

# Chapter 7

## The Elohist Epic

(ca 750-720 BCE)

My servant Moses is entrusted with all my house.  
With him I speak face to face - clearly and not in riddles.  
Numbers 12.

Refugees from Israel poured into Judah in large numbers during the years of instability before and after the Assyrian invasion of the northern country in 722 BCE. All classes and occupations moved south. So great was the movement that only a few years after the Assyrian invasion of the north, Jerusalem's population reached 25,000 and Judah as a whole 100,000 or thereabouts. Whilst Judah struggled to absorb this wave of migration, Israel was left almost bereft of its more able citizens. Just a few years after the occupation, according to a report now found in Kings, there was no priest to be found in the north and one had to be extracted from exile and returned there.<sup>1</sup> It is highly likely that a version of the Northern (or Elohist) Epic would have been brought into Judah by this immigrant movement, whether or not the Judean intelligentsia were already aware of the work. Motives for the writing of the Northern Epic could have existed: -

- In Ahab's time; as a response to the threat from Baalism.
- In Jehu's time; as part of the religious involvement in the revolution that brought Jehu to power;
- In Jeroboam II's time; in parallel with the emergence of prophetic writing, stimulated by the expansion of literacy levels.
- Shortly after the fall of Israel in an effort to preserve the northern traditions. The bitter element in the stories concerning Aaron may have been a response to the refusal of the Aaronite temple priesthood to allow the northern priests to sacrifice there.

The Hebrew used is similar to that found in the dateable works of Amos, Micah and Isaiah. The stories concerning Jacob and Laban are generally accepted as being metaphors for the political history of Israel and Aram-Damascus. In these stories Israel is represented by Jacob and Aram-Damascus by Laban, whose name is preserved to this day in the country 'Lebanon'. The story of Jacob's servitude to Laban, which occurs in this text and which ends with the two men making a treaty and setting up a boundary stone between their lands, is generally accepted to be a metaphor for Israel's submission to Aram-Damascus from 825 to about 785 BCE, after which the two countries established a co-operative relationship with each other.

The story of Hagar and Ishmael was probably a reference to the Arabian tribes of these names. The tribe of Ishmael was known to the Assyrians and was first referred to in a text from 738 BCE. It appears that the Ishmaelites and their related tribes controlled the spice route from central Syria south through the desert fringes to the Arabian escarpment. References to Gerar and Sheba, towns that came to prominence in the 8<sup>th</sup> century support a date after 775 BCE. There is also a reference to Kadesh-Barnea which would push the probable date forward to at least the late 8<sup>th</sup> century if it was part of the original text, but it looks rather as if it may be a later editorial insertion, and thus is not conclusive. The text includes a story involving the prophet Balaam. Texts relating to this prophet have been found in Tell Deir Alla which can be dated to the period 840 -760 BCE. These texts represent the earliest known writing in a Western Semitic dialect other than monumental inscriptions.

The second half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, but before the destruction of Israel would seem to be the most likely time for the Elohist's work. There is a bitterness in the Aaron stories in which he is portrayed as sacrificing to the golden calf. This language seems to suggest a current hurt rather than an ancient enmity. If this is true, then a date shortly approaching that of the fall of the Israel in 722 would seem likely - for this is when elements of the northern priesthood, refugees from impending disaster, would significantly have been refused employment by Aaron's descendants as priests in the Jerusalem temple.<sup>2</sup> If Hosea was

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Kings 17:28

<sup>2</sup> In incorporating this story, the author took a real event from his own history, the setting up of golden calves at the royal shrines of Dan and Bethel, and re-applied it as an act of blasphemy committed by

quoting from this Epic text when he wrote “‘I am’ is not yours”, then a date somewhat earlier would be required. It is notable that the text contains no references to the catastrophic events of 722.

### The author

Since the Elohist’s versions of the stories of the Patriarchs all have northern heroes, the author was almost certainly an Israelite<sup>3</sup>. In the literature both he and his text are given the letter E; E for Elohist or Ephraim – the father of the northern tribes. The Elohist might have been a disciple of a prophet – some even suggest Elijah. The Elohist knew about the quails and the manna of Sinai. and Elijah, it was believed, went to Horeb to escape from Jezebel. If so, he would have known the desert. However, the arguments concerning the date do not fit this alternative very well, nor does the incorporation of so much law.

