

Chapter 14

Israel's Faith before Israel Was a Kingdom: The Oldest Sources for Israelite Religion

The oldest literary composition in the Bible is a single verse attributed to Miriam, the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, and found in Exodus 15:21:

Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously: the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.

The brevity of this refrain suggests that it came from a very early date, and its form indicates that it was sung in celebration of the great event. It is the type of chorus that women sang when they went out, tymbrels in hand, to welcome victorious warriors returning from battle: one woman would compose a song to the victory and the others would act as her chorus. By means of this one verse we are invited to stand beside the jubilating Israelites as they celebrated the victory which meant freedom for them.

This passage provides us with a model for the source material that the writers of Scripture employed in composing their writings. They are literary compositions complete in themselves that can be lifted from their present context without destroying their sense; and they have an air of antiquity about them which marks them as earlier in time than the writings surrounding them. Interpretation of these compositions by competent scholars can help us reconstruct the life and culture of Israel at particularly critical times in her history. Most scholars believe that they existed first in oral tradition, the word-of-mouth process by which significant traditions about the life and faith of ancient peoples were transmitted from one generation to another. That they were oral does not mean that they were inaccurate; these societies had their own ways of preserving the accuracy of their important information.

One was to cast their sacred traditions into poetic form. Poetry, with its rhythms and parallelisms, and its ability to retain the actual wording of the original, is the best form yet developed to transfer with precision one's thoughts to another person. So key portions of Scripture--psalms, prophecies, even the teachings of Jesus--were written in poetic form that they might be remembered from generation to generation.

A second check for accuracy lay in the public presentation at times of worship of this significant material. At Passover the Jewish people recited the hymns and celebrations of that event and on New Year's Day they would recite the psalms that spoke of God's enthronement as king. The Christian churches followed the same pattern by relating over and over again the accounts of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, his miracles and mighty works. The continual repetition of these

psalms and sagas in the presence of others who knew them well enhanced the accuracy of what was being transmitted.

There is also considerable evidence that young men were gathered in schools and guilds or other forms of community for the purpose of being taught the sacred words of the past. Guilds of priests were found at such shrines as Shechem, Bethel, and Jerusalem; prophets had communities of disciples; rabbis had schools of scholars who had followed prescribed methods in learning the wisdom of their teachers: Jesus gathered disciples so that they could receive his teaching and transmit it accurately to Christian converts.

At some point, then, these words were put into writing, and that too was a guarantee of their accuracy. The art of writing had been invented many centuries before the time of Abraham, and while done laboriously by hand at considerable expense, important documents were copied and placed in the archives of temples and palaces. Kings set up monuments in conspicuous places in cities or along well-traveled trade routes where friends and foes could read of their feats in battle. Later, cities developed libraries where treaties and other important writings were deposited; and if even one copy of a text existed, it could serve as a check on all the oral recitations being made of that same story. If by our standards oral tradition seems a chancey way to retain and transmit important information, it is worth remembering that many a civilization employed it as their primary method, and they built into the process all the safeguards that they could.

Our purpose is to examine four of these ancient traditions embedded in the Old Testament: a victory song, a creed, a code of laws used by an Israelite tribe, and a saga of the people. Each dates to a time before the beginning of the kingdom of David. We shall look at the composition itself, and its purpose and learn from it what we can of the people who wrote it and of those for whom it was written.

I.

The victory song, now found in the fifth chapter of the Book of Judges, is known as "The Song of Deborah." The event of which it speaks took place about 1125 B.C., when Israelites fought Canaanites for control of the land of Canaan. The Canaanites had been severely repressing the Israelite clans and the call went out to the tribes to do battle against their enemies. The tribes from Benjamin north into what later became Galilee responded to the call. The battle was fought at Megiddo, a town strategically located in a mountain pass through which trade from Egypt to the Valley of Esdraelon had to pass; whoever controlled the town could control the trade between those areas. Sisera was the general of the Canaanite forces; the Israelite armies, called together by the woman judge Deborah, were under the command of Barak. At first sight, the battle appeared unequal. The Israelites were armed only with spears and swords, while the Canaanites brought their war chariots into play. But a remarkable event turned the battle in favor of the Israelites. A storm broke out of the mountains, though this was not the season for rain, and it caused the river Kishon, which flowed through the plain of Esdraelon, to overflow its banks. The Canaanite charioteers were hopelessly mired in the mud and clay and the Israelites

won the battle. Some Israelites were to compare it in importance to the victory over the armies of Egypt at the Sea of Reeds, for with the destruction of these Canaanite armies, Canaanite rule was broken and the way was cleared for the Israelites to assume more and more power in the northern regions of their confederation.

