

**From Genesis, A New Translation of the Classic Biblical Stories**  
**by Stephen Mitchell**

The stories in Genesis were composed, some of them from ancient folk material, by a number of different writers, as biblical scholars have established beyond a doubt. There are at least four writers, and probably half a dozen more: J, the author of many of the most famous stories in Genesis (J for Yahwist, or Jahwist in its German spelling, so called because he almost always uses the name YHVH, "the Lord," for God); E, whose greatest story is "The Binding of Isaac" (E for Elohist, because he uses the name Elohim, "God" in a curious, seemingly plural form, for God); P the Priestly Writer; the author of "Joseph and His Brothers", and a number of other writers whom I call "early sources" and "late sources." In addition, there was an editor, known as R (for Redactor), who collected all these texts and tried to reconcile them and make one continuous narrative out of the disparate sources. The (very approximate) dates of these writers are: J, 950-800 B.C.E.; E, 850-750; P 700-500; the Joseph author, 1000-900; early sources, 950-750; late sources, after 587; and R, 450-400.

If there is any author of Genesis as a whole, it is R. He was in certain ways a very skillful editor, and I will discuss the shape of his book in the last section of this essay. But Genesis as it is presented to us in R's recension — as we read it in the Hebrew text and in all the translations, except for a few scholarly ones — is a disservice to the original authors. That is why in this book I have separated the text into its sources, printing each story as a distinct work by a particular writer. (For many of these attributions, there is general scholarly consensus. Much of the time I have agreed with the contemporary German scholar Claus Westermann, whose three volume commentary on Genesis is one of the great works of Hebrew textual scholarship.)

A peculiarity of the text that the present format makes much more obvious is what scholars call doublets: two (sometimes three) versions of the same story, by different authors. There are many doublets in Genesis: "The Creation" according to P and according to J; "The Flood" according to J and according to P; "Wife and Sister" (three versions. J, E, and a late source); "The Promise to Abram" (J and one or possibly two late sources) and "The Covenant with Abraham" (P); "Hagar and Ishmael" according to J and according to E; "Beer-sheba" (three versions: E, J, and a late source); "Why Jacob Was Sent to Laban" according to J ("Esau Cheated of the Blessing") and according to P; "Jacob at Beth-El" according to J and according to E; and "Jacob Becomes Israel" according to J ("Jacob Wrestles with God") and according to P.

In one instance, "The Flood," R took the two versions and combined them into a single text (see Appendix 2). This accounts for the various discrepancies in the composite story as it is usually translated. In J's story, *the Lord* commands Noah to bring *seven* pairs of all the ritually clean animals and one pair of all the unclean animals into the ark, so that afterward Noah can perform an animal sacrifice without causing the extinction of a species; in P's story, *God* commands Noah to bring just *one* pair of each into the ark. In J's story, it is *rain* that causes the flood; in P's, the floodwaters issue from both the upper reservoir ("the floodgates of heaven") and the *subterranean source* ("the wells of the great deep"). In J's story, the flood lasts for *forty* days; in P's for *a hundred and fifty*. When the two strands are unwoven, each version becomes clear and self-consistent. We can also see more easily the distinctive elements in each: in J's story, the regretful Lord, sorry that he ever created humans, like a righteous but not wise man who feels heartsick at the corruption and suffering on the front page of his morning newspaper and can barely repress a wish to blow up the whole world

and be done with it, the ridiculous yet touching detail of having the Lord shut the door of the ark behind Noah after he has entered with all the animals, the three flights of the dove (the raven is a variant that I have relegated to the Textual Notes), and the lovely last sentence — “For as long as the earth endures, these will not end: seed time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night.” While in P’s story we find the detailed instructions for building the ark, the various stages of the rising and subsiding of the waters, the landing on Ararat, and the promise of the rainbow.

