

## Chapter 15 The Golden Age of Israelite Literature

The period which dates from near the end of David's reign to the end of Solomon's--roughly the years 975 to 925 B.C.--was the Golden Age of Israel. It was also the Golden Age of Israelite literature for, as often happens, creativity in life was accompanied by creativity in literature. Before we discuss some of the literary achievements of this period, we should try to recall some of the facets of Israelite life which made all future Israelites look back upon this as the era of the height of Israel's influence.

It was, for one thing, the time of Israel's greatest military might. There was no army in the world at that time--not in Mesopotamia, not in Egypt--which could stand up to Israel's. Because it was so powerful no nation really challenged it.

Behind the army stood commercial success. Israel was a center of trade and of finance. She exploited her natural riches, built a fleet of ships to carry her goods, and dealt with nations all over the world. Hiram of Tyre came from the north and the Queen of Sheba came from the south. Israel opened trade routes all the way from Jerusalem to Ethiopia. Solomon became one of the richest men of the ancient world, and his nation was a giant of commerce.

This commercial power showed itself in the architectural activities of Israel. A temple was built in Jerusalem, as were the king's palace and other buildings of government; the city walls were pushed out to contain these structures. Other cities were established or rebuilt for military and commercial purposes; Megiddo in the north, Ezion-geber in the south. Smelting refineries of surprising sophistication were constructed in the deserts south of Jerusalem. Even the most casual visitor had to be impressed with this sudden and widespread eruption of architectural marvels.

Religion flourished, too. Worship was enriched, the traditions of the people were gathered together and the priesthood was strengthened. King Solomon supported this growth, and he himself presided at many of its ceremonies.

From this emerges a picture of a fascinating civilization. It was an urban civilization, built around Jerusalem. It was a time of international concern, the horizons of nations stretching far beyond their own borders. It was an affluent day, a time of great wealth and too much poverty. It was a curious mixture of the secular and the religious: people pursued their worldly goals of power and wealth and at the same time pursued their religious aspirations trying to discover what, if anything, God was doing in their lives. Since these descriptive words also apply to civilization in the last quarter of the 20th century, it is easy to see why we conduct studies of this age: what happened then can speak directly to our not dissimilar world of today.

For this reason, we turn to her literature. For this Golden Age of Israelite life also produced a Golden Age of Israelite literature that permits us to see how these people struggled with the questions before them. This Golden Age can be compared with only a few other periods of history. Athens at its zenith might compare, and England under Queen Elizabeth I. Like them, Israelites in this Golden Age created poetry, historiography, educational methods, and sagas of the life of her people.

I.

The Book of Proverbs provides one clue to the era and in reading fact begins to emerge. The book deals more with ethical action and instruction than it does with spiritual and religious development. The chief purpose of the proverbs was to describe the ideal person, and not only to describe the ideal but to produce it. In other words, the persons responsible for the proverbs were trying to deal with the question: what man or woman, what king or ruler could best fulfill the kind of new life the Israelites were now living? The school of proverbs tried to supply an answer. The ideal man, they said, was one who avoided evil company; who avoided the seductions of the strange woman; who discharged his duties of trust, fear and honor of God: who carried out his obligations toward his neighbor and who knew he could fall at any time and so he was vigilant at all times. The ideal woman, likewise, was one who served her husband well; who provided the things her family needed, who was charitable to the neighbors, who was busy at all times, and had strength of character on her own. The ideal king was the ideal man at work at the task of governing, discharging his responsibilities both to his subjects and to God.

These wise men of Israel also had a clear idea of God. According to their thought, he was the guide through life; he was the one who sees, examines and judges human conduct; and he was the one who rewards people according to their conduct. This was the proverbial understanding of the God who presided over the ideal life.

