

# THE LEGENDS OF GENESIS.<sup>1</sup>

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## I.

### THE SIGNIFICANCE AND SCOPE OF THE LEGENDS.

ARE the narratives of Genesis history or legend? For the modern historian this is no longer an open question; nevertheless it is important to get a clear notion of the bases of this modern position.

The writing of history is not an innate endowment of the human mind; it arose in the course of human history and at a definite stage of development. Uncivilised races do not write history; they are incapable of reproducing their experiences objectively, and have no interest in leaving to posterity an authentic account of the events of their time. Experiences fade before they are fairly cold, and fact and fancy mingle; only in poetical form, in song and saga, are unlettered tribes able to report historical occurrences. Only at a certain stage of civilisation has objectivity so grown and the interest in transmitting national experiences to posterity so increased that the writing of history becomes possible. Such history has for its subjects great public events, the deeds of popular leaders and kings, and especially wars. Accordingly some sort of political organisation is an antecedent presumption to the writing of history.

Only in a later, in the main a much later, time is the art of writing history, learned through the practice of writing national histories, applied to other spheres of human life, whence we have memoirs and the histories of families. But considerable sections of the people have never risen to the appreciation of history proper,

<sup>1</sup>The present treatise is the Introduction to the same author's *Commentary on Genesis* (Van-den-boek & Ruprecht, Göttingen), in which the positions here taken are expounded and supported in greater detail.—Translated from the German by Prof. W. H. Carruth, of the University of Kansas.

and have remained in the saga stage, or in what in modern times is analogous to saga.

Thus we find among the civilised peoples of antiquity two distinct kinds of historical records side by side: history proper and popular tradition, the latter treating in naïve poetical fashion partly the same subjects as the former, and partly the events of older, prehistoric times. And it is not to be forgotten that historical memories may be preserved even in such traditions, although clothed in poetic garb.

Even so did history originate in Israel. In the period from which the Book of Genesis is transmitted to us the art of history had been long established and highly developed according to ancient standards, having here as everywhere the deeds of kings and especially wars for themes; a monument of this history is found in the narratives of the Second Book of Samuel.

But in a people with such a highly developed poetical faculty as Israel there must have been a place for saga too. The senseless confusion of "legend" with "lying" has caused good people to hesitate to concede that there are legends in the Old Testament. But legends are not lies; on the contrary, they are a particular form of poetry. Why should not the lofty spirit of Old Testament religion, which employed so many varieties of poetry, indulge in this form also? For religion everywhere, the Israelite religion included, has especially cherished poetry and poetic narrative, since poetic narrative is much better qualified than prose to be the medium of religious thought. Genesis is a more intensely religious book than the Book of Kings.

There is no denying that there are legends in the Old Testament; consider for instance the stories of Samson and of Jonah. Accordingly it is not a matter of belief or skepticism, but merely a matter of better knowledge, to examine whether the narratives of Genesis are history or legend. The objection is raised that Jesus and the Apostles clearly considered these accounts to be fact and not poetry. Suppose they did; the men of the New Testament are not presumed to have been exceptional men in such matters, but shared the point of view of their time. Hence we are not warranted in looking to the New Testament for a solution of questions in the literary history of the Old Testament.

#### CRITERIA FOR LEGEND AND HISTORY.

Now, since legend and history are very different in both origin and nature, there are many criteria by which they may be distin-

guished. One of the chief points of difference is that legend is originally oral tradition, while history is usually found in written form; this is inherent in the nature of the two species: legend being the tradition of those who are not in the habit of writing, while history, which is a sort of scientific activity, presupposes practice in writing. At the same time the writing down of an historical tradition serves to fix it, whereas oral tradition cannot remain uncorrupted for any length of time and is therefore inadequate to be the vehicle of history. Now it is evident that Genesis contains the final sublimation into writing of a body of oral traditions. The tales of the Patriarchs do not have the air of having been written down by the Patriarchs themselves; on the contrary many passages reveal clearly the great interval of time that lies between the period of the Patriarchs and the narrators. We read frequently the expression "even to this day," as in Genesis xix. 38; the kings of Edom are enumerated down to the time of David, xxxvi. 31 ff.; the sentence "in those days the Canaanites dwelt in the land" must have been written at a time when this race had long since passed away.

But the whole style of the narrative, as is to be shown hereafter, can be understood only on the supposition of its having been oral tradition; this condition can be realised especially in the many variants, to be treated in the following pages. But if the contents of Genesis is tradition, it is, as the preceding considerations show, legend also.

#### DIFFERENT SPHERES OF INTEREST.

Another distinguishing feature of legend and history is their different spheres of interest. History treats great public occurrences, while legend deals with things that interest the common people, with personal and private matters, and is fond of presenting even political affairs and personages so that they will attract popular attention. History would be expected to tell how and for what reasons David succeeded in delivering Israel from the Philistines; legend prefers to tell how the boy David once slew a Philistine giant. How does the material of Genesis stand in the light of this distinction? With the exception of a single chapter (Chapter xiv), it contains no accounts of great political events, but treats rather the history of a family. We hear a quantity of details, which certainly have for the greater part no value for political history, whether they are credited or not: that Abraham was pious and magnanimous, and that he once put away his concubine to please

his wife; that Jacob deceived his brother; that Rachel and Leah were jealous,—“unimportant anecdotes of country life, stories of springs, of watering-troughs, and such as are told in the bed-chamber,” attractive enough to read, yet everything but historical occurrences. Such minor incidents aroused no public interest when they took place; the historian does not report them, but popular tradition and legend delight in such details.