Sometimes one story in the doublet is a very inferior version. This is true, for example, of two of the P stories, “Why Jacob Was Sent to Laban” and “Jacob Becomes Israel.” The J versions are among the greatest stories in the Bible, in all literature; but they made an orthodox mind like P’s extremely uncomfortable. Just as the early rabbis of the Midrash (and all the later rabbinic commentators, for that matter) change Esau into a villain and rationalize away Jacob’s dishonesty and disrespect, P eliminates all the brilliant, troubling, morally ambiguous elements of J’s story. “No, no;” he seems to be saying, “it wasn’t like that at all. Jacob wasn’t sent to Mesopotamia because, God forbid, he deceived his father and cheated his brother and was in danger of being killed. It all happened because Esau married two Canaanite women, against the wishes of his parents. So Esau was the bad son. Jacob was the obedient one; he went to Mesopotamia out of filial piety, because his father commanded him to. And he didn’t steal the blessing, God forbid; Isaac gave it to him knowingly.” In the same way, P’s version of “Jacob Becomes Israel,” a clumsy story in an indifferent style, eliminates all mention of the wrestling match and simply states the new name without even trying to explain its meaning.

Some of the doublet stories, though very different from each other, are written with almost equal skill. This is most obviously true of the two creation stories. It is also true of the lesser-known “Hagar and Ishmael.” E’s revision of this story is even more moving than J’s original. Like the P version of “Why Jacob Was Sent to Laban,” it was written by an author who knew the earlier story and wanted to correct it. What seems to have bothered E most are the portrayals of Sarah and Abraham. J’s Sarah is manipulative, insecure, selfish, and harsh to the point of cruelty, while Abraham is a wimp who capitulates to his wife’s jealousy and washes his hands of the whole business. Hagar herself, while an object of pity and admiration in her escape to the wilderness, is also seen as the partial cause of her own misfortune. The only character who comes off well is the kindly Lord.

In E’s version, Sarah’s jealousy and anger are more arbitrary, though just as unpleasant; this immediately establishes Hagar as a more sympathetic figure. But it is especially Abraham whom E is concerned about. He can’t change the basic facts, as they were given to him by an already ancient tradition: that Sarah caused Hagar’s flight or banishment into the wilderness, that Abraham did nothing to intervene, and that God rescued and comforted Hagar. But E wants to make Abraham less passive and callous, and more of a father to Ishmael. He does this brilliantly, in one sentence: “And this troubled Abraham very greatly, because Ishmael too was his son.” The subsequent visit or vision from God achieves two purposes: it legitimizes both Sarah’s demand and Abraham’s acquiescence, and it takes the danger and therefore Abraham’s moral responsibility out of the banishment, since he knows from the start that God “will make (Ishmael) too into a great nation.” The next part of E’s story, the description of Hagar’s departure and of her rescue in the wilderness, is a triumph of tenderness and skill. (Ishmael is obviously a young child here, small enough to be carried on his mother’s shoulder, although the story has been spliced into the Genesis narrative four chapters after P’s “The Covenant with Abraham:” in which Ishmael is already thirteen years old.) And it ends with a version of Ishmael that is strikingly different from J’s. Rather than

portraying Ishmael as a wild and warlike savage, E makes the remarkable statement that "God was with the boy as he grew up," a statement about a kind of blessedness and charmed existence that is almost unique in Genesis: only of Ishmael and Joseph is this said.

In another doublet, the strange "Wife and Sister" (actually a triplet), E is clumsier in his revisions, probably because the material is more refractory. It is easy to see what disturbed him in J's portrayal of Abram. We can understand the instinct for self-preservation that makes Abram ask Sarai to lie, but self-preserving here is indistinguishable from self-serving. And when J says that Pharaoh took Sarai as a wife, he strongly implies sexual consummation. Abram is well rewarded for his complaisance and seems, to the great discomfort of some contemporary readers, very much like a pimp. In Es revision, the king (not Pharaoh now, but Abimelech of Gerar) takes Sarah into his harem but doesn't have sex with her, as E, emphatically states. Not only does he not have sex with her, he *can't* have sex with her, since God has made him impotent. Thus E assures his readers that no impropriety resulted from Abraham's lie. Not only that: according to E the lie wasn't really a lie, since Sarah is Abraham's half-sister. This relationship is unattested in the older tradition; E invents it here, purely for the purpose of defending Abraham's truthfulness. Furthermore, according to E, the king gives Abraham his reward *after* he learns that Sarah is Abraham's wife; it is a compensation and a proof, rather than a finder's fee. (The author of the third and still tamer version is bothered even by hearing that Es Abimelech takes Sarah into his harem; *his* Abimelech gets no closer to Rebecca than seeing her from an upper window.)