The Elohist’s interest in the covenants with God and with the law in general suggests that it is more likely that he was a priest than a prophet, although the absence of any discussion about the rituals and laws of sacrifice suggest that he did not officiate at any of the major shrines.

His focus on the life of Moses and contempt for Aaron may indicate that he considered himself to be a descendant of Moses. In a crucial passage, he accused Aaron, at the very time that Moses was receiving the divine commandments, of creating a god in the form of a single golden calf. He stated that when Aaron’s team presented the calf to the people, they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who led you out of the land of Egypt”. The use of the plural here appears odd, until it is realised that this was a quotation. He was accusing Aaron, not only of making a god out of a molten image, not only of doing so at the time that his brother Moses was receiving the commandments from the one true God, but also of committing the same sin as the commissioner of the golden calves at Dan and Bethel, who may well have been assumed to have dedicated these calves with the words quoted. The Elohist was no admirer of either the Southern Aaronites or the Northern Monarchy.

The tablets of stone on which the Commandments were written were, according to the Elohist, destroyed and never replaced. In so doing, he denied the existence of one of the two major relics held by the Aaronite priesthood in the Jerusalem temple. The other relic, the Ark of the Covenant, was not mentioned by the Elohist. Instead he gave importance to the Tent of Meeting. The importance of the Tent for E was that it was the place where Moses communicated with the deity<sup>4</sup>. Both the Tent and the Ark were initially established at Shiloh, but the Ark was lost when the Philistines overwhelmed the Israelites and captured the Ark. The Tent, however, may not have been captured and could have remained in the hands of the Shiloh priesthood – at least for a while<sup>5</sup>. The Elohist’s treatment of these crucial symbols of his faith further suggests that he may have been a descendant of the Shiloh priesthood. The argument would be even stronger if it could be shown that the Priests of Shiloh were also descendants of Moses, but in fact the evidence, such as it is, points to them being descendants of Aaron.<sup>6</sup> However it is fairly clear that Aaronites dominated much of the editing of the Pentateuch and that fact may be the reason why the genealogies so often trace back to Aaron.

Friedman points to an interesting biblical story that could give an additional reason for the bitterness of the Shiloh priesthood towards the established religious and political powers. It seems that the priests of Shiloh moved to Nob after the Philistine destruction of their shrine. At Nob, all of them except Abiathar were killed by Saul’s men because Saul thought they were in league with David<sup>7</sup>. When David moved the ark to Jerusalem, he appointed two priests; Zadok, a descendant of Aaron and a

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Aaron - which, if true, should have disqualified the sons of Aaron from exclusive rights to the priesthood in Jerusalem.

<sup>3</sup> By contrast, the J text has southern heroes. See the chapter on the Southern (Yahwist) Epic.

<sup>4</sup> The Tent, or Tabernacle, is also of importance to P, but for a different reason. There it is important because the only place that worship and sacrifice may take place is in front of the Tabernacle.

<sup>5</sup> According to the Chronicler’s version of the David tradition the tent turned up at Gibeon some time later. Whilst David created a new tent for the Ark, he allegedly sent his priests to sacrifice before the tabernacle at Gibeon (I Chron 16:39-40) in accordance with the requirements of Leviticus 17. (Both texts created by members of the Aaronite priesthood some considerable time after the relevant events).

<sup>6</sup> Eli, the priest in Shiloh in Samuel’s time, cannot be shown to be a descendant of Moses. Josephus has Eli as a descendant of Ithamar, a son of Aaron (Antiquities 5:11:5 (361)) whilst the second book of Esdras traces his ancestry back to Eleazar, another son of Aaron (2 Esdras 1:2).