#### EYE-WITNESS AND REPORTER.

In the case of every event that purports to be a credible historical memorandum, it must be possible to explain the connexion between the eye-witness of the event reported and the one who reports it. This is quite different in the case of legend which depends for its material partly upon tradition and partly upon imagination. We need only apply this test to the first narratives of Genesis in order to recognise their character straightway. No man was present at the creation of the universe; no human tradition extends back to the period of the origin of our race, of the first peoples and the primitive languages. In former times, before the deciphering of hieroglyphs and cuneiform writing, it was possible for Israelitic tradition to be regarded as so old that it did not seem absurd to look to it for such reminiscences of prehistoric ages; but now when creation has widened so mightily in our view, when we see that the People of Israel is one of the youngest in the group to which it belongs, there is an end of all such conjectures. Between the origin of the primitive races of southwestern Asia and the appearance of the People of Israel upon the stage of life had rolled unnumbered millenniums; hence there is no room for serious discussion over historical traditions said to be possessed by Israel regarding those primitive times.

The accounts of the patriarchs also give rise to the most serious doubts. According to the tradition the period of the patriarchs is followed by the four hundred years during which Israel lived in Egypt. Nothing is reported from this period; historical recollection seems to have been utterly blotted out. And yet we have an abundance of unimportant details regarding the period of the patriarchs. How is it conceivable that a people should preserve a great quantity of the very minutest details from the history of its primitive ancestors and at the same time forget its own national history for a long period following? It is not possible for oral tradition to preserve an authentic record of such details so vividly and for so long a time. And then, consider these narratives in de-

tail. The question how the reporter could know of the things which he relates cannot be raised in most cases without exciting laughter. How does the reporter of the Deluge pretend to know the depth of the water? Are we to suppose that Noah took soundings? How is anyone supposed to know what God said or thought alone or in the councils of Heaven? (Cp. Genesis i. 2, 18, vi. 3-6 ff., xi. 6 ff.)

#### THE CRITERION OF INCREDIBILITY.

The clearest criterion of legend is that it frequently reports things which are quite incredible. This poetry has another sort of probability from that which obtains in prosaic life, and ancient Israel considered many things to be possible which to us seem impossible. Thus many things are reported in Genesis which go directly against our better knowledge: we know that there are too many species of animals for all to have been assembled in any ark; that Ararat is not the highest mountain on earth; that the "firmament of heaven," of which Genesis i. 6 ff. speaks, is not a reality, but an optical illusion; that the stars cannot have come into existence after plants, as Genesis ii. 10-14 reports; that the rivers of the earth do not come chiefly from four principal streams, as Genesis ii. thinks, that the Tigris and the Euphrates have not a common source, that the Dead Sea had been in existence long before human beings came to live in Palestine, instead of originating in historical times, and so on.

Of the many etymologies in Genesis the majority are to be rejected according to the investigations of modern philology. The theory on which the legends of the patriarchs are based, that the nations of the earth originated from the expansion of a single family, in each case from a single ancestor, is quite infantile.<sup>1</sup> Any other conclusion is impossible from the point of view of our modern historical science, which is not a figment of imagination but is based upon the observation of facts. And however cautious the modern historian may be in declaring anything impossible, he may declare with all confidence that animals—serpents and she-asses, for instance—do not speak and never have spoken, that there is no tree whose fruit confers immortality or knowledge, that angels and men do not have carnal connexion, and that a world-conquering army cannot be defeated—as Genesis xiv. declares—with three hundred and eighteen men.

<sup>1</sup> Compare my Commentary to Genesis, pp. 78 ff.

## WANING ANTHROPOMORPHISM.

The narratives of Genesis being mostly of a religious nature are constantly speaking of God. Now the manner in which narratives speak of God is one of the surest means of determining whether they are historical or poetic. Here too the historian cannot avoid having a universal point of view. We believe that God works in the universe in the silent and secret background of all things; sometimes his influence seems almost tangible, as in the case of exceptionally great and impressive events and personalities; we divine his control in the marvellous interdependence of things; but nowhere does he appear as an operative factor beside others, but always as the last and ultimate cause of everything. Very different is the point of view of many of the narratives in Genesis. We find God walking about in the Garden of Eden; with his own hands he fashions man and closes the door of the ark; he even breathes his own breath into man's nostrils and makes unsuccessful experiments with animals; he scents the sacrifice of Noah; he appears to Abraham and Lot in the guise of a wayfarer, or as an angel calls directly out of Heaven. Once, indeed, God appears to Abraham in his proper form, having the appearance of a burning torch and of a smoking baking-pot (the Revised Version in English has here "furnace"). The speeches of God in Genesis are remarkable for the fact that his words are not heard in the obscure moments of intensest human excitement, in the state of ecstasy, as was the case with the prophets when they heard the voice of God, but that God speaks in all respects as does one man to another. We are able to comprehend this as the naïve conception of the men of old, but we cannot regard belief in the literal truth of such accounts as an essential of religious conviction.

And these arguments are immensely strengthened when we compare the narratives which on inner evidence we regard as poetry with the specimens which we know of strict Israelitish history. For these violations of probability and even of possibility are not found throughout the Old Testament, but only in certain definite portions possessing a uniform tone, whereas they are not to be found in other portions which for other reasons we regard as more strictly historical. Consider especially the central portion of the Second Book of Samuel, the history of the rebellion of Absalom, the most exquisite piece of early historical writing in Israel. The world that is there portrayed is the world that we know. In this world iron does not float and serpents do not speak; no god

or angel appears like a person among other persons, but everything happens as we are used to seeing things happen. In a word, the distinction between legend and history is not injected into the Old Testament, but is to be found by any attentive reader already present in the Old Testament.