As I separated the stories into their sources, I came to feel that there was another, greater disservice that had been done to them and to their authors. By the time they arrived on R's desk, some of the stories —J's, E's, and the Joseph author's —were four or five hundred years old, and much material had been added to them by various scribes in the course of half a millennium. (Westermann's nose for these additions is particularly acute, but there is general scholarly consensus about the more important ones.) The most extraordinary example is "The Rape of Dinah": though the original version ended in the relatively tame murder of the rapist and his men by Simeon and Levi, the later version, taking its cue from the genocidal hatred of Deuteronomy 7, has Jacob's sons murder all the males in the Canaanite city and enslave the women and children (see Appendix 3). But there were many other additions, small and large. R could have had no way of knowing about them or about any original versions. What he had to work with were the texts he was given, which he would have considered sacrosanct.

His sense of the sacred did not, however, prevent him from doing the job of a good editor. He wove together the J and P strands of the Flood story, as we have seen, and in many other instances tried to reconcile the different versions by proper placement and with editorial insertions. To J's version of "Hagar and Ishmael," for example, R added two very clumsy verses.

And the Lord found her near a spring in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, "Hagar, where have you come from and where are you going?" And she said, "I am running away from Sarai, my mistress." *And mal'akh YHVH (which to R would have meant "the angel of the Lord") said to her, "Go back to your mistress, and submit to her harsh treatment." And mal'akh YHVH said to her, "I will multiply your descendants very greatly, and they will be too many to be counted."* [16:9-10] And the Lord said to her, "You are pregnant, and you will give birth to a son, and you will name him Ishmael... "

R's reason for adding the first of these two verses is clear: J's story left Hagar in the

wilderness; R had to get her back to Sarai so that she could be banished in chapter 21, in E's version, which R would have considered a later incident in a continuous story.

Often R would splice one or several verses from P into a J story to establish the chronology, as in J's "The Promise to Abram."

*And Abram went, as the Lord had told him to; and Lot went with him. And Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had obtained, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan [12:4b-5], and they arrived in Canaan and passed through the land as far as the sanctuary at Shechem, the great oak of Moreh.*

The insertion here is skillful enough, but elsewhere R's splices can be awkward, interrupting the flow of the narrative and interpolating P's dull prose into the brilliant concision of J, as at the beginning of J's "Hagar and Ishmael."

*Now Sarai had not borne Abram any children. And she had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram, "See how the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. I beg you now, go and sleep with my maid, and perhaps I will have a son through her." And Abram did what Sarai had asked: And Abram's wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to Abram her husband as his concubine. [16:3] He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. And when she knew that she was pregnant ...*

Early on in the work of translation, I decided to omit all these additional verses, whether they had been added by R or by some scribe centuries before. I felt obliged to do this out of loyalty to J, E, and the Joseph author, who are the great writers of Genesis. What author would want his work presented to the public cluttered with the second and third thoughts of second- and third-rate writers? As I relegated these accretions to the Textual Notes, the stories took on a stunning clarity. It was like removing coat after coat of lacquer that had obscured the vibrant colors of a masterpiece. This was most impressive in the Joseph story. But there are many other striking examples.

In the original version of "The Binding of Isaac," for example, God calls to Abraham just once, after which Abraham sees the ram, sacrifices it, names the place, and leaves. Some scribe, copying passages from elsewhere in Genesis, appended a second heavenly intervention (scholars are virtually unanimous that this is a later addition).

*And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from the sky and said, "'I swear,' says the Lord, 'that because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your darling, I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they are as many as the stars in the sky and the sands on the seashore. And your descendants will seize the gates of their enemies, and in your descendants all the nations of the earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed my command.'" [22:15-18]*

This awkward and anticlimactic passage is a blot on a story of the greatest economy and tact.

Another clumsy addition occurs at the end of J's "The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah." It is a silly passage, written in a style obviously different from the rest of the story, and it interrupts the high drama of the climactic moment.