<sup>7</sup> 1 Sam 22:6-23. The principal priest at Nob was Ahimelech, the great grandson of Eli the priest at Shiloh before whom Samuel served. (I Samuel 14:3). The shrine at Shiloh was destroyed around 1025 by the Philistines and never rebuilt. Jeremiah refers to the destroyed shrine as evidence of the way Yahweh will react when his people betray him. (Jeremiah 7:12)

southerner, and Abiathar who had remained with David all through the years of struggle. In the succession battle that occurred as David's reign came to an end, Abiathar picked the wrong side and, as a result, was banished to Anathoth (1 Kings 2:26), thereby leaving the Jerusalem priesthood entirely in the hands of the southern Zadokites. The story is, however, entwined with the David legend and the Solomon myth and therefore cannot be regarded as historically sound. Nevertheless, it does seem that, for whatever reason, the surviving descendants of the Shiloh priesthood were never able to sacrifice in Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup>

The Shiloh priesthood would therefore have opposed both the Aaronites in Jerusalem and the priesthood at Dan, whose supposed descent from Moses is questionable<sup>9</sup>, and Bethel, who were appointed by the monarchy and may not even have been Levites. The Shiloh priesthood would have supported reserving the priesthood to the Levites (as opposed to the upstarts at Bethel) but would not have supported the special status claimed by the Aaronite priests in Jerusalem. They were not admirers of the Davidic monarch who allegedly banished their leader from Jerusalem, nor of the Israelite monarchy who appointed their own priests at Bethel. These attitudes prevail in E's text.

Moses is the subject of more than half of the text; he is the key to their history. In this text, Aaron is a blasphemer; the priesthood is reserved for Levites as a whole; there are no special roles reserved for Aaronites, and there is no mention of the Ark.

Whilst there is a general consensus that the author was a priest of Israel. Some would go further and argue, as Friedman does, that the author considered himself to be a descendant of Moses and associated with the Shiloh tradition.

### The Elohist text

In the earlier chapter on the Epic Authors, the key characteristics of the Elohist (E) were stated to be that:

- 'Elohim' was the principal divine name used –until 'Yahweh' was revealed to Moses<sup>10</sup>
- The Holy Mountain was named Horeb, not Sinai.
- Moses' father-in-law was called Jethro, not Reuel.
- The heroes had names associated with northern Tribes.
- The author used a plain unadorned style.
- The author avoided euphemisms
- The author wrote simply of the 'people', not of the 'congregation'.
- The text used *sar* for commander or chief and the avoided *nasi* – prince.
- The author wrote stand-alone episodes.
- The author believed that Moses was the only person to whom God spoke directly.
- The author believed that God communicated with all others in dreams and visions.
- Aaron was not mentioned unless absolutely essential for the story.
- The author had little interest in romance, family relationships, amusing word-play and advancing the plot through speech – all J characteristics.
- The author had little in priestly matters or a bureaucratic concern with lists, dates and ages – all P characteristics.

Other markers will be observed in the context of the text that contains them and in the footnotes.

The Epic may have begun with the covenant with Abraham, but it certainly ended with the death of Moses. It comprised an introductory section containing tales of the patriarchs and then focused on the life of Moses from his calling on the Holy Mountain to his death on the far side of Jordan, incorporating his leadership of the Exodus, his actions on and around the Holy Mountain and his leadership of the people through the wilderness.

### Introduction: The Three Patriarchs

The text opened with three short groups of stories; one for each of the patriarchs Abraham, Jacob and Joseph. No attempt was made to link these together; it appears to be assumed that the reader will be familiar with the principle protagonists in each set of stories.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Elliot Friedman (1987); "Who wrote the bible?"; p 61ff and 128

<sup>9</sup> Judges 18:30. This supposed, but unreliable, connection between the priests at Dan and Moses is due to the Septuagint's translation being preferred to the Masoretic Hebrew text, since the latter connects them to *Manasseh* not *Moses* at this point.

<sup>10</sup> Exodus 3:13-15

Abraham was the father of the nations, Jacob the father of the tribes and Joseph the father of Ephraim –an alternative name for Israel, the northern country. The social setting of these stories, and therefore possibly their primary origin, is the Hurrian culture of the middle second millennium BCE. Embedded in these stories are the Hurrian customs of the wife-as-sister arrangement, of the requirement that a barren wife provides a surrogate slave-wife for her husband, of the inheritance laws that concerned the principal characters and even of the rules concerning the payment for lost sheep. This culture was not monotheistic and therefore there is no reason to suppose that the references to the God of Nahor, the God of Abraham, the Fear of Isaac, the God of Bethel and El Shaddai were all originally perceived as being references to the same god. The god in some of these stories was often the source of struggle and fear.

