

## Session 13: The Primeval History of Genesis 1 – 11

### A. The Sources of the Pentateuch

In the previous session we compared two accounts of the creation of the world, those of Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. We saw that these are very different in style but that they share a basic unity of theological understanding. Both portray the world as the creation of one sovereign God and humankind as having a special place in God's purpose for it.

We have also seen, in session 5 on Deuteronomy, that the first five books of the Bible, the books of Moses or 'Pentateuch', were not the work of one person. We saw the way the laws gradually developed throughout Israel's history and examples of anachronism and contradiction.

In fact it is possible to discern in the Pentateuch four major strands or sources. This does not necessarily mean that any of these existed in the form of a separate written document, but that there were broadly four different traditions, which have been carefully combined and edited to form the five books we have today.

More about these four sources and the current 'state of play' in Old Testament scholarship about them can be found in Drane, *Introducing the Old Testament*, pages 166-170. In brief, they are these:

- a) Source J, short for the 'Yahwist', which in German begins with a 'J' (the scholars who gave it this name being German). This probably originated in the court of Solomon as a gathering of the traditions of Israel and the arrangement of them to form a coherent story in order to provide the newly united and self-conscious nation of Israel with a sense of her past. The characteristic that gives this source its name is that it usually refers to God as 'Yahweh'. A typical example of a story from this source is Genesis 2:4-25, the creation story.
- b) Source E, otherwise known as the Elohist. This is another collection of Israel's traditions probably from the northern kingdom of Israel some 100 to 200 years after Solomon. It is distinguishable from J by the fact that it refers to God as 'Elohim', usually translated into English as 'God'. A typical story from this source is Genesis 22, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. It may well have been combined with J at some point in the later history of Judah to form 'JE'.
- c) Source D: Deuteronomy
- d) Source P, which originated in priestly circles. Much of this is very ancient, but it would continue to develop as priestly practice developed over the course of Israel's history. We have already seen many of the features of this source in our study of Genesis 1: the concern for order and regularity. We shall see in later session that the priestly writers were also concerned with details and detailed explanation.

These sources were combined at some time after 450 B.C. to form the Pentateuch in roughly the form we have it today, the editors of the whole being drawn from the priestly tradition.