Moreover, it should not be forgotten that many of the legends of the Old Testament are not only similar to those of other nations, but are actually related to them by origin and nature. Now we cannot regard the story of the Deluge in Genesis as history and that of the Babylonians as legend; in fact, the account of the Deluge in Genesis is a younger version of the Babylonian legend. Neither can we reject all other cosmogonies as fiction and defend that of Genesis as history; on the contrary the account of Genesis i., greatly as it differs in its religious spirit from other cosmogonies, is by its literary method closely related to them.

#### LEGEND IS POETRY.

But the important point is and will remain the poetic tone of the narratives. History, which claims to inform us of what has actually happened, is in its very nature prose, while legend is by nature poetry, its aim being to please, to elevate, to inspire and to move. He who wishes to do justice to such narratives must have some æsthetic faculty, to catch in the telling of a story what it is and what it purports to be. And in doing so he is not expressing a hostile or even skeptical judgment, but simply studying lovingly the nature of his material. Whoever possesses heart and feeling must perceive, for instance in the case of the sacrifice of Isaac, that the important matter is not to establish certain historical facts, but to impart to the hearer the heartrending grief of the father who is commanded to sacrifice his child with his own hand, and then his boundless gratitude and joy when God's mercy releases him from this grievous trial. And every one who perceives the peculiar poetic charm of these old legends must feel irritated by the barbarian—for there are pious barbarians—who thinks he is putting the true value upon these narratives only when he treats them as prose and history.

The conclusion, then, that one of these narratives is legend is by no means intended to detract from the value of the narrative; it only means that the one who pronounces it has perceived somewhat of the poetic beauty of the narrative and thinks that he has thus arrived at an understanding of the story. Only ignorance can regard such a conclusion as irreverent, for it is the judgment of rev-



erence and love. These poetic narratives are the most beautiful possession which a people brings down through the course of its history, and the legends of Israel, especially those of Genesis, are perhaps the most beautiful and most profound ever known on earth.

A child, indeed, unable to distinguish between reality and poetry, loses something when it is told that its dearest stories are "not true." But the modern theologian should be farther developed. The evangelical churches and their chosen representatives would do well not to dispute the fact that Genesis contains legends—as has been done too frequently—but to recognise that the knowledge of this fact is the indispensable condition to an historical understanding of Genesis. This knowledge is already too widely diffused among those trained in historical study to be suppressed. It will surely spread among the masses of our people, for the process is irresistible. Shall not we Evangelicals take care that it be presented to them in the right spirit?

### THE VARIETIES OF LEGENDS IN GENESIS.

In the great mass of our materials two groups are distinctly recognisable:

1. The legends of the origin of the world and of the progenitors of the human race, the stories down to the tower of Babel, their locality being remote and their sphere of interest the whole world;

2. The legends of the patriarchs of Israel: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the latter's sons, the locality and the sphere of interest being Canaan and adjacent lands.

Even in their character the two groups are most plainly distinguished: the narratives of the first group speak of God in a way different from that of the legends of the patriarchs. In the latter the divinity appears always enveloped in mystery, unrecognised or speaking out of Heaven, or perhaps only in a dream; in the earlier legends, on the contrary, God walks intimately among men and no one marvels at it: in the legend of Paradise men dwell in God's house; it is assumed that he is in the habit of visiting them every evening; he even closes the ark for Noah, and appears to him in person, attracted by his sacrifice. Furthermore, in the legends of the patriarchs the real actors are always men; if the divinity appears, it is regarded as an exception. But in the primitive legends



the divinity is the leading actor (as in the creation), or at least among those chiefly concerned (as in the story of Paradise, of the union of men and of angels, of the Deluge and the Tower of Babel). This distinction is, to be sure, only relative, for some of the legends of the Patriarchs (notably those connected with Hebron and Pen-uel) represent the divinity as appearing in the same way; on the other hand, the story of Cain and Abel and that of the cursing of Canaan, in which human beings are the chief actors, are among the primitive legends. However, the distinction applies on the whole to the two groups. This prominence of the action of the divinity in the primitive legends indicates that these have a more decidedly "mythical" character: that they are faded myths.

#### FADED MYTHS.

"Myths"—let no one shrink from the word—are stories of the gods, in contradistinction to the legends in which the actors are men. Stories of the gods are in all nations the oldest narratives; the legend as a literary variety has its origin in myths. Accordingly, when we find that these primitive legends are akin to myths, we must infer that they have come down to us in comparatively ancient form. They come from a period of Israel's history when the childlike belief of the people had not yet fully arrived at the conception of a divinity whose operations are shrouded in a mystery. On the other hand, these original myths have reached us in comparatively faded colors. This we can perceive in the narratives themselves, where we are able in some points to reconstruct an older form of the story than the one transmitted to us: notably Genesis vi. 1-4 is nothing but a torso.

We are led to similar conclusions when we compare the primitive legends with the allusions to the myths which we find in the poets and prophets of the Old Testament and the later apocalyptic writers;<sup>1</sup> as, for instance, the myths of Jahveh's combat with Rahab or Leviathan, of the fall of Helal, and so on. The same result very clearly follows a comparison of the primitive legends of Genesis with the myths of the Orient, especially of the biblical story of the creation and the Deluge with the Babylonian versions of the same subjects. The colossal outlines, the peculiarly brilliant colors which characterise these myths in the original form are lost in a measure in the biblical legends of the beginnings of things. The equivalence of the divine beings and the objects or realms of nature, the combat of the gods among one another, the birth of the

<sup>1</sup> Compare the material gathered in my work *Creation and Chaos*, 1895.

gods, are some of the features which have disappeared in the version of Genesis.