This poem is one of the most remarkable compositions in the Old Testament. It was composed by someone who stood near in time to the battle, perhaps even one who was a participant in it; it is a first-hand and authentic witness to that ancient struggle for power:

The kings came, they fought;
 then fought the kings of Canaan, at Taanach, by the waters of Mediggo;
 they got no spoils of silver.
From heaven ought the stars
 from their courses they fought against Sisera.
The torrent Kishon swept them away,
 the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon.
March on, my soul, with might!
Then loud beat the horses' hoofs
 with the galloping, galloping of his steeds.
Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite,
 of tent-dwelling women most blessed.
He asked water and she gave him milk.
 she brought him curds in a lordly bowl.
She put her hand to the tent peg
 and her right hand to the workman's mallet; she struck Sisera a blow.
 she crushed his head
 she shattered and pierced his temple.
He sank, he fell,
 he lay still at her feet; at her feet he sank, he fell;
 where he sank, there he fell dead.
Out of the window she peered,
 the mother of Sisera gazed through the lattice: "Why is his chariot so long in
 coming?
Why tarry the hoofbeats of his chariots?" Her wisest ladies made answer,
 nay, she gives answer to herself.
"Are they not finding and dividing the spoil?"-- A maiden or two for every man;
 spoils of dyed stuffs for Sisera,
 spoils of dyed stuffs embroidered,
 two pieces of dyed work embroidered for my neck as a spoil?"

The immediacy of the feelings of the people involved in that event reaches out to us through 3000 years. We stand beside Jael as she watches Sisera make his way to her tent. We witness the obliging way she supplies his needs and more; he asks for water and she gives him milk, she serves his food in her best bowl, and when he lies down to sleep she takes a tent peg in her left hand and a workman's mallet in her right, puts the peg to his head, and with a resounding blow

shatters and pierces his temple; and we watch in horrified fascination as his body quivers, jerks, lies still at her feet. The sparseness of the narrative adds to the terror of what is told. We quickly pass to the mother of Sisera, sitting in her house, a queenly dwelling fitted with lattice through which she could peer out to the road along which her son's chariot should be coming. She asks her maid why her son is so long in returning and even tries to imagine the victorious soldiers delighting in dividing the spoils. The poem never tells us that he did not return home; it simply lets us look into the anxious heart of his mother. This exquisite poetry compares with the best produced by any nation.

There is also theology at work in this passage: God is acting in human affairs and we human beings are trying by every process we can command to understand what he is doing. According to the author's view of the matter. God saw the problem that the people were having. He knew that the caravans passing between Egypt and Mesopotamia had ceased to move; travelers could no longer travel the main highways of commerce but had to keep to the byways and back roads. So, God began to act to relieve his people. He called Deborah, a mother of Israel, to sound the alarm to gather the tribes in battle. When the clans assembled and the battle began, it did not go well with them; defeat was imminent. But in the heavens too as well as on earth, a battle was taking place between the God of Israel and the gods of the Canaanites, and Israel's God was the victor. God sent the torrent of rain that flooded the plains of Esdraelon and mired the Canaanites in the bitter clay. Israel won the day not by the might of her own arms but by the blessed intervention of God. God is described here as the God who had earlier intervened in Egypt: God comes to save the tribes of Israel from the Canaanite powers as God had saved their ancestors from the hands of the Egyptians by the Sea of Reeds. God is king not only over Israel but over all the nations: God's power cannot be thwarted by the power of the gods of the people around. So, the poem ended: "Perish all thine enemies, O Lord! But thy friends be like the sun as he rises in his might." This poem, among the oldest pieces of writing of the Old Testament, is marked by great feeling and emotion on the part of the participants and renewed confidence that God himself is acting in the life of his people Israel.

II.

A second composition is a creed now placed in the Book of Deuteronomy.

This creed was used in worship as the men of Israel gathered each year at their central sanctuary to celebrate the Feast of Weeks, when the first fruits of the harvest were to be presented. This feast was the second of the three annual pilgrimages Israelite men were to make to fulfill their religious obligations. Bringing his gifts to the sanctuary within which the ark of the covenant was lodged, he would lay his gift before the shrine. As he did so, he understood that he was placing his whole life in dedication before the God who had given him everything he had; and he would recite this credo to his God:

"A wandering Aramaean was my father: and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the Lord

the God of our Fathers and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, and toil and our oppression; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt; with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; and he brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which thou, O Lord, has given me."

