

## *Introduction*

The Bible tells many stories. And it tells many of them *twice*, leading to what are called doublets. Of the two, we can often distinguish an earlier version from a later. Of two versions of Noah's Ark, one is the common Flood myth, borrowed from nearby Babylon; the other is an update, including the Hebrew distinction of clean and unclean foods. David kills Goliath, but in an update, Saul *orders* him to; David is now part of the Saul story. These updates show us how times and ideas changed, and how the Biblical writers kept up with them.

For the historian, those changes are the whole story. But for those who see the Bible as Words of God, they are problematic: *Can God differ from himself?* For them, there was devised the 1895 Four Document Hypothesis (4DH).

*It holds that there were at first four sources, each consistent; contradictions arose when those sources were combined as texts. They are: J (Jehovah, 09c), E (El, 08c), D (Deuteronomy, 07c), and P (Priestly, 05c). But it proved hard to distinguish J and E, which were merged as JE. Some statements of priestly interest seemed to be early and others late. This led to the separation of P as P1, P2, and P3, plus H for the "Holiness Code" in Leviticus 17-27.*

For the historian, it suffices to notice that the tendency of these doublets is to enhance the power of Yahweh, or the king which Yahweh (at that moment) has supported. And to see Bible stories as so many Words of Men *About* God, which change as human conceptions of God develop, over the centuries.

The Hebrews with their god Yahweh did enter Canaan; they came to dominate much of it. But did this happen gradually, as Alt had concluded, and as archaeology has confirmed, and as the closely described battles of Jericho and Ai suggest? Or rapidly, as the instantaneous exterminations of Makkedah, and Libnah, and Lachish, and Gezer, and Eglon, and Hebron, and Debir, assert? No one who understands military matters will hesitate as to the answer.

The Bible itself persists in seeing Yahweh, and not any human agent, as responsible for events. When Babylon defeats Judah and exiles its people, is it because Babylon's army was stronger? No, it is punishment for the sins of the people. When the Persians conquer Babylon and permit the exiles to return, does that invalidate Yahweh's previous prediction, and prove Yahweh fallible? The writers scramble to insert passages making Yahweh predict the Return also – and in the process, making Yahweh into a kindlier and a more universal god, *a god who, at least potentially, is the god of more than one people.*

In this process of evolution in Men's Ideas of God, Yahweh has thus come to resemble El, the god of the Canaanites, who was *always* universal, and could be worshipped anywhere, "upon the hills, and under every green tree."

El tradition turns out to be better preserved than we might have expected, and we will be noticing it regularly, as we follow the Bible story to its end.

### Approach

**Audience.** This book is submitted to the judgement of scholars, but it has been written to be accessible to the informed general reader. It is hoped that the one will bear with what has here been done to extend a welcome to the other.

**Scope.** There is more to the Bible than the Bible; its writers also knew the literatures of Egypt and Mesopotamia. The Babylonian flood myth which underlies Noah's Ark (Genesis 9), and the failed seduction scene in the Story of Joseph (Genesis 39), inspired by a popular Egyptian story, are moments where that wider acquaintance is easily visible in the Biblical texts.

**Plan.** The introductions to each section summarize the main points of that section's chapters. Together, they give an overview of the book's argument, and may be read as an extended Introduction, before taking up the book itself.

**Conclusion.** Can ancient history offer anything useful to the present day? For our suggestion about Biblical history, see §72, the end of the present book.

### Details

**Dates** BC/BCE are given with a preposed zero; 06c is "sixth century [BC]." For events, see the Chronology at p269. For places, see the Zondervan Essential Atlas of the Bible (2013), here cited as Atlas. Also helpful is Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (1955), cited as ANET. The professional counterpart is the 6-volume *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (1992), cited as ABD.

**Quotations** follow English Bible numbering, and use the ASV translation. Short citations of other works are expanded in the Works Cited list at p290. The Septuagint (LXX) Greek translation (see Brenton) was based on an earlier version of the Hebrew text than the Masoretic Text (MT), and has often been preferred. Asterisks (such as Exod \*20:1-17, the Decalogue) mark passages we regard as interpolations. Chapter 9 of this book is §9, the Noah's Ark chapter.

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### Dedication

Abraham ibn Ezra, in the 11th century, had made a beginning by rejecting Moses' authorship of the Pentateuch texts, but the modern study of the Bible really began with the 1670 *Tractatus* of Benedict de Spinoza.

This book is dedicated to Benedict de Spinoza.

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