By the time these stories came to be written down the original family homes of Abraham and Laban had fallen under Aramean control, leaving the Israelites with the idea that their ancestors were Arameans.

### Abraham

Some scholars<sup>11</sup> hold that the Elohist text began with God’s covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15:13-16.<sup>12</sup> But others maintain that, for the Elohist, there is no covenant between man and God other than that of Moses. Whilst the majority of Genesis 15 are characteristically Yahwist, it is clear that verses 13-16 are a deliberate insertion.

Abraham Episodes	
Topic	E Text (all Genesis)
Abraham’s Covenant	15:13-16
Wife as Sister	20:1b-18
Isaac, Ishmael and Hagar	21:6 & 8-32 & 34
Sacrifice of Isaac	22:1-9 & 16-19
New wife and children	25:1-4

They occur in the middle of a strange covenant ceremony; they follow a phrase about the sun setting and are followed by a repetition of that phrase and the resumption of the strange ceremony. They are out of place in the ceremony they interrupt. They may therefore be an attempt by an editor to place the Elohist’s account of the covenant with Abraham alongside the Yahwist’s account of a somewhat different covenant, regardless of the awkwardness of the result.

Viewing Genesis as a whole, there is no other text which could more probably provide an opening to the Elohist’s work, and in view of the lengths to which the editors went to preserve each of the core texts intact, it would be surprising if the beginning of this one was omitted. Viewing the Elohist text as a whole, the ending seems to require this beginning. These few verses summarise the Epic to come. The words are set as a divine statement<sup>13</sup>:-

*“Know, know for certain that your descendants will be immigrants in a land not theirs, and shall be slaves and oppressed for four hundred years; but that I will execute judgement on the nation that enslaves them, and afterwards they shall come out with great possessions. As for you yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in good old age. (They shall come back here in the fourth period; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.)”<sup>14</sup>*

<sup>11</sup> Alan W Jenks’ article on the Elohist in ABD includes this passage in a list of the minimum set of texts which should be classified as Elohist. F.A. Speiser (Genesis: AB) argues for two sources in chapter 15 and allocates a number of verses including these to the Elohist. Richard E Friedman in ‘Who wrote the Bible’ ascribes this text, somewhat cautiously to the Yahwist, although in a subsequent work, ‘The Bible with sources revealed’, he assigns them to an editor. Whilst in the majority of the texts quoted here, Richard Friedman’s identification of the Pentateuchal sources as determined in “Who wrote the Bible” has been followed – an exception with respect to the Elohist is made here, in the oracles of Balaam and in a few other verses.

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 15: 13-16

<sup>13</sup> The introductory, “and he said to Abram” was supplied by the editor who incorporated this Elohist text. The editor uses Abram, rather than Abraham, since he is inserting the text into a J passage, and J uses Abram. All the E texts use Abraham. There is no Abram to Abraham name change story in today’s bible other than the one in P’s text. The name could refer to the leader or father (*Ab*) of the *Raham* tribe. *Aburahana* occurs in Egyptian execration texts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

<sup>14</sup> Gen. 15:13-16. The use of ‘Amorites’ in the last line is a pointer towards the Elohist source; the Yahwist would probably have used ‘Canaanites’ in this context. The phrase about their being ‘oppressed’ uses the same Hebrew verb as occurs in the E text of Exodus 11-12 dealing with the story of what is here predicted. Historically it was the ‘Amorites/Canaanites’ who were the oppressors of Egypt.