A class of men known as scribes produced this proverbial literature, and their influence in the ancient world was widespread indeed. They possessed the ability to read and write, and this skill made them indispensable to society. Kings needed them for government; priests needed them for religion; tradesmen needed them for business. But the scribes who had, apparently, a monopoly on this basic skill, did not merely remain clerks in the offices of businessmen or secretaries in the king's palace. Because they controlled the means of communication, they also controlled the processes by which decisions were made and implemented, and this lifted them far above mere stenographic rank. They were in charge of the official archives of the state and hence had access to the information needed for decision-making. They drew up the treaties and contracts by which international affairs were carried out. They conducted the extensive correspondence upon which ancient governments depended for communications. The nearest present analogy I know to the place these scribes had in the ancient world is to compare them with the computer experts of today. Computer experts have a unique place in our society in that they use an esoteric language known only to themselves, and are able to draw upon impressive data banks in the making of decisions, can make the decisions rapidly (and accurately, if the programming is correctly done), and can put expert knowledge to the use

of others who depend upon their skills. They have made possible our space technology, our credit cards, the information upon which health care is based; they undergird our system of universal taxation, produce projections by which business, government, academic institutions, even churches set courses of action to meet a dimly perceived future; and they do all this because they have particular skills in a particular discipline. This is roughly the place these scribes had in the ancient world: they were indispensable to anyone wanting to conduct affairs of state, commerce, or religion; and their indispensable position was based on the fact that they had developed and continued to control the basic skill of reading and writing.

We do not know how these scribes were trained in Israelite society; at home by parents? In temple schools? In schools sponsored by government? By special tutors? We do not even know who could enter upon this training: anyone? Only the sons of the scribes? Only those whose families could afford it? Those selected by some process we cannot now recover? We do know that the Israelite educational system was remarkably effective: it did produce men and women who modeled themselves on the ideals of their society, and it did produce civil servants and religious leaders who ably carried on the functions of state and religious life. We know also that Israel's ideal people were molded after the patterns developed in Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures; all these peoples had a wisdom literature and a scribal class in their societies, and they borrowed ideas and techniques from one another; and this tells us a good bit about the intercommunication that took place in the ancient world. We know, too, that in addition to offering a vocational education to the aspiring scribe, the schools also had to deal with serious ethical and behavioral questions: how should one act in a given set of circumstances? It is clear, as well, that God did not play a large part in the literature of the proverbs nor did God have a very important place in the world view of this ruling class. So to be true to the God of Israel, the understanding of God which the scribes held had to be modified and enlarged, and this is what happened in the next level of literary composition in the Golden Age: the sagas and histories of Israel.

## II.

The name scholars have given to this composition is "J." It is an odd name but there were reasons for its selection. For one thing, J stands for the name of God used in the document; it calls God Yahweh or, in the older translation, Jehovah. A second reason for calling it J is that the work was composed in the land of Judah, in and around Jerusalem, during the time of the united kingdom and is part of the great body of material that came from the court of King Solomon.

By any name, J is a remarkable document. It is the saga of the Israelite people. It opens with an account of creation, the story of Adam and Eve, and it continues through the entrance of the people into the Land of Promise, through the settlement of the land and on to the monarchy and the time of the writing of J. It is interesting to speculate about the purposes the author (or authors) had in mind in putting together the record of Israel's past life in the way he or she did.

J's first purpose was clear: telling the story of God's dealing with God's people. J wanted us to understand that none of the events of Israel's history had happened accidentally; through this history God was working out God's purposes for all humankind. God created a world in which humankind might live in harmony with God, and despite humans' proclivity to succumbing to temptation, to murder, to enslaving one another, God continued to care for them. J's purpose was to hold before Israel the character of their God who had called this people into being and was still blessing them.

There was, however, a more subtle purpose at work, J was also trying to unite the various groups of Israel into one nation. If what we said earlier concerning significant social movements within the people of God is correct, namely that not all Israelites shared in the exodus experience, not all looked to Abraham as their father, not all the tribes wanted a king, not all were happy with what was happening in Jerusalem; then we have to admit that this purpose was at work in his writing. J took the varied sacred traditions of the various tribes and clans and wielded them into a unity, and offered each of the disparate tribes and clans a stake in the united kingdom of David and Solomon. This nationalist purpose was as real as the religious purpose: J was trying to stress the unity of this people.