And as soon as dawn came, the beings said to Lot, "Hurry, take your wife and the two daughters who are here, or you will be crushed in the punishment of the city." And he still lingered. And the beings took him by the hand, and his wife and the two daughters also, since the Lord was merciful to him, and they led them out and left them outside the city. And one of them said, "Run for your lives! Don't look back, don't stop anywhere in the plain: run to the hills or you will be crushed!"

*And Lot said, "Please don't, sir. You have been so good to me and have shown me such great kindness in saving my life, but if I try to run to the hills, the destruction will overtake me and I will die. Look, that town over there, I can go to it, and it is so small. Please let me go there: it is so small, and my life will be saved." And he said to him, "I will grant you this favor too, and I will not obliterate the town. Hurry, go; for I can't do anything until you get there." That is why the town was named Zoar [Small]. The sun was rising as Lot entered Zoar. [19:18-23]*

And the Lord rained sulfurous fire on Sodom and Gomorrah, and he obliterated those cities, and the whole plain, and all the cities' inhabitants, and everything that grew on the ground.

And Lot's wife looked back, and she turned into a pillar of salt.

And in the morning Abraham went back to the place where he had stood in the Lord's presence. And he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, across the whole plain, and the smoke from it was rising like the smoke from a furnace.

Ehrlich points out that not only is this passage awkward, it makes nonsense of "Lot's Daughters," also by J, which follows it.

The statement in 19:31, "there are no men left on earth to lie with us," clearly shows that everything that is said about Zoar proceeds from a later hand. Only according to the original story, in which Lot fled directly from Sodom into the hills, can the daughters believe that the whole world had perished as in the Flood; they could not believe this, however, if they had in the meantime been living in Zoar and seen its inhabitants quite alive.

In "Jacob and Esau," two verses have been inserted near the beginning, for a particular purpose.

Now Rebecca was barren, and Isaac prayed to the Lord for her. And the Lord answered his prayer, and Rebecca conceived. *And the children fought inside her womb; and she said, "If it is like this, why do I live?" And she went to consult the Lord's oracle. And the Lord said to her:*

*"Two nations are in your womb,  
two peoples inside your body.  
But one shall be stronger than the other  
and the elder shall serve the younger." [25:22-23]*

And when it was time for her to give birth, twins came out of her womb. And the first one was red and hairy like a fur cloak; so they named him Esau, [*The Shaggy One*]. And then his brother came out, with one hand grasping Esau's heel; so they named him Jacob [*Heel-Grasper*].

The continuation of this story, "Esau Cheated of the Blessing," causes problems for any reader who wants to see Jacob as a decent, honest man. Whether or not Rebecca and he are right in thinking that the end justifies the means, their deceit is deeply unsavory. The author

of these two inserted verses must have felt so troubled by the story that he had to authorize Rebecca's preference for Jacob by enlisting God on her side. But in its original version, with the oracle removed, it is a simpler, more powerful story of how Rebecca loved Jacob and Isaac loved Esau. God plays no part in it at all.

Of all the texts, "Joseph and His Brothers" is the one that most dramatically benefits when we leave out the accretions. Unlike the rest of Genesis, the Joseph story seems to be a unified whole, by a single author of genius. As Westermann has written, "The Joseph narrative as far as chapter 45 runs its course in a continuous, coherent, and clearly arranged sequence of events; the conclusion, chapters 46-50, is complicated. It contains expansions, doublings, breaks in continuity, and much that does not seem to belong immediately to the Joseph narrative," I have relegated these additions to Appendix I. They are all dull or awkward (except for "The Testament of Jacob," which is a skillful early poem, though not nearly as good as the best biblical poetry), and they seriously interfere with the flow of the narrative. The worst of them are "Joseph's Land Policy," in which Joseph's enslavement of the Egyptians is an unconsciously, chillingly ironic precursor of Exodus I, and the ludicrous "Joseph and His Brothers Reconciled."

And when Joseph's brothers realized that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and takes revenge on us for all the harm we did to him?" So they sent this message to Joseph: "Your father gave us this message before he died: 'Say this to Joseph: "Forgive, I beg you, the crime and sin of your brothers, who did you harm:" So now, please, forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.'" And Joseph wept at their words to him. [50:15-17]

It is indeed hard to keep from weeping at these words, so clumsy and bathetic are they. How any writer could have had the gall to add them to the impeccable prose of the Joseph story is beyond comprehension.