And the E text then moved comfortably into the first story: -

*Abraham lived between Kadesh and Shur. He stayed for a while in Gerar and there he said of his wife Sarah, "She is my sister". Abimelech, King of Gerar, sent for Sarah and took her<sup>15</sup>.*

...and no children were born to the women of the Harem whilst Sarah was amongst them. This is one of three stories in which a patriarch passes off his wife as his sister and profits by the deception – two of which involve Abraham and Sarah, one being this text and the other being Genesis 12:10-20, a J text, where the king's role is taken by 'Pharaoh'. The third (Genesis 6-14, another J Text) also involved king Abimelech but then the couple was Isaac and Rebecca. The practice of adopting a wife as a sister was a normal marriage procedure in upper class Hurrian society as is now known through documents found at Nuzi<sup>16</sup>. The Elohist states this clearly enough when Abraham has to explain himself to Abimelech. He says, "...and also she is in fact my father's daughter, though not my mother's, and she became a wife to me." In Hurrian society, she could have become an adopted daughter of Abraham's father as part of the contract whereby she became a wife to Abraham. The arrangement gave greater authority to the husband and greater status to the wife. Nuzi was a regional administrative centre in the land of Arraphe whose capital was near present day Kirkuk in Iraq. According to the Yahwist, Abraham came from Haran and Rebecca, the wife-sister of Isaac, was born there.<sup>17</sup> Both Haran and Nuzi were Hurrian cities at the time in which these stories were set. The biblical authors may not have had much knowledge of the historical legal background to the traditional stories they were re-telling and hence treated the sister-wife identity mainly as a deceit designed to protect the husband.

The Elohist concluded this story with the return of fertility to Abimelech's wives once Sarah had left the harem; An editor next then proceeded directly into the story of the return of Sarah's own fertility - the birth of Isaac.

*Sarah said, "God has made Laughter (Hebrew 'Isaac') for me<sup>18</sup>." The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned.*

Then came the powerful story of the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael: -

*When Sarah saw Hagar the Egyptian's son, who had been born to Abraham, laughing with her son Isaac, she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac."<sup>19</sup> The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. But Elohim said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed for the boy and your slave woman; Listen to what Sarah tells you. And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman as well, because he is your child."<sup>20</sup>*

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<sup>15</sup> Gen 20:1b-2. The whole following chapter is E

<sup>16</sup> E.A. Speiser; Genesis; AB; p 91-93. Martha A. Morrison; the Hurrians; ABD. ANET pp 219-220. A similar effect could also come from the occasional practice of a father adopting his son-in-law as a son. Land could only be inherited within the family in Hurrian society; so if a father wanted to provide his son-in-law with a decent estate (so that his daughter could be kept in the luxury to which she was accustomed), then he adopted the son-in-law, making his biological daughter the sister of his adopted son.

<sup>17</sup> The usual P text states that Abram came from 'Ur of the Chaldees' (Gen: 11:28-31), but the Septuagint has 'the land of the Chaldees' (i.e. land owned by or conquered by the Chaldeans). J states that Abram, then called Abraham, sent his servant back to his birthplace to find a wife for Isaac, and the place he went to was not Ur but rather the city of Nahor. The city of Nahor has been identified as being on the Nabor river, east of Haran. As will be discussed later, 'Ur of the Chaldees' probably entered the P text as a result of scribal and editorial errors.

<sup>18</sup> The pun here is a close one; the consonants are exactly the same and the vowels very similar, making the naming of the child in this verse unnecessary.

<sup>19</sup> Recollect law 170 of Hammurabi's code discussed in Chapter 1. This would have given a portion of the inheritance to Hagar's son.

<sup>20</sup> Genesis 21: 9-13. The phrase 'laughing with her son Isaac' is a word play on the name 'Isaac' The conventional 'mocking her son Isaac' is probably incorrect (Speiser 1962; p 155). The reassuring phrase about Abraham's descendants coming through Isaac is omitted here as it was probably an editorial insertion since, for the Elohist, Isaac had no descendants. See the discussion on the binding of Isaac that follows.

