

## CHAPTER VII

### THE "J" DOCUMENT

The days of Israel's wealth and prestige among the nations of the Near East vanished. A movement had begun in King Solomon's time that would be of utmost importance to Western civilization. However it is rarely mentioned in the Scriptures.

The cries of merchants and the chants of straining slaves echoed through the streets of Jerusalem. Within the chambers of the temple, wise priests and scribes were gathering memories, laws and history for the guidance of their people. This would tighten the cords of unity among them and trace the background of Israel's powerful identity.

There was no lack of material for the scribes to work with. From time immemorial storytelling was the backbone of social relations among people, from the Nile to the Euphrates and beyond. There were stories in prose and in poetry, written or recited. There were myths concerning the mysteries of life, legends with their roots in fact, tales of pagan gods and records of real men, memories of heroes whose exploits had actually been performed by whole tribes.

Though other nations might record the feats, real or imaginary, of their great kings and heroes, the priests wrote only of Israel's relations with her God. Although Moses' inspiration had seen God as I AM, in Solomon's days the priests' concept was still anthropomorphic. They were far from the spiritual heights future prophets would attain. Invisible and all-powerful, God was still man-like: kind, patient and completely righteous, yet on occasion terrible in his anger towards his wayward people. God and Israel were the center of the world.

Reverently the scholars studied the folklore, sacred writings and court records of Israel's past. They discussed, weighed, sifted and carefully selected those narratives which best expressed their knowledge of their God. The skillfully retold stories constitute the earliest segments of our Bible.

### THE GARDEN OF EDEN

The author (or authors) began the work with the wide sweep of creation and man's place in it:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.  
(Genesis 1:1)

From the red clay of the river plain (adamah) he made man (Adam). He was ancestor not only of Israel but of all the nations of the earth. He set him in the luxuriant Garden of Eden between the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers. For companionship he shaped cattle, birds and wild animals and called upon Adam to name them. This meant

that he determined for each species its character and individuality. However, among them all there was not found a helpmeet suitable for Adam. Finally, as Adam slept, the Lord God removed one of his ribs and formed of into a woman, Eve.

And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she has taken out of Man.  
(Genesis 2:23)

The man and woman, unlike the animals, had the power of choice. Only by their own appreciation and decision might they enjoy the Garden of Eden and the companionship of their God. When a smooth tongued serpent insinuated that the Lord God had deceived them, deprived them of some unknown ingredient of happiness, they accepted his word. They turned from their God and reached in greedy, self-centered disobedience for the forbidden fruit of evil. By this act, they denied themselves and their progeny forever the peace of the Garden of Eden. This incurred a life of pain and toil.

### CAIN AND ABEL

Symbolic of the constant rivalry between agriculture and animal husbandry, Cain and Abel were the first sons of Adam and Eve.

When the two young men brought sacrifices to the Lord God -- Cain the fruit of his field, and Abel the firstling of his flocks -- God accepted Abel's offering, but refused Cain's. To the Israelite elders, their roots deep in the lives of their shepherd's forefathers, it was obvious that it should be so.

And the Lord said unto Cain,...If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.  
(Genesis 4:6,7)

This was the privilege of decision. However, rather than make the effort to rule over sin Cain slew his brother. He sought to eliminate the light that cast shadow on his own inadequacy.

And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper? (Genesis 4:9)

Cain, like his parents, was condemned to a life of hardship. He was to be "a fugitive and vagabond" in the earth.

## THE GREAT FLOOD

The savage destruction of overflowing rivers was always a scourge and a mystery, as earliest Mesopotamian folklore indicates. By Solomon's time Israel's wise men had completely changed the pagan saga of the great flood. They used its bare outline to show the guiding, purposeful hand of the God of Israel. The account is prefaced with a fragment of heathen lore well known in their day (Genesis 6:1-4). Surely all who followed such horrible beliefs, with the resultant cruelty and immorality, deserve to be wiped from God's sight!

Of all mankind, the patriarch Noah was found steadfastly obedient to the Lord God. His integrity separated him from the fate of his unprincipled neighbors. In staunch faith he followed the strange, divine directives. He built a three-story floating house, the ark. In it was shelter for seven pairs of all the clean animals on the earth, and two pair of those designated "unclean" by ritual law. Two by two the beasts and the birds went into the ark, male and female as God commanded. They were followed by Noah, his wife, his three sons and their wives.