#### MONOTHEISM HOSTILE TO MYTHS.

In all this we can see the essential character of the religion of Israel. The characteristic trait of the religion of Jahweh is unfavorable to myths. For this religion from its very beginning tends toward monotheism. But for a story of the gods at least two gods are essential. Therefore the Israel which we observe in the Old Testament could not tolerate genuine and unmodified myths, at least not in prose. The poet was excused for occasional allusions to myths. Hence in poetry we find preserved traces of a point of view older than that of the tradition of Genesis, frankly familiar with myths. But the primitive legends preserved to us are all dominated by this unspoken aversion to mythology. The monotheism of Israel tolerates only such myths as represent God as acting alone, as in the story of the creation, and even then there is no real "story," where action and counter-action give rise to a new situation or action. Or at the most, the story deals with action between God and men, where, however, men are too weak in the true Israelitish conception to be worthy rivals of God, to produce in their clash with God a real epic action; as soon as God intervenes all is decided. If in such a case a "story" is to be told, men must perform their part first. This is the method of the legends of Paradise and of the Tower of Babel. With the story of the Deluge it is different, God taking part from the beginning; but as a result of this the continued interest of the hearer is not maintained. Furthermore it should be noted that the legends preserved to us with mythical elements are much less numerous than the legends of the patriarchs in which this element is absent. This fact also may fairly be regarded as a result of the Israelitish aversion to mythology.

#### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MYTHS.

It is not proposed to present here a theory of the origin and primitive significance of myths. Only a few observations may be permitted. A certain series of myths may be interpreted on the assumption that some natural phenomenon that is wont to occur frequently or regularly in the actual world has furnished the colors for the painting of one similar but gigantic phenomenon in primitive times. Thus the creation of the world is painted as Spring on

a grand scale, and the overflows of the rivers of Mesopotamia gave rise to the story of the Deluge.

Many myths attempt to answer questions being intended to give instruction. This is the case with the primitive legends of Genesis: the story of creation raises the question, Whence come heaven and earth? and at the same time, Why is the Sabbath sacred? The story of Paradise treats the question, Whence are man's reason and his mortality? and along with this, Whence are man's body and mind? Whence his language? Whence the love of the sexes? Whence does it come that woman brings forth with so much pain, that man must till the stubborn field, that the serpent goes upon its belly, and so on? The legend of Babel asks the question, Whence is the variety of nations in language and location? The answers to these questions constitute the real content of the respective legends. In the case of the legend of the Deluge this is different, but there is an ætiological, or explanatory, feature at the close: Why is there never such a flood again? And what is the meaning of the rainbow?

All these questions interest not Israel alone, but the whole world. We know that ancient Israel in general was not inclined to philosophic speculation, but that it always took most interest in immediate and Israelitish affairs. But here is a place in which the ancient race is able to treat universal human problems, the profoundest questions of mankind. This they have done in unique fashion in the stories of the creation and of Eden: these are the beginnings of theology and of philosophy. It is no wonder that especial emphasis has been laid upon these features, and that every generation, since Genesis has been known, has read into it its own deepest thoughts.

#### THE LEGENDS OF THE PATRIARCHS.

The primitive legends are followed in Genesis by the legends of the patriarchs. The distinctive feature of these legends is that they tell of the progenitors of races, especially of Israel. At the foundation of these legends lies the theory that all races, Israel included, have come in each case from the family of a single ancestor, which gradually expanded. This theory is not supported by observed facts, for no human eye observes the origin of races; on the contrary, it is the remnant of a primitive poetic conception of tribal life.

In earliest times the individual man counts for little; there is much more interest in the destinies of the race: the tribe, the na-

tion, are regarded as real entities much more than at the present day. Thus it comes that the destinies of the race are regarded as being the destinies of a person: the race sighs, triumphs, is dejected, rebels, dies, comes to life again, etc. Thus too the relations of races are regarded as the relations of individuals: two races, it is said, are brothers, i. e., are closely related and equal; if one of them is regarded as richer, stronger, or nobler, it is said to be the firstborn brother, or it comes of a better mother, while the other is younger, or comes of a concubine. Israel being divided into twelve tribes, we are told that the tribal ancestor of Israel had twelve sons. Some of these tribes having a closer union with one another, they are said to come from one mother. The relation of mother and son exists between Hagar and Ishmael; the more distant relation of uncle and nephew between Abraham and Lot.

Originally these persons were the tribes themselves. This method of expression is still entirely current later in the pathetic poetry of the prophets: Edom builds his nest on high, Moab dies to the sound of trumpets, Asshur falls upon Israel like a lion upon his prey, Jerusalem and Samaria are two unchaste sisters, Edom has treated his brother Israel with enmity, etc. Such personifications must have been very familiar to the earliest ages. But as the world became more prosaic and these expressions were no longer understood in the simple narrative, the question was asked, who these persons, Jacob, Juda, Simeon, really were, and the answer given that they were the patriarchs and the later races and tribes their sons; an answer which seems to be a matter of course, since it was customary to refer to the individual Israelites and Ammonites as "Sons of Israel" and "Sons of Ammon."