Abraham sent Ishmael and his mother out into the desert. When the boy was close to death through lack of water: -

*Elohim heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of Elohim called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for Elohim has heard the voice of the boy. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." Then Elohim opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.*

*Elohim was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.*

The Ishmaelites were a group of tribes who lived along the spice route to Southern Arabia in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. At various times they paid tribute to Assyria or fought against them. They were camel breeders and appeared to range over an extended area of the desert fringe from central Syria east of Ammon, Moab and Edom and continuing south to Arabia<sup>21</sup>. Hagar's story is of great importance in the tradition of Islam. Although Hagar (Hajar in Arabic) is not mentioned in the Koran, her story is understood to be referred to in Sura Ibrahim (14:37) where as part of his prayer, Ibrahim says, "I have settled some of my family in a barren valley near your Sacred House." (The Kaaba in Mecca). The books of Hadiths describe how Hajar was an enslaved Egyptian princess who bore Ibrahim's eldest child – Ishmael. In a test of his obedience, Ibrahim was instructed to take her and Ishmael to a barren desert and leave them there. Hajar's search for water is re-enacted in every Hadj when the pilgrims walk seven times between the two hills which encompassed the place where she had been left. The mother and child are miraculously provided with water in the form of the well of Zamzam next to the Kaaba. The Koran states that God's House – the Kaaba - was built, or rather rebuilt (since it is said to have existed in the time of Adam and Eve) by Ibrahim and Ishmael (Sura 2:127).

In today's bible, the E text continues, without a break, into Abraham's treaty with Abimelech concerning water rights and Abraham's request to live in the land as a foreigner<sup>22</sup>. The treaty concerned the strategically important oasis at Beersheba in the desert - inland from Gerar. Etymologically the name Beersheba can be held to mean either 'The Well of Seven' or 'The Well of the Oath'. The story provides the background for both interpretations, for here the oath that Abimelech makes with Abraham is confirmed by Abraham's gift of seven ewes in response to Abimelech's recognition of Abraham's right to the water.

*'After these things, the Great God tested Abraham.'*

This is the beginning of the story of the binding of Isaac. Here the definite article is placed before *Elohim*, which cannot be included in the translation if *Elohim* is treated as a name; as a result, the definite article is usually dropped. A different approach is to consider the alternative meaning of *Elohim* as 'Great Spirit' or 'Great God'.<sup>23</sup>

*He said to him. "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am," He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah<sup>24</sup>, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you."*

*So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out to the place that Elohim had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place from a distance. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Wait here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship - and then we will come back to you."*

*Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac, and he took the fire*

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<sup>21</sup> See Ernst Knauf's article on the Ishmaelites in ABD for further information.

<sup>22</sup> Genesis 21:22-24

<sup>23</sup> This meaning of *Elohim* as 'great spirit' or 'great god' is used elsewhere in the bible when Saul conjures up the 'great spirit' or ghost of Samuel.

<sup>24</sup> It is possible that the legendary site for this sacrifice was not originally Moriah, but that this location, the site of the Jerusalem temple, was inserted to enhance the sanctity of the temple mount. Verse 14 offers an etymology based on the divine name plus 'yir'eh' (will see) or possibly, with different vowel pointings, the passive yera'eh (will be seen). Gunkel argues that the original site was Jeruel. (Genesis pp 238-239 translated by M. Biddle) Other suggestions include the land of the Amorites.

*in his hand and the knife.*

*The two of them walked on together.*

*Isaac said to his father Abraham, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham said, "Elohim himself will see the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." The two of them walked on together.*

*When they came to the place that Elohim had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and put him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.*

*And he (Elohim) said, "I swear by myself, that since you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will bless, yes bless you and multiply your descendants like the stars of skies, and like the sand that is on the seashore. Your descendants shall bring blessings to all the peoples of the earth because you listened to my voice."*

*And Abraham came back to his young men and they went together to Beersheba.<sup>25</sup>*

This is not the story we have been comfortable with. Yet it probably was the Elohist's original version. The verse states bleakly, "*Abraham returned to his young men*", and subsequently there is no mention of Isaac. For the Elohist, Isaac died in the sacrifice<sup>26</sup>. Additional confirmation comes in the finality of the phrase, "*since you have done this and not withheld your son*".

It is possible that this story may be traced back to older Canaanite myths involving 'the Great God'. There is evidence that child sacrifice was practised by the Phoenicians in their Carthaginian territory, and there is evidence of child sacrifice by the Canaanite Hyksos during their time in Egypt. Philo records a Phoenician legend in which El himself offers his 'only son' as a burnt offering to his father Uranus. But child sacrifice – the sacrifice of a first born – was practiced even in the time when these texts were being compiled and edited. Ahaz, a northern King, "made his son pass through fire". And Yahweh complained through Jeremiah that the people of Judah "go on building the altar of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire" - a practice also referred to in Ezekiel<sup>27</sup>.