There was a still more subtle purpose in addition to the original two: that was the theological purpose. J was also trying to delineate God's action to a nation that was urban, affluent, religio-secular and most likely concerned with many things other than worshipping God. In this nation with its many worldly pursuits, it is realistic to imagine that for many of the people, religion was simply not a serious concern. J was theologian enough to place God again in the center of Israelite life.

And what a God! Look at the way J perceives God. A God who has a direct hand in creation. A God who creates the world and the people in it. God's way of creating is quiet, direct, humane; God makes Adam and Eve in the same simple manner that a sculptor fashions figures from clay; what a contrast to the creation stories of other peoples, with their wars between the gods, their cosmic battles between good and evil, light and darkness, chaos and form. As is demonstrated in the stories that follow, God also cares for God's people. Adam and Eve sin against God and in their sin they make clothes of fig leaves to cover their nakedness (the raucous humor behind this naive act would not be lost on the middle easterner who knew from painful experience that prickly fig leaves caused a rash when they rubbed against bare skin). God does not leave the errant couple in their raw state but instead out of loving care God makes them garments of leather, even as God punishes them by evicting them from Eden's garden. From sin comes the terrible crime of fratricide, as Cain kills his brother Abel. God punished Cain, but also puts an identifying mark on him so that no one else will punish him further. The wickedness of humankind shortly becomes so great that God determines to destroy every living thing; even yet God picks out Noah and saves him and his family from the flood, that all the world will have another chance at life. Humankind misuses this chance, wanting to build for themselves a tower that will reach to heaven so that they can unify the earth on their own terms. But God confounds their aim; and in the confounding of it God calls from all nations one man, Abraham, to serve God's purposes. To Abraham God gives the land and gives the promise that through Abraham and his descendants all the nations of the world will bless themselves. But in their wandering and through human wickedness the people of the patriarchs find

themselves enslaved in Egypt. Once again God acts: this creating, caring God who calls this people for God's own purposes now makes a covenant with them through Moses, whereby God is to be their God and they God's people. The people do not keep the covenant--they break it willingly and rudely - so God again must act, this time to correct and change God's people. Here is God as J wants the people of Solomon's time to see him: the creating, caring, calling, covenanting God who is even now engaged in correcting and changing God's people to fit God's own purposes. Such a God as this, says J, is active even now in the affairs of the people of Jerusalem.

So, J was a major source for our Scriptures. His work stood as source material for much of what is now Genesis and Exodus; evidence of his work appear in Leviticus and Numbers. It may even stretch into Joshua and Judges. Yet he himself had sources he used to construct his saga. He did not invent the narratives of the patriarchs. These stories circulated among the various clans for a long time before he incorporated them into his own work. He did not invent the account of God's dealing with Moses. That account went back in oral tradition close to the event itself and he shaped what he found for use in his own narrative. The stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the flood, the tower of Babel, evidently were told for generations before he adapted them for his own purposes. It is a complex problem indeed to discover the sources behind the source-book of our faith, the Scripture itself!

III.

Another important source from the Golden Age of literature begins at II Samuel, chapter 9, and continues through I Kings, chapter 2. Scholars give it two different names. Some call it "The Court History of David"; others name it "The Succession Narrative," the account of the selection of Solomon as the successor to David's throne. By whatever name, it is a fascinating record of the latter days of David and the early days of Solomon's rule. It is as intriguing as a contemporary novel in the cunning and ambiguous way it deals with human motivation. In theology, it carries to new depths the work begun in J. Since it was written within years of the events it depicts, it is very near to being an eye-witness account of the happenings themselves. Yet it is one of the oldest pieces of historical writing in all world literature; the Greeks, generally considered the fathers of modern historiography, did not begin to match it for another five centuries.