We are not putting a new meaning into the legends which treat of such race-individuals, when we regard their heroes, Ishmael, Jacob, Esau, and others, as tribes and try to interpret the stories about them as tribal events; we are simply getting at their meaning as it was understood in primitive times in Israel.

On the other hand, we must go about this attempt with caution, for we must reckon with the possibility that some of these figures do not originally represent tribes, but only came to be regarded as patriarchs in a later time, and further, after the figures of the patriarchs had once become established as the heroes of epic legends, that legends of other sorts and wanting the basis of tribal history became attached to these. We may certainly regard as personifications of tribes those figures whose names are known to us in other connexions as names of tribes; such are notably, Ish-

mael, Ammon, Moab, the twelve tribes and their divisions. Sometimes it is perfectly evident from the narratives themselves that we have to do with tribes, as in the case of Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Ham and Japhet. Accordingly, many of the narratives treating such ancestors are originally the experiences of races or tribes.

Once in ancient times, so we may assume, there were conflicts over wells between the citizens of Gerar and the neighboring Bedouins; ending in a compromise at Beersheba. The legend depicts these affairs as a war and a treaty between Abimelech, king of Gerar, and the patriarchs called in the legend Abraham or Isaac. (21, 22 ff., 26).

Dinah, the daughter of Jacob, is seduced by Shechem, and in punishment Shechem is treacherously assaulted by Dinah's brothers; Jacob, however, abjures the brothers and curses them. The history at the bottom of this is probably as follows: Dinah, an Israelitish family, is overpowered by the Canaanitish city of Shechem and then treacherously avenged by Simeon and Levi, the most closely related tribes, but the other tribes of Israel renounce them and allow the two tribes to be destroyed.

The legend of Tamar, also, depicts in part early relations in the tribe of Judah: Judah allied itself with Canaanites, in the legend Hirah of Adullam and Judah's wife, Bathshua; a number of Judæan-Canaanitish tribes (Er and Onan) perished early; finally two new tribes arose (Perez and Zerah). In the Esau-Jacob legend also there are quite evidently historical reminiscences: Esau and Jacob are brother tribes, Esau a tribe of hunters, Jacob a tribe of shepherds; Esau is the elder, but by sale or fraud he loses his birth-right, that is, the older and better known tribe of Esau was compelled to give way to the later and originally weaker tribe of Jacob and has now the poorer land.

A similar rivalry is assumed by the legend between the Judæan tribes of Perez and Zerah and between Ephraim and Manasseh. Reuben, the first-born among the Israelitish tribes, loses his birth-right on account of sin: the tribe of Reuben, which was the leading tribe in the earliest times, afterwards forfeited this position. Cain, the husbandman, slew his brother Abel, the herdsman, but was compelled to leave the land which they had before occupied in common. Shem, Japhet and Canaan are originally brothers; but Japhet has now a much more extensive territory than the others, and Canaan is the servant of both.

We hear of many migrations. From the north Abraham migrates to Canaan, after him Rebecca, to marry Isaac, and finally

comes Jacob; the initial point of the migration is given as Ur-Kasdim and Haran the city of Nahor (xxiv. 10). In the legend of Joseph there is described a migration of Israeilitish tribes to Egypt; the account of the trip of Abraham to Egypt has a similar basis.

Now it is in the nature of legend that we do not catch sight of these old occurrences clearly by its means, but only as through a mist. Legend has woven a poetic veil about the historical memories and hidden their outlines. In most cases the time of the event is not to be derived from the legend itself; often even the place is not to be distinguished, and sometimes not even the personality of the actor. Who can tell what race it was that came to Canaan from Aram-Naharajim? Where the real home of Jacob and Esau was, of Cain and Abel, of Shem and Japhet, the legend has forgotten. What tribes parted at Bethel, in case there is any historical basis to the legend of the separation of Lot and Abraham? And so, although the things of the past are hidden rather than revealed in these legends, he would be a barbarian who would despise them on this account, for often they are more valuable than would be prosaic reports of actual occurrences. For instance, if we had good historical data regarding Ishmael we should not value them highly, for this "wild ass" rendered little service to mankind; but as it is, touched by the hand of poetry, he is immortal.

In these legends the clearest matter is the character of races: here is Esau, the huntsman of the steppes, living with little reflexion from hand to mouth, forgetful, magnanimous, brave, and hairy as a goat; and there is Jacob the herdsman, a smooth man, more cunning and accustomed to look into the future. His uncle Laban is the type of the Aramæan, avaricious and deceitful, but to outward appearances an excellent and upright man, never at loss for an excuse. A more noble figure is Abraham, hospitable, peaceful, a model of piety.

Moreover it is clear to us in many cases in what spirit the incidents are regarded: we perceive most easily how the legend despises the unchastity of Canaan, how it mocks at Esau and Laban, how it rejoices that Lot, with all his avarice, obtained after all the worse land, etc.

#### ANTIQUITY OF THE LEGENDS.

These legends have not hitherto received full justice, even when it has been recognised that they are legends. Even the most superficial reader can distinguish for himself the chief original sources in Genesis from which the present redaction was con-



structed, now commonly called the writings of the Elohist, of the Yahvist, and of the Priestly Code. Since the sources of the Elohist and the Jahvist were written down in the ninth or eighth century B. C. some commentators have been disposed to think that the legends themselves originated in the main in the age of the Israelitish kingdom and furnished therefore no revelations of primitive history. But in reality these legends are much older. The tribal and race names which they preserve are almost all forgotten in other records: we know nothing of Shem, Ham, and Japhet, of Abel and Cain, of Esau and Jacob, nothing of Hagar and scarcely anything of Ishmael, from the historical records of Israel. Hence we must conclude that these races all belong to prehistoric times. This is particularly evident in the case of Jacob and Esau, who were, to be sure, identified later with Israel and Edom. But this very lapping of names, as well as many features of the legend which are not applicable to Israel and Edom, as, for instance, the treaties between the city of Gerar and the sons of Abraham (or Isaac) concerning the possession of certain wells, especially that of Beersheba, show us that the old narrative originally had in mind entirely different races; in the legend Jacob is not disposed to war; in history Israel conquered Edom in war; in the legend Esau is stupid, in history he is famous for his wisdom.