In the final version that we have in today's bible, a few words have been inserted in the story by someone for whom god's name was Yahweh: -

"But the angel of Yahweh called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand upon the boy; do not do anything to him." And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt sacrifice instead of his son. So Abraham called the place "Yahweh-Yireh (meaning 'Yahweh will see')". It is said to this day. "On the mount of Yahweh, it (a vision?) will be seen."

This insertion, between the line where Abraham took out his knife to kill his son and God's promise "*Because you have done this...*" skilfully changed the sense. The insertion was added by a later editor, possibly the one who would combine the J and E texts<sup>28</sup>. The result was consistent with prophetic teaching, as is evidenced by Jeremiah 7:31 quoted above, for the prophets generally were concerned to turn men away from sacrifice and towards inner obedience. The substitution story has a close parallel in Greek legend where, in the story of Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia, Artemis substituted a deer.

The idea that the firstborn belonged to God was carried from the old religion to the new. The ancient covenant code contained the command "The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me"<sup>29</sup>. This was not relieved in the Elohist text, although the Yahwist would later include in the Ritual Decalogue

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<sup>25</sup> Genesis 22:1-10 & 12b & 16b-19.

<sup>26</sup> Isaac is mentioned in the prayer of Jacob (Gen. 46:1) and in the blessing given by Jacob to Joseph as one of his ancestors (Gen. 48:15), but these references are separate insertions into the main text. There is no mention of Isaac taking part in any action of the story after the sacrifice. The tradition that Isaac was sacrificed is confirmed from Midrashic sources. See Friedman (1987) "Who wrote the bible" p 257 and S. Spiegel "The Last Trial".

<sup>27</sup> 2 Kings 16:3, Jeremiah 7:31 & Ezekiel 20:31

<sup>28</sup> This is Friedman's view, but others disagree. Speiser has doubts about the whole passage, pointing out that the dramatic style is more like the Yahwist's writing than that of the Elohist, but assigns the bulk of the text to Elohist. Jenks assigns verses 1-14 and 19 to the Elohist, thereby including most of the verses which refer to Yahweh.

<sup>29</sup> Exodus 22:28-29

the instruction that “you shall redeem every firstborn male”.<sup>30</sup> The idea of obedient sacrifice was carried forward into Christian belief in the ultimate sacrifice of the Jesus Christ, the Son of God, for the sins of the whole world. The reading of the story of the binding of Isaac is therefore a key reading for Christians during the Easter Vigil.

In the E text, Elohim’s promise that Abraham’s will be the father of many nations occurs after the sacrifice of Isaac.

*“Your descendants shall bring blessings to all the peoples of the earth because you listened to my voice.” Abraham returned to his young men and they went together to Beersheba. And Abraham lived in Beersheba, and Abraham took another wife and her name was Keturah<sup>31</sup>*

...and she gave birth to many sons. If Jacob was originally amongst them or descended from them, the editor who combined the Epics would have had to delete the reference, since according to his other source, Jacob was born of Isaac.

### Jacob

The first Elohist episode involving Jacob is the foundation story of the shrine at Bethel on the southern border of 8<sup>th</sup> century Israel. Some scholars believe that it is based on an ancient Canaanite myth. In today’s bible, this dream story is intertwined with a Yahwist version of the same event. In the Elohist version, there was a presumption that the reader will know who Jacob was; it read: -

Jacob Episodes	
	E Text (all Genesis)
Dream at Bethel.	28:11b-12 & 17-18 & 20-22
Children	30:1b-13 & 17-24a
Leaving Laban	31:2 & 4-16 & 21-24 & 25a & 36a&c & 38-42 & 51-54 & 32:1-3
Offerings for Esau	32:14b-25
Struggle in the night	32:26-33
Meeting with Esau	33:1-20
Rachel’s death	35:1-7 & 16 – 20