The story itself is familiar. It begins as David consolidates his kingdom. He does so in a dual way; he befriends those enemies who will respond to his friendship and he destroys those who will not. Then he commits a terrible sin. He impregnates another man's wife. His own prophet calls him to task for that. His troubles abound. Absalom, his oldest son, leads a rebellion against him. David gathers his forces and, despite being driven temporarily from his capital, he destroys those who rebelled against him. Absalom himself is killed in the battle. As David grows old, the question arises of who will rule in his place. Palace intrigue spreads like a cancer. Finally, Solomon emerges as the strong man, and David gives his consent to his rule. There seems to be a sigh of

relief from the storyteller as Solomon is confirmed in the rule and the crisis over the selection of a successor to David is ended.

It is interesting to probe for the reasons this account was written. It may have been written primarily to provide an official history of these important events; as such it is an excellent record. On the other hand, its real purpose may have been more subtle. Perhaps it was designed to legitimize the kingship of Solomon. This would have been no easy task. Solomon had two major problems that stood as barriers to his being accepted as king of Israel in David's stead.

First was the problem of his parentage. David had married Bathsheba, Solomon's mother, under very peculiar circumstances; she was already another man's wife and David had lied and schemed to bring her into his harem. The child born from this illicit liaison died as soon as it was born, however, and the author considered its death to be atonement for the sin of the parents. The next child born to David and Bathsheba was Solomon; and while this child was technically legitimate, the story of the unfortunate circumstances surrounding the marriage of his mother and father did not make it easy for people to accept Solomon as king.

The second major barrier Solomon faced was that he was not the oldest son of David. Since most nations were dynastic, with rule passing from father to oldest son, this made it difficult for him to become king. In some way his three older brothers had to be disposed of.

Absalom was the natural heir, but he was possessed by a desire for power that was to destroy him. He rose in rebellion against his father and while it was successful at first it ended in his death at the hand of Joab, David's general.

Amnon, the second son, had already removed himself. He had had an unnatural passion for a sister of Absalom's--the girl was only his half-sister since he and Absalom were born of different mothers--and Absalom, before his rebellion, had killed his brother Amnon to avenge his sister's honor. The third son was Adonijah. The dynasty by rights should have settled upon him. Even his name was in his favor. Adonijah means "My Lord is Yahweh," and in this Yahwist kingdom the name alone should have guaranteed his claim to the throne. But as David grew old and weary of ruling, Adonijah began to worry about his rights of succession. Seeing that the king was making no move in his behalf, he decided to take matters into his own hand. He gathered allies and supporters and put out word that he was to be king. But most of David's priests, scribes, and much of his army refused to support Adonijah. They favored Solomon instead, so Adonijah withdrew. He made one request as he did so. He asked for a particular concubine of David's to be his wife. Bathsheba understood the plot; Adonijah really intended to take over David's place in the family and hence he had designs on his father's place in the kingdom. The ruse was reported to Solomon and he ordered the death of Adonijah. When the order was carried out, Solomon had himself declared king. Was he the legitimate king? This document sets him out as such. It made it appear as

if from the beginning God and David both had had this in mind; and if this document could convince its readers that this was true, it would help to bring peace and unity to a kingdom that could have been split asunder in this crisis of succession.

The document, however, was interested in far more than only this question. It raised other questions that intrigue us yet today.

One had to do with the problem of governing: what did it mean to be a good ruler, a good governor, a well-ruled nation? The document answered with the single idea: the ruler who governs well is the one who is just and the nation that is well-governed is one that shows justice to its people. The narrative was trying to teach Solomon, his court, and the people themselves, the necessity of justice.

It indicated that when David was at his best, he was above all a just king. He treated all the people of the nation by one single standard of justice. Nor was justice delayed in his kingdom. If any citizen had a matter that needed attention, he need only petition the king for it and David would deal with the question. The narrator then pointed out that it was only when David put aside his sense of justice that he began to lose his kingdom. Absalom's rebellion had begun when the young man appeared in the city streets saying, "Oh, if I were king, you would get justice again." He would hasten to the gates of the city, where his father used to appear, and adjudicate the grievances the people brought to him. This very incident was a lesson directed to the young king Solomon: if you give justice, you will be ruling rightly. This was the lesson this writer would teach the new king and his court: be just in your dealings and you will truly inherit the kingdom that has been prepared for you!