Another proof of the age of these tribal legends may be found in the history of the legend in Israel. The legends in the Book of Judges have ceased to speak of tribes as persons (excepting Judges i.), but they tell of heroes, of individual leaders of the tribes. The latest story that preserves the old style and to which an historical date can be assigned is the legend of the capture of Shechem, the Dinah-legend of Genesis. Sometime in the earlier portion of the period of Judges, then, this naïve style of narrative disappeared so far as we can ascertain; from that time on such narratives are merely transmitted, but no longer constructed new.

#### CLASSIFICATION OF LEGENDS.

We call these legends "historical" when they reflect historical occurrences, "ethnographic" when they contain chiefly descriptions of race and tribal relations. Thus we characterise the legend of the treaty of Beersheba and the various legends of migrations as "historical," but those of Jacob and Esau as "ethnographic."



## ÆTIOLOGICAL LEGENDS.

Alongside these narratives of Genesis are also "ætiological" legends, that is, those that are written for a purpose, or to explain something. There is no end of the questions which interest a primitive people. The instinct for asking questions is innate in man: he wants to know of the origin of things. The child looks into the world with wide eyes and asks, Why? The answer which the child gives itself and with which it is for the time satisfied, is perhaps very childish, and hence incorrect, and yet, if it is a bright child the answer is interesting and touching even for the grown man. In the same way a primitive people asks similar questions and answers them as best it can. These questions are usually the same that we ourselves are asking and trying to answer in our scientific researches. Hence what we find in these legends are the beginnings of human science, only humble beginnings of course, and yet venerable to us because they are beginnings, and at the same time peculiarly attractive and touching, for in these answers ancient Israel has uttered its most intimate feelings, clothing them in a bright garb of poetry. Some of these questions are the following:

## ETHNOLOGICAL LEGENDS.

There is a desire to know the reasons for the relations of tribes. Why is Canaan the servant of his brethren? Why has Japhet such an extended territory? Why do the children of Lot dwell in the inhospitable East? How does it come that Reuben has lost his birthright? Why must Cain wander about a restless fugitive? Why is sevenfold vengeance proclaimed against the slayer of Cain? Why is Gilead the border between Israel and the Aramæans? Why does Beersheba belong to us and not to the people of Gerar? Why is Shechem in possession of Joseph? Why have we a right to the holy places at Shechem and Machpela? Why has Ishmael become a Bedouin people with just this territory and this God? How does it come that the Egyptian peasants have to bear the heavy tax of the fifth, while the fields of the priests are exempt? And with especial frequency the question was asked, How does Israel come to have this glorious land of Canaan?

The legends tell in many variations how it came about that the patriarchs received this particular land: God gave it to Abraham because of his obedience; when on the occasion of the sep-

aration at Bethel Lot chose the East, the West fell to Abraham; Jacob obtained the blessing of the better country from Isaac by a deception; God promised it to Jacob at Bethel, and so on.

Such ethnological legends, which tell a fictitious story in order to explain tribal relations, are of course very difficult to distinguish from historical legends which contain the remnant of a tradition of some actual event. Very commonly ethnological and ethnographic features are combined in the same legend: the relations underlying the story are historical, but the way in which they are explained is poetic.

The usual nature of the answer given to these questions by our legends is that the present relations are due to some transaction of the patriarchs: the tribal ancestor bought the holy place, and accordingly it belongs to us, his heirs; the ancestors of Israel and Aram established Gilead as their mutual boundary; Cain's ancestor was condemned to perpetual wandering by the word of God, and so on. A favorite way is to find the explanation in a miraculous utterance of God or some of the patriarchs, and the legend has to tell how this miraculous utterance came to be made in olden times. And this sort of explanation was regarded as completely satisfactory, so that there came to be later a distinct literary variety of "charm" or "blessing."<sup>1</sup>

Childish as these explanations now seem to us, and impossible as it was for the men of old to find out the true reasons of such things, yet we must not overlook the profundity of many of these poetic legends: they are all based on the assumption that the tribal and national relations of that day were not chance, but that they were all the results of events of the primitive world, that they were in a way "predestined." In these legends we have the first rudiments of a philosophy of history.

#### ETYMOLOGICAL LEGENDS.

Along with the above we find etymological legends or features of legends, as it were, beginnings of the science of language. Ancient Israel spent much thought upon the origin and the real meaning of the names of races, mountains, wells, sanctuaries, and cities. To them names were not so unimportant as to us, for they were convinced that names were somehow closely related to the things. It was quite impossible in many cases for the ancient people to give the correct explanation, for names were with Israel as with other nations among the most ancient possessions of the people, coming

<sup>1</sup>Cp. Genesis xlix.

down from extinct races or from faraway stages of the national language. Many of our current names such as Rhine, Moselle, Neckar, Harz, Berlin, London, Thames, Seine, etc. are equally unintelligible to those not trained in philology. It is probable that the very fact of the oddity and unintelligibility of these names attracted the attention of the ancient race. Early Israel as a matter of course explains such names without any scientific spirit and wholly on the basis of the language as it stood. It identifies the old name with a modern one which sounds more or less like it, and proceeds to tell a little story explaining why this particular word was uttered under these circumstances and was adopted as the name. We too have our popular etymologies. How many there are who believe that the noble river which runs down between New Hampshire and Vermont and across Massachusetts and Connecticut is so named because it "connects" the first two and "cuts" the latter two states! Manhattan Island was named from the exclamation of a savage who was struck by the size of a Dutch hat worn by an early burgher, "Man hat on!" Many are the stories told to explain why a famous London highway is called "Rotten Row" (*Route en roi*).