This passage is notable in that, for the persons who recited it, the history of Israel had begun not with creation or with the call of Abraham but with the wanderings of Jacob who ranged widely throughout the Mideast before he settled in Egypt. The population of Israel grew until their numbers became a threat to the Egyptians; under the subsequent oppression by Egypt. Israel cried to the Lord who acted to deliver them. Two of God's saving acts are especially described, the deliverance from Egypt and the gift of the land of Canaan to the Israelites. This could mean that the particular clan or tribe who first recited this creed did not know of such events as the giving of the covenant at Sinai or the wandering of the people through the wilderness; or it could mean that all the events between the time of the destruction of the enemy troops at the sea and the entrance of Israel into the land were to be included in the phrase "deliverance from Egypt." By reciting the creed year after year, these Israelites would recall the saving acts of God.

But it was not only in the interests of the past that the creed was recited. It would call to their attention that God was indeed a saving God: the God who had delivered them in the past was their deliverer now, and they could call upon this God and God would answer them. From the youngest to the oldest, every Israelite was taught to believe that he or she was living in the presence of the saving God. So, the creed was not merely a recital of history; it became a statement of theology: in such ways does God act in their lives right now.

One of the open questions about the creed was whether it was recited by individual worshippers or by a congregation worshipping together. I would have to opt for the former; being stated in the first person singular as it is, it appears to be the creed of a single worshipper. This tells something important about the worship of this period. While the people recognized the corporate bonds that bound them to one another, worship was performed as the individual, under the direction of the priest, laid his or her gift at the sacred shrine. Upon his or her own initiative and responsibility he or she chose to come to the shrine. In doing so, they accepted their place in the people who looked to Jacob as their progenitor, God as their savior, and land and life as God's gift to them. Like the creeds recited in our worship services today, this one was designed to help its adherents know who God is and who they are who worship God, and we who read their recitation can grasp something of the way the ancient Israelite nurtured and expressed his or her religious life.

III.

A third ancient document is the legal system of one clan or tribe which can be seen in the Covenant Code found in Exodus 21 through 23. As it stands now this code is attached to the Ten Commandments and is a further attempt to explicate the meaning of being a tribal unit in

the Israelite confederacy. In its present form, however, this code could not have been given by Moses in the desert since most of its provisions were irrelevant to desert living. The code regulated slavery, livestock and property; outlined penalties for various types of assault and murder; and contained a lengthy section about personal morality, including sexual conduct, treatment of widows and orphans, lying, and the rights of the oppressed. It concluded with laws about the sabbath and the three major feasts to be observed annually. This law was designed not for a desert people but for a more settled community whose life was based on agriculture.

There is no discernible principle of systematic organization in the code, but this very fact gives important information on the way the code was originally compiled. A single precept was given to cover a general type of crime, but as the cases before the tribal elders became more involved, their rulings became more sophisticated. The process can be seen in the series of laws concerning murder: "Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death: but if he did not lie in wait for him but God let him fall into his hands, then he may flee for safety to the approved places: but if he willfully attacks another to kill him treacherously, you may take him even from my altar, so that he may die." The first ruling was clear: a man who kills another man is executed for his crime. Then came a second and more complicated case: the man who killed his neighbor did not do so with intent but the murder resulted from a quarrel between them: what of him? The elders ruled that he may flee to the sacred altar of a designated shrine in a city of refuge and remain there free from penalty. A third case then arose: suppose the killer started the quarrel purposely to goad his enemy into attack and in the fracas kills him, can he escape the penalty of murder? After due deliberation the elders made another ruling and it too took on the force of precedent: such a man may even be snatched from the sacred altar for he must surely die for his deed. The Covenant Code was set to regulate the common life of one Israelite tribe and it demonstrated the increasing sophistication with which they did so as their life together became more intricate.

Portions of this Covenant Code were not original to this tribe either; they borrowed or amended laws that were part of the basic legal system of Mesopotamia at a time even before Abraham left his homeland of Ur.

As nearly as we can reconstruct the situation, each clan or tribe in ancient Sumeria had a code of laws to which it adhered. One very detailed code, recently discovered, came from the ancient city-state of Eshnunna, a kingdom that flourished for a century or more around the year 2000 B.C. This code contained precepts that have entered directly into the Covenant Code: like Israel and all ancient tribes, Eshnunna had trouble with oxen and they set up a series of laws to deal with the owner of an ox who gored a person or another ox. The Covenant Code borrowed its rules about oxen and added others to them. The Code of Eshnunna was soon superseded in Mesopotamia by the Code of Hammurabi. Hammurabi, who ruled from 1728 to 1686 B.C. and had through his conquests become king over a large and diverse population, sensed the need for a single standard of law to govern the peoples in his extensive kingdom and early in his reign he promulgated such a standard. The laws were not original to him; most of the individual precepts were borrowed from one or another of the codes used in important cities in his

territory. Having only one code of laws to cover matters of marriage, slavery and debt regularized relationships between the various populations of Hammurabi's empire so that justice could be exercised in every part of the kingdom in a more even-handed way.