There was a second question people of that day had to face: how do you educate a king, and a ruling class, to this responsibility? The answer was provided by the Book of Proverbs: "Bring up a son in the way he is to go." Following the directions given in Proverbs, we recall that the good king and the good ruler was one who gave justice, avoided evil company, who trusted, feared, and honored God, who discharged his duty to family and nation, was a person of deep feeling and was vigilant and foresighted at all times. Interestingly enough, we can find evidence of each of these virtues in this document. Read carefully the successes and failures of David. He was successful when he followed this code. He was unsuccessful when he abandoned it. Proper education meant passing these virtues on to the coming generation.

A further question this document dealt with was even more important: what part does God have in human life? It is interesting that by almost any religious standards we apply, this long narrative is a secular document. The writer was not always bringing God into the narrative to claim that God was the cause of events. But he suggested that God was indeed the guide through life; the one who saw, examined, and judged human conduct; who forgave those who repented and turned to God, and God was the one who arranged human affairs in accordance with God's own strong will. This writer was a subtle theologian who, in working through the affairs of the succession of a ruler to the throne of Israel, cared to point out that God was indeed working behind the hands of humans.

#### IV.

The last major composition before us from the time of the Golden Age is the story of Joseph. This is found in Genesis, chapters 37 through 50.

As it stands in Genesis, this narrative is part of the J saga, though it draws heavily upon the work done earlier by E. It deals with the son of one of the patriarchs, Joseph, son of Jacob. Joseph was the favorite son of Jacob's favorite wife. He was sold into slavery by his brothers and rose from being a prisoner in Egypt to being the prime minister in Pharaoh's land.

There is much in this story that bears the marks of a folk tale handed down for many generations, one with a basic historical kernel. At the same time, the story gives evidence of being re-worked by the authors of the literature of the Golden Age. Their purpose seems to have been that of setting Joseph before the court of Solomon as the model for the ideal ruler: "if you, O King," they were saying, "will rule after the manner of Joseph your rule will be blessed in Israel as his was blessed in Egypt." Joseph was indeed the ideal man that the school of proverbs had been presenting to the court of Solomon and he was the ideal ruler after whom other rulers could pattern their governance.

Joseph avoided all evil company. He did not subscribe to the wrong ideas and ideals; he did not act in a way to violate the moral code of the court.

He did not fall for the intrigues of a woman and this too was important to those who adhered to the code of Proverbs. David had done so; Solomon's own mother had been one of the temptresses. But Joseph refused all such advances; he was the model ruler for the court of Solomon.

Joseph trusted God. There was never a moment in the Joseph story in which he did not do this. He was in the pit and he knew God would bring him out. He was in prison and he turned to God for the interpretation of dreams. He was the ruler of Egypt and, in a dream, he was given a vision of what was about to happen, and he acted upon that vision. Joseph, the ideal man, trusted, honored and feared God.

He was one who discharged his duty toward his family and his nation. He was careful to be a good steward of the affairs of Pharaoh. He treated his own family mercifully when they came to Egypt though they had been merciless to him. He loved his sons, he had deep feelings about the death of his father and honored his memory and his casket. The ideal man of Proverbs was a man of deep feelings for nation and family, and Joseph fit perfectly the ideal.

He was vigilant and foresightful at all times. Joseph had tremendous resiliency. No defeat could down him. If he was a slave in the house, he would be the best slave possible. If he was a prisoner in the jails of Egypt, he would be the model prisoner. If he was the right-



hand man of Pharaoh, he would execute his office to the fullest of his ability. The motto for his life was expressed in the words of Genesis: "The Lord was with Joseph in prison; and whatever was done in the prison, Joseph was the doer of it; and whatever Joseph did, the Lord made it prosper." Like the ideal man of Proverbs, he found the providing care of God acting upon him at all times, and he responded to that.