The Lombards, we are told by another legend, were originally called Winili. But on an occasion the women of the tribe put on beards as a disguise, and Wodan looking out of his window in the morning exclaimed, "What are those 'long beards' (Lango-barden)?" Grimm, *German Legends*, No. 390.

The famous Thuringian castle, the Wartburg, is said to have derived its name from the fact that the landgrave, having strayed thither during a hunt, exclaimed, "*Wart, Berg, du sollst mir eine Burg werden*" (Wait, mountain, thou shalt become my fortress).

Similar legends are numerous in Genesis and in later works. The city of Babel is named from the fact that God there confused human tongues (*balal*), xi. 9; Jacob is interpreted as "heelholder" because at birth he held his brother, whom he robbed of the birth-right, by the heel (xxv. 26); Zoar means "trifle," because Lot said appealingly, "It is only a trifle" (xix. 20, 22); Beersheba is "the well of seven," because Abraham there gave Abimelech seven lambs (xxi. 28 ff.); Isaac (*Yishak*) is said to have his name from the fact that his mother laughed (*sahak*) when his birth was foretold to her (xviii. 12), and so forth.

In order to realise the utter naïveté of most of these interpretations, consider that the Hebrew legend calmly explains the Babylonian name Babel from the Hebrew vocabulary, and that the wri-

ters are often satisfied with merely approximate similarities of sounds: for instance Cain (more exactly *Kayin*) from *kaniti*, "I have murdered" (iv. 1), Reuben from *rah beonyi*, "he hath regarded my misery" (xxix. 32), etc. Every student of Hebrew knows that these are not satisfactory etymologies. Investigators have not always fully perceived the naïve character of this theory of etymology, but have allowed themselves to be misled into patching up some very unsatisfactory etymologies with modern appliances. In one case many theologians even are wont to declare one of these explanations, a very ingenious one indeed (Jahveh = "I am that I am," Ex. iii. 14) as an established etymology. But etymologies are not acquired by revelation. The etymological legends are especially valuable to us because they are especially clear illustrations of the ætiological variety of legend.

#### CEREMONIAL LEGENDS.

More important than these etymological legends are those whose purpose is to explain the regulations of religious ceremonies. Such ceremonial regulations play a great part in the life of primitive races, but many of these customs have become in part or altogether unintelligible to the one who observes them in the earliest times of which we have authentic record. For customs are far more persistent than opinions, and religious customs are particularly conservative. And even we, whose religious service has undergone a vigorous purging in the Reformation and again at the hands of rationalism, see and hear in our churches many things which we understand only in part or not at all.

Ancient Israel reflected deeply upon the origin of these religious practices. And if the grown people become too blunted by custom to be able to perceive the strange and unintelligible features of the custom, they are roused from their indifference by the questions of the children. When the children see their father perform all sorts of curious customs during the Feast of the Passover, they will ask—thus it is expressly told, Ex. xii. 26; xiii. 14—What does this mean? and then the story of the Passover is to be told them. A similar direction is given with relation to the twelve stones in the Jordan (Josh. iv. 6), which the father is to explain to the children as memorials of the passage of the Jordan. In these examples, then, we see clearly how such a legend is the answer to a question. Similarly, questions are asked with regard to the origin of circumcision, and of the Sabbath. Why do we not eat the muscle of the thigh? Why do they anoint the holy stone of Bethel

and deliver the tithes there? Why do we not sacrifice a child at Jeruel as Jahveh commands, but in its stead a ram (Gen. xxii.)? Why do our people "limp," that is, perform a certain dance, at the festival in Penuel (xxxii. 32)?

No Israelite could have given the real reason for all these things, for they were too old. But to relieve this embarrassment myth and legend step in. They tell a story and explain the sacred custom: long ago an event occurred from which this ceremony very naturally sprang, and we perform the ceremony representing the event in commemoration of it. But this story that explains the custom is always laid in primitive times. Thus the ancient race gives the entirely correct impression that the customs of their religious service originated in the immemorial past: the trees of Shechem and Hebron are older than Abraham! We perform the rite of circumcision in memory of Moses, whose firstborn was circumcised as a redemption for Moses whose blood God demanded (Ex. iv. 24 ff.). We rest on the seventh day because God at the creation of the world rested on the seventh day (a myth, because God himself is the actor in it). The muscle of the thigh is sacred to us because God struck Jacob on this muscle while wrestling with him at Penuel (xxxii. 33). The stone at Bethel was first anointed by Jacob because it was his pillow in the night when God appeared to him (xxviii. 11 ff.). At Jeruel—this is the name of the scene of the sacrifice of Isaac, xxii. 1-19 (cf. the *Commentary*, p. 218 ff.)—God at first demanded of Abraham his child, but afterward accepted a ram. We "limp" at Penuel in imitation of Jacob, who limped there when his hip was lamed in the wrestling with God (xxxii. 32). And so on.

