

J's Religion

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The Bible Untangled

Read the Texts that Were Edited Together
to Form the Early Books of the Bible

Edited with commentary by Charles Siegel

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to His vanity.⁷⁹ Nowhere else in the E text does God change his mind in this way, so it seems reasonable that this passage was written by a later Mushite priest who was influenced by J's stories about God changing his mind, which he had read as an integral part of the JE text.

Thus, it seems possible that a later Mushite priest modified the JE text and added a few passages—including these two passages, which are more hostile to Aaron and Miriam than anything else in the E text.

This possibility needs more discussion. For now, we can say that, apart from a few problematic passages that might have been added later, the E text seems to be a continuous narrative written by one person.

J's Religion

J was a member of the court of Judah rather than being a priest. Because the kings of Judah made alliances with surrounding countries by taking wives from those countries, this court was multi-cultural, so J was influenced by the religions of other countries. J also tells us that Judah had three sons with a Canaanite woman,⁸⁰ which indicates that there was a considerable mixture of Canaanite ancestry in the tribe of Judah, so we would expect pagan influences in Judah's culture and religion even before they had a multi-cultural court.

As a result of these influences, J conflated the Israelite religion and other religions. Both E and P say that the God of Israel first revealed Himself to Abraham and the patriarchs as El and first revealed His real name, YHWH, to Moses. By contrast, J says that the worship of this God goes much further back in history: before the time of Noah, in the days of Adam's grandson Enosh, people began ^{“GEN 4:26}to call upon the name of the Lord [=YHWH].” J also speaks of the ^{“GEN 31:53}The God of Abraham, and the God of Nahor, the God of their father,” showing that she thinks Abraham continued his father's and family's religion, rather than making a decisive break with earlier religion, as he does in the E and P texts.

J begins her narrative with pre-Israelite myths, unlike E who begins with Abraham. Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the flood, and the tower of Babel are influenced by myths that are earlier than the patriarchs and that come from non-Israelite sources. Appendix 5 discusses possible sources of these myths.

J's religion does not have a moral element. J presents a version of the Ten Commandments that is purely ritualistic, with commandments such as “The feast of unleavened bread shalt thou keep” and “Thou shalt not see the a kid in its mother's milk.”⁸¹ She does not include the familiar moral commandments such as “Thou shalt not steal” and “Thou shalt not kill.” Apart from these ritualistic Ten Commandments, there are no Israelite religious texts incorporated in J, as there are in E and P.

In line with her amoral religion, J admires tricksters. When we considered

whether J was a woman, we saw that she described Lot's daughters,⁸² Rebekah,⁸³ Rachel⁸⁴ and Tamar⁸⁵ as tricksters who are more or less dishonest. J also makes Jacob himself a trickster: Jacob and Rebekah use fraud to steal Isaac's blessing from Esau,⁸⁶ and Jacob responds to Laban's attempts to swindle him by out-swindling Laban, feeding the herd in a way that makes them give birth to the speckled, spotted, and dark goats and sheep that Jacob can keep.⁸⁷ In E, by contrast, there are no admirable tricksters: in E's story of Jacob and Laban, God makes the herd give birth to animals that Jacob can keep, apparently because God cares about justice, as Jacob says:

GEN 31:7 And your father hath mocked me, and changed my wages ten times; but God suffered him not to hurt me. ⁸If he said thus: The speckled shall be thy wages; then all the flock bore speckled; and if he said thus: The streaked shall be thy wages; then bore all the flock streaked. ⁹Thus God hath taken away the cattle of your father, and given them to me.

J has a primitive religion with an anthropomorphic God. God changes his mind, regrets his decisions, and even seems to fear competition from humans. He seems to worry that if Adam and Eve eat the tree of life, they might compete with Him and the angels.⁸⁸ He has to go and visit locations to see what is happening there: He goes down to see the tower of Babel,⁸⁹ and He tells Abraham that He has to go to Sodom to see whether the accounts he has heard about are true and it should be destroyed.⁹⁰ So much for omniscience!

In J, God speaks and appears directly to many people, and He meets people while He walks on the earth. He walks in the Garden of Eden to talk to Adam and Eve,⁹¹ and He even walks right up to Abraham's tent with two angels, looking like three men, and stays to have a meal.⁹² He talks directly to a long series of people, beginning with Adam, Cain, and Noah. After God gives the Ten Commandments, seventy of the elders of Israel go up to Mount Sinai to see Him.⁹³

J loved telling dramatic stories. She seems to tell stories just for the joy of story telling, and she added details to traditional stories that make them more dramatic by describing the characters' emotions; for example, she includes an intense description of Joseph's emotions when he sees his brother Benjamin.⁹⁴ She often used repetition to heighten drama: for example, she had Abraham ask God to spare Sodom if it has fifty righteous men, and then has Abraham gradually lower the number until, after six repetitions, Abraham finally convinces God to agree to spare Sodom if it has ten righteous men.⁹⁵

She is a bit like Sophocles or Shakespeare, who use their imaginations to dramatize traditional material from myth or history. It seems likely that she knew of a tradition that Abraham bargained with God about saving Sodom, and she dramatized it by imagining the bargaining and inventing the details

that it began with fifty, then went down to forty-five, and so on until it went down to ten in six steps.

It is strange that, after her pagan myths and her imaginative dramatizations were combined with E and later with P, they were taken as revealed truth and became part of the basis of the Israelite religion. Like the J text, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* was based on history, on the actual feud between the Montecchi and the Cappelletti families of Verona; later writers invented the story of two tragic lovers from these two families; and Shakespeare himself added drama to this story by inventing touches such as the balcony scene. It would be very strange if people came to believe that Shakespeare's story was completely true, so that all the standard histories of Verona said that the balcony scene actually occurred and the family names were actually Montague and Capulet. What happened to J's dramatizations of traditional material is even stranger: for over two millennia, people have believed that her imaginative embellishments and her anthropomorphic God are revealed truth.

J was a great writer, which presumably is why RJE was more inclined to preserve J's version of stories than E's. Harold Bloom has said "J's cognitive power is unmatched among Western writers until Shakespeare."⁹⁶ But because she is influenced by pagan cultures, her writing is not the best source for understanding the earliest Israelite religion, any more than Shakespeare is the best source for understanding the history of Verona.

The contrast between E and J disproves Wellhausen's theory about the inevitable stages of the evolution of religion. E is closer to the religion of the early Israelite priests than J is, but J's religion is clearly much more primitive than E's. Much theorizing about the early Israelite religion simply assumes that the earlier religion must have been more primitive. But when we untangle the early texts and read E and J separately, we can see that this is not true. When J and E were combined to form the JE text, including J's primitive myths and anthropomorphic God, there was clearly a decline from E's earlier version of the Israelite religion.

Is the J Text Continuous?

The J text is a continuous and very readable story that begins with creation and continues to the death of Moses. It has a distinct view of religion that contrasts with the religions of E and P by being closer to paganism. The text is episodic, with one event after another, which is what we would expect from someone like J who cannot resist telling a good story, but if you read it from beginning to end, it reads like a continuous text by a single author.

The Biblical scholar Richard Elliott Friedman has argued convincingly that this text extends beyond the book of J and was also incorporated in the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, providing a continuous story from the creation to the time when Solomon became king. He points out that