we part of nature or somehow above it? Is the world a prison from which we must escape to some higher world which is our true home? Is everything, ourselves included, some vast accident, without any meaning at all? The mythic stories in the first eleven chapters of Genesis state Israel's basic attitudes toward such questions as these. They describe the terms under which life is lived within the culture of Israel—the terms of life under God.

A mythic story is a story about a god or gods (or their equivalents) that sets the terms of human existence before these deities. Even if a culture has many gods, or if it does not speak of gods at all but only of the nonhuman powers in relation to which we must live, its myths always do this. Many different terms have been developed in myths by cultures that have lived in the past, and many of them are still important in the lives of people today. The myth that describes the point of view out of which you live your life, make your decisions, and hold your values, will express the most important depths of your life.

Legend

We have seen that myths should not be read raising the question of whether or not "it really happened that way"; they are to be taken seriously because they speak of great issues in human life. There are other kinds of stories, however, about which we may sometimes raise questions, wondering if they describe "what really happened."

A *legend* is such a story. It is not a myth, because it does not speak of the work of God or the gods in creation, though the wonders and activity of the deity may play an important role. Legend usually involves a hero, a human figure who is important in the memory of his or her people. There is often a core of fact in the story, but the story has grown in the telling of it particularly to the glorification of the hero or heroine, "appealing to admiration, awe, and to imitation of his or her moral virtues" (*IDB*, vol. 3, p. 109). Sometimes things that have happened to whole tribes are told as though they had happened to one person.

There are many legends in Genesis. The stories of the patriarchs contain much legendary material. It is impossible for us to tell what parts of the stories really happened as described and what parts are legendary. As a result of modern discoveries about the ancient peoples of the Middle East, we are beginning to take the accuracy of the stories more seriously than we sometimes have in the past, but we still know that much legend is mixed into them. Still, the stories tell us important things about the people who told them. The legends that a people tell show what sorts of things they value. If a hero in a legend is cruel but clever, it would suggest that the people who saw him as a hero liked cruelty and cleverness, or at least were willing to put up with cruelty if the person were clever enough. If the hero is noble and courageous, we assume that the people prized these virtues. When we read stories that are obviously legendary, we should not simply cast them aside as unimportant, but see them as good signposts to an understanding of the people who told them.

Saga

A *saga* is a lengthy series of stories, many of which may be legendary, forming a single unit. It is usually about a single person. In Genesis, chapters 12-25 comprise the *Abraham saga*. When we study it, we look at the individual stories in it, such as the sacrifice of Isaac, in order to see what we can learn from them. We also try to hear what the saga taken as a whole tells us. We do the same with the Jacob saga and the Joseph saga.

Summary

In the Book of Genesis, we study the *myths* of creation, sin, and judgment in order to see how the people of Israel saw the terms of human life under God. We study the *sagas* of Abraham, Jacob (with the stories about Isaac which are contained in these two sagas), and Joseph in order to see how Israel saw herself under the covenant with God which offered the promise of redemption. We are not to worry about what is "fact" and what is "legend," since both help us understand how Israel saw herself.

We also begin to think about the themes that are presented in the *myths*. These themes run throughout our studies. They provide the framework within which to reflect on the meaning of our own life and times and on our practice of ministry. You will find an extended discussion of these themes in Section 4:12 of the *Common Lessons and Supporting Materials* (*CLSM*). You may wish to look at this now. It is something to which you will return frequently, particularly after you begin to do theological reflections which are described in Section 2 of the *CLSM*.

These theological themes are:

1) *Creation*—how do we think of the world in which we live; how do we see ourselves and our neighbors; and how do we see the relationship of all of these to God? Part of this question is what kind of "god" is meant.

2) *Sin*—what sorts of things do we regard as evil or negative in life? From what do they arise? What are we supposed to do about them when they do arise?

3) *Judgment*—how do we think of the things that happen to us, the things that we cause by our own intent or do not plan on, but that happen nonetheless? By calling this *judgment*, we show that Israel understood all these things as acts of God, but do we?

4.) *Repentance*—in what ways do we demonstrate regret or remorse, take responsibility for our own actions, and seek restoration and reconciliation?

5) *Redemption*—how do we expect meaning and purpose to come into our lives? What sorts of things do we count as helpful in setting things right?

We might think about these questions in terms of ourselves rather than of the ancient Hebrews. How do we answer them now? Are the answers we think of as "right" the ones we really act on? As you think about these things, and as you are able to search for truth more than for mere facts, you are beginning your work as a theologian.