In all this matter we are constantly hearing of certain definite places, such as Bethel, Penuel, Shechem, Beersheba, Lacha-roi, Jeruel, etc., and of the trees, wells, and stone monuments at these places. These are the primitive sanctuaries of the tribes and families of Israel. Primitive times felt that there was some immediate manifestation of the nature of the divinity in these monuments, but a later time which no longer regarded the connexion as so clear and so self-evident, raised the question, Why is this particular place and this sacred memorial so especially sacred? The regular answer to this question was, Because in this place the divinity appeared to our ancestor. In commemoration of this theophany we worship God in this place. Now in the history of religion it is of great significance that the ceremonial legend comes from a time when religious feeling no longer perceived as self-evident the di-

vinity of the locality and the natural monument and had forgotten the significance of the sacred ceremony. Accordingly the legend has to supply an explanation of how it came about that the God and the tribal ancestor met in this particular place.

Abraham happened to be sitting under the tree in the noonday heat just as the men appeared to him, and for this reason the tree is sacred (xix. 1 ff). The well in the desert, Lacha-roi, became the sanctuary of Ishmael because his mother in her flight into the desert met at this well the God who comforted her (xvi. 7 ff). Jacob happened to be passing the night in a certain place and resting his head upon a stone when he saw the heavenly ladder; therefore this stone is our sanctuary (xxviii. 10 ff). Moses chanced to come with his flocks to the holy mountain and the thornbush (Ex. iii. 1 ff). Probably every one of the greater sanctuaries of Israel had some similar legend of its origin.

We can easily imagine that any such legend of a sanctuary was originally told on the occasion of the festival concerned and on the original spot, just as the Feast of the Passover and the legend of the exodus, the feast of Purim and the legend of Esther, the Babylonian Easter festival and the Babylonian hymn of the creation, belong together, and as with us Christmas and Easter are not to be thought of without their stories. These ceremonial legends are so valuable to us because we discover from them what were the sacred places and customs of Israel and at the same time they give us a very vivid realisation of ancient religious feeling: they are our chief sources of information regarding the oldest religion of Israel. Genesis is full of them, and but few are found in the later books. Almost everywhere in Genesis where a certain place is named, and at least wherever God appears at a definite place, it is based on such a legend. In these legends we have the beginning of the history of religion.

#### GEOLOGICAL AND OTHER LEGENDS.

Aside from the foregoing we may distinguish a number of other sorts of legends, of which at least the geological deserves mention. Such geological legends undertake to explain the origin of a locality. Whence comes the Dead Sea with its dreadful desert? The region was cursed by God on account of the terrible sin of its inhabitants. Whence comes the pillar of salt yonder with its resemblance to a woman? That is a woman, Lot's wife, turned into a pillar of salt in punishment for attempting to spy out the mystery of God (xix. 26). But whence does it come that the bit of territory



about Zoar is an exception to the general desolation? Because Jahveh spared it as a refuge for Lot (xix. 17-22).

All these ætiological legends, then, are remote from the standards of the modern sciences to which they correspond; we regard them with the emotion with which a man looks back upon his childhood. But even for our science they have a great value, for they furnish us in their descriptions or implications of definite conditions the most important material for the knowledge of the ancient world.

#### MIXED LEGENDS.

Very frequently various types of legend are combined in one. The flight of Hagar (xvi.) is to be called ethnographic because it depicts the life of Ishmael; ethnologic, because it undertakes to explain these conditions; in one feature it is allied to the ceremonial legends, its explanation of the sacredness of Lacha-roi; furthermore it has etymological elements in its interpretation of the names Lacha-roi and Ishmael.—The legend of Paradise treats all at once a number of questions.—The legend of Bethel explains at once the worship at Bethel and the name of the place.—The legends of Beersheba (xxi., xxii. ff., xxvi.) contain remnants of history, telling of a tribal treaty established there, and at the same time certain religious features, as the explanation of the sanctity of the place, and finally some etymological elements.—The legend of Penuel explains the sanctity of the place, the ceremony of limping, and the names Penuel and Israel. And so on. Etymological elements, it may be noted, never appear alone in Genesis, but always in connexion with other features.

#### ORIGIN OF THE LEGENDS.

In many cases the origin of the legends will have been revealed with what has already been considered. Thus in most etymological features it can be shown quite clearly that those features in the legend which explain the name were invented for this very purpose. The incident of Abraham's giving Abimelech seven (sheba) lambs at Beersheba (xxi., 28 ff.) was surely invented to explain this name; also the laughing (sahak) of Isaac's mother (xviii. 12-15), etc. The narrative of Judah, Er, Onan (xxxviii.) and the others is plainly nothing but a history of the Israelite families, just as the legend of Dinah (xxxiv.) is merely a reflexion of the attack upon Shechem. But on the other hand the investigator is to be warned not to be too quick to jump at the conclusion that he always has



the origin of the legend in this oldest interpretation attainable by us; on the contrary, we have to reckon with the possibility that the features of the story which are intelligible to us were injected into it later, and that the legend itself is older than any meaning we can see in it.

Finally, there are legends which cannot be classified under any of the heads given above. Of such are large portions of the legend of Joseph; also the chief feature of the story of Jacob and Laban, the deceits and tricks, cannot be understood from the standpoint of either history or ætiology.

The preceding classification of legends is based of course upon the chief or dominant features. Along with these go the purely ornamental or æsthetic features twining about the others like vines over their trellises. The art of these legends is revealed especially in this portrayal of the subject matter given.