And it came to pass after seven days, that the waters of the flood were upon the earth. And the flood was forty days upon the earth; and the waters increased, and bare up the ark, and it was lift up above the earth. And every living substance was destroyed which was upon the face of the ground, both man, and cattle, and the creeping things, and the fowl of the heaven; and they were destroyed from the earth: and Noah only remained alive, and they that were with him in the ark. (Genesis 7:10, 17, 23)

At the end of forty days the downpour ceased and the waters began to recede. Noah released a raven and later a dove. When the dove failed to return, having found a resting place, he removed the covering of the ark and found it was resting on dry land. It was on a mountain of Northern Mesopotamia called Ararat.

Out came all the animals, Noah and his family. In reverence and gratitude he built an altar and sacrificed to the Lord God/ The kindness and patient reliability of Israel's God was reaffirmed in a new covenant:

...and the Lord said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite anymore every thing living, as I have done. While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease. (Genesis 8:21, 22)

Noah and his three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth and their wives were alone on an earth swept clean of wickedness. All the nations known to Judah must therefore have sprung from this family. The children of Israel traced their ancestry back to Shem, Noah's favored firstborn son.

### THE TOWER OF BABEL

Why was there a multitude of languages? To answer this puzzle the scribes drew upon a dim tribal memory of a people who had wandered down from the Eastern mountains to the alluvial plain of Shinar, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Longing for their native mountains, the accustomed places of worship,

they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly ....And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.  
(Genesis 11:3,4)

They used the valley clay for bricks and asphalt from the nearby pits for mortar to build a ziggurat, a great pyramidal tower.

And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; ...and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. (Genesis 11:6-8)

Thus in one brief, dramatic narrative these master storytellers gave their simple people a satisfying explanation of diversities of language. At the same time they skillfully conveyed a lesson concerning the penalties of commercialism and pride. A modern pragmatist might point out that prosperous Babylon lay on a main trade route. It was a gathering place of many foreign tongues.

### THE THREEFOLD PROMISE

A great new era began when Abram, a direct descendant of Shem, received the Lord's call and promise. This promise was threefold:

I will make of thee a great nation, ....  
and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed ....  
Unto thy seed will I give this land

A remarkable aspect of this promise, and one that engaged the attention of the scribes in David's and Solomon's time, was that it could not be stopped!

Common knowledge denied that Abraham's aged wife could bear a son. Yet God set the human law aside for the birth of Isaac.

There was no human way for Abraham to claim the land of Canaan, beyond the purchase of the field and burial cave of Machpelah. But as he passed the sacred shrines of

the local gods at Shechem, Bethel and Hebron, he raised altars there to his own God. When his descendants invaded the land centuries later these shrines were recognized and claimed with gladness.

The human circumstances at Jacob's birth would have placed God's work in insensitive hands/ Yet inevitably the tools of blessing, wealth and understanding came to Jacob. At Peniel all wrongs were wiped away. Neither the hatred of Joseph's brothers, the cruelty of Egyptian slave-masters, the waters of the Red Sea nor of the tumbling Jordan, nor the stone walls and iron chariots of the Canaanites could block the unfolding of the might of the chosen people, of the knowledge of God, and of Israel's dwelling place.

During the golden century of the royal kingdom Jacob's blessing of Judah, "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come," (Genesis 49:10) seemed to be reaching fulfillment. David traced his ancestry back to Jacob's fourth son through the latter's daughter-in-law Tamar. (Genesis 38.) The prophet Nathan told the king:

And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established forever  
before thee: thy throne shall be established forever.  
(2 Samuel 7:16)

Priests and scribes were jubilant; even though the ten tribes of Israel rebelled, the future of God's people was firmly assured.

### A MODERN VIEW

We may be deeply grateful to those careful, unknown writers who have reported to us with such integrity and oneness of purpose the founding footsteps of our way of life.

The editors of those early writings, are called the "J" writers. The name they used to designate God was Jehovah (or more recently Yahweh). Other editors of the Old Testament are called "E," "D" and "P." These we will meet later.

When Bible scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries recognized the work of these four main editors there was a tendency to discount the Old Testament as merely a collection of moralizing narratives concocted by ancient religionist. However in the last few decades archaeologists, with modern, sophisticated tools, have made tremendous strides in unraveling past events. They have uncovered on-the spot evidence of the mores, cultures and geological situations of which the ancient writers tell. At the time these events were written down the material evidence was already buried under the rubble of centuries. Only by meticulously faithful tradition could the priests have kept alive the stories of long gone times.

So sacred were the records to the compilers of the Old Testament that they often preferred to leave a point unclear rather than change the wording of their traditions. This is why we sometimes find twice told tales with slight discrepancies, as in the story of the Great Flood.