Joseph recognized how good God had been to him, as is seen in the scene of the reunion between father and son. The old man Jacob had mourned a lifetime for his lost son, and in how many dreams had that beloved face come back to him. But now, at the end of his life, when with his remaining sons he had made his way to Egypt, there he was restored to the lost one. And not to his son only, but to his son's sons; for Ephraim and Manasseh, Joseph's sons, were placed before him on his knees. Says the text of Genesis: "Jacob said to Joseph, 'I had not thought to see your face; and lo, God has let me see your children also.'" This is the statement of faith of the Joseph story. The Almighty does not treat us only as we deserve or even in a way lesser than we deserve; we are treated in a way better than we deserve; as the Gospel of John will later say, God pours upon us "grace upon grace." So did the theologians of this Golden Age understand the way God deals with God's people.

Finally, Joseph knew God as the one who worked out God's own good purposes for God's people despite all the evil intentions men and women laid upon one another. This was stated in the words that formed the climax to Joseph's story. "And Joseph said to his brothers who had sold him into slavery. 'Fear not, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many would be kept alive, as they are today.'"

This passage came at the end of the story. Jacob had died, and the brothers were fearful of what Joseph would do to them now. Was it only out of love for the father that he had not taken some vengeance on them? So, they approached Joseph to say how sorry they were that they had wronged him. Joseph responded with this marvelous statement: "Fear not, I am not in the place of God." In other words, am I the one to make an ultimate judgment on your life? Only God does that. God sees, examines, and judges all human activity. Furthermore, this very God took the evil of your intentions and worked it for the good of all. "You threw me into the pit and sold me into slavery," says Joseph, "You meant to do evil against me. But God took these evil intentions and in God's own way shaped them so that because of them people are now alive who would be dead, were it not for the loving care of God."

It is in the Joseph story that the two main strands of the literary activity of the Golden Age of literature are merged. On the one hand, Joseph provides the model for the ideal man of Solomon's Jerusalem. Whoever ruled properly would rule in the same way Joseph ruled and whoever lived properly would live in the same way Joseph lived. Through Joseph, who lived seven centuries before the time the story was written down, the writers of the scribal schools of Jerusalem were able to highlight all those characteristics which were dearest to their understanding of the proper Israelite lifestyle. At the same time, in this narrative these subtle theologians were able to bring to sharpest focus the understanding of God they wished to present to the urban, urbane, affluent, international, secular-religious age

of Solomon. They understood God to be the one who sees, examines, and judges the actions of every person. In this they agreed with the theology of scribal writers the world over. But somehow in Jerusalem, in the hands of scribes who were also convinced Yahwists, this concept of God was transformed into something distinctly Israelite. The God who does these things also is the one who creates, cares, calls, covenants with, corrects and changes people. Even more, God treats people in a way far better than they deserve to be treated: God shows grandsons to an old man who thought he would never see his son again, God takes even the evil intentions of humankind and in, with, through, despite them God brings God's own gracious purposes into play. The story of Joseph is the climactic story of the scribal writers of Israel, and it communicates in a precise and picturesque way what God is doing in human life and how the people of the newly established Kingdom of Israel should respond to that, if this new nation is to be faithful to the God who called her.

The formulations of the writers of the Golden Age of Israelite literature, however, are not the final ones in Scripture on the questions they raise. In a remarkable, most likely intentional, way these questions find further answers in the person of Jesus Christ. In him we are shown what proper governance is: he who comes to introduce the kingdom of God makes the claim that all authority in heaven and on earth belongs to him. In him we are shown the ideal man incarnate: the pattern of life God had been pointing to through all the centuries receives its perfection in Jesus of Nazareth. In him we are shown the gracious activity of God come to its fullest expression: the evil intentions of humankind conspired to put Christ on the cross, yet when he is lifted up he is able to draw all people to himself. Hence the Golden Age of Solomon, significant in itself, takes on even greater significance as it points beyond itself to another age that in a new and complex way is itself urban, affluent, international, religious and secular—the age of Rome. For in that age one greater than Solomon stands forth, Jesus the Christ, in whose person God acts in newer and more profound ways than God had ever acted before.

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