We wish we could trace the exact path this Covenant Code traveled from Mesopotamia to Canaan until it was set beside the Ten Commandments in Exodus but our knowledge has so many gaps in it that this is presently impossible. These surmises do seem defensible, however. This set of precepts came with one of the clans of Israel as they migrated from Mesopotamia. When the group settled in Canaan, additions were made to the code as the elders were forced to make new rulings to cover the new situations confronting the people. Gradually, the excellence of this code as a standard of judgment for civil and religious affairs was recognized by more than one tribe; or perhaps this tribe was stronger than its neighbors and forced its standards upon others. When the Book of Exodus was put into the form in which we now have it, this code was inserted as one that demonstrated what it meant for a people to organize their legal affairs in a way accountable to Yahweh and also to fulfill the stipulations of the covenant Yahweh had made with them.

IV.

A fourth composition, of great significance, was designed to bring together into one account the most important historical memories of the many tribes. Called by scholars "E", its purpose was to mold into an effective unity the disparate tribes that made up the federation that had named itself "Israel." Drawn from many places and tribes, it presented the history of Israel as a single and coherent story.

The document began with God's call to Abraham. It told of his wanderings in Canaan and especially it highlighted the near sacrifice of Isaac at his father's hand. It followed Jacob and Joseph into Egypt; recounted the birth of Moses and the exodus from Egypt under his leadership; and traced the course the people followed in their return to the northern areas of Canaan. Moses was its central character. To others God came only through angels and dreams, but to Moses God spoke directly, though Moses feared to face God. This point may provide the clue to the basic theological position of the E document. The most discernible thread running through the E passages has to do with God's testing people to try their faithfulness: those who disdained God followed their own sinful course to destruction, but those who feared God remained obedient. Abraham was the first of those tested, when God seemingly demanded the senseless sacrifice of Isaac his son; not scorning but fearing God, Abraham would not withhold that which was most precious to him when God demanded it. Joseph became the agent for feeding his starving family after they had sold him into slavery, but he did this only after he had tested their sincerity and their fear of God. Moses delivered the law to the people at Horeb and on that occasion he announced, "Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of God may do its work on you, that you may not sin." (Exodus 20:20.) This conjunction of ideas, God's testing people to determine whether they held God in contempt or in reverence, is the most constant theme that can be extracted from those bits and pieces of E's work still left to us; and the people who fear God remain faithful and sin not.

Scholars call this document "E" for the two reasons that its name for God was "elohim," the plural of the word "el," the name for God used in Canaan, and that it gave prominence to figures important to the tribe of Ephraim. Joseph figures heavily in the story, as does Rachel his mother and his son Ephraim, the patriarch of a leading tribe in the Israelite confederation. E also portrayed a decided interest in the northern shrines of Shechem and Bethel. It used "Horeb" in place of "Sinai" for the mountain of Moses, and it called the natives of the land of Canaan "Amorites." Wherever one or another of the above traits is found in the first seven or eight books of our present Old Testament, we are dealing with the E narrative.

The message of E fit well the situation of his readers and auditors. Israel was constantly being tempted by the fascination of Canaanite manners and morals, with its emphasis on fertility cults, child sacrifices, and the undiluted power of kings. Canaan presented both a test and a temptation to the people of God who had banded together at Shechem, and to the task of strengthening Israel in its time of testing, E set itself. This story was designed to call the people of Israel to renewed obedience to the God who has also tested Abraham, Joseph, and Moses; it was only when they feared to displease God that they remained obedient. If Israel would hear that message, reasoned those who composed the document E, they would be kept from capitulating to Canaanite lures and would continue to be faithful to the God of their fathers.

Taken together, these four compositions permit us to see Israelite life as it was actually lived more than three millenia ago. We can watch someone at worship; experience the exhilaration of the tribes over victory in battle and yet share their sympathy for the families of the fallen enemy; witness the day by day life in village and small city where people bought and sold slaves, lived in danger of violent assault from humans and beasts, worried about thievery, tried to take advantage of one another in business dealings, seduced a neighbor's daughter, mistreated widows and orphans; serve the constant temptation before them to take on Canaanite values and practices and this need to be called anew to the worship of the "el" of Israel. This view of the seamy side of their life needs to be balanced by that other side, in which the tribes strove valiantly to bring the force of justice and the practice of a true religious faith upon such nefarious behavior and to organize their public lives in accord with the stipulations of their covenant. These four compositions were important to Israel for they helped to nurture her faith. They are also important to us because they afford an intimate look into Israelite life as it was lived by the immediate successors of those who had come out of slavery in Egypt and were trying to fashion a new way of life in their new land.