*He (Jacob) took one of the stones and set it as a headrest and lay down in that place. And he dreamed. - there was a ladder set up on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven; and the angels of Elohim were ascending and descending on it. And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of El, and this is the gate of Heaven. And Jacob arose early in the morning and took the stone that he had set as his headrest and set it up as a pillar and poured oil upon it. Then Jacob made a vow saying, “If Elohim will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come back to my father’s house in peace, then this stone that I have set up as a pillar, shall be a temple of Elohim and of all that you give me, I will set aside a tenth for you.”<sup>32</sup>*

Apart from the abrupt opening, the story reads smoothly despite the removal of a couple of passages of J material; indeed, it reads better without these intrusions. Implicit in this story was the idea that the gods can be bargained with, and that it was up to a man to choose his god. This idea was present in the ancient Mesopotamian religions. There it was believed that the gods could be managed by giving or with-holding praise or sacrifice. In Astrahasis men were advised by Enki, a god friendly to mortals, to rebel against the gods. “Do not revere your gods, Do not pray to your goddesses” until they back down on their plan to decimate mankind with disease. In Astrahasis, it worked. In the E text, Jacob promised

<sup>30</sup> Genesis 34:20

<sup>31</sup> Genesis 22:18-19 & 25:1 In the Midrash commentary on Genesis (Bereshit Rabbah 61:4) it is suggested that Keturah and Hagar are the same person and that Abraham sought her out after Sarah’s death. That Ibrahim returned to place where he abandoned Hagar and Ishmael is implied by the assertion in the Koran that Ibrahim and Ishmael built the Kaaba.

<sup>32</sup> Gen. 28: 11b-12 & 17-18 & 20-22. The text actually reads today (end of verse 21) ‘then *Yahweh* shall be my god’, but this use of *Yahweh* is out of context with the El/Elohist usage elsewhere and was probably an accidental editorial alteration at the time when the Yahwist version was spliced in. In the Elohist Epic, *Yahweh* has not yet been revealed. The basic rule is that the E and P sources always refer to the Deity as El or Elohim until the name *Yahweh* is revealed to Moses, whereas *Yahweh* is the only name used by J throughout. Friedman points out that amongst the over 2000 Pentateuchal references to the Deity there are only three exceptions to this rule. This is one of them.

Elohim very little, merely that if Elohim provided safety, food and clothing, the stone would become a temple and attract a tithe. The idea that the stone itself became the temple – the house of god – carried the implication that the god was within the stone. The reminder about tithing may have been important to the author, as it was on the peoples' tithes that the priesthood survived: it was useful for a priest to be attached to an active shrine.

The romantic story of Jacob's love affair with Rachel is clearly Yahwist material, but the Elohist did tell the story of the children she, her sister and their slave-maids had by Jacob. (Genesis 30: 1b-24a).

*Rachel became jealous of her sister and she said to Jacob, "Give me children – or I'll die!" Jacob became angry with her and said, "Am I in the place of Elohim, who has kept you from having children?" So she said, "Here is Bilhah, my slave woman. Go into her, so she can bear children on my knees and I can get a child through her." And Jacob went into her. And Bilhah became pregnant and gave him a son. Then Rachel said, "Elohim has vindicated me (Hebrew 'dan'); he has heard my prayer and has given me a son. And so she named him Dan. Rachel's slave conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. Then Rachel said, "I have wrestled with my sister like wrestling with God (Hebrew 'naphtuli elohim'<sup>33</sup>), and I have won. And she named him Naphali.*

*When Leah saw that she had stopped having children, she took her slave Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. Leah's slave Zilpah bore Jacob a son. Leah said, "What good fortune (Hebrew 'gad')", so she named him Gad. Leah's slave Zilpah bore Jacob a second son, and Leah said, "I am so happy! (Hebrew 'osher') - daughters will call me happy", and she named him Asher.<sup>34</sup>*

*Elohim heeded Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son, and she said, "Elohim has granted me my reward (Hebrew 'sachar') for having given my slave to my husband." So she named him Issachar. Leah conceived again and bore Jacob a sixth son. Leah said, "Elohim has given me a good gift (Hebrew 'zebed'), and she called him Zebulum. And after that she gave birth to a daughter and named her Dinah (Hebrew meaning 'judgement')*

*Elohim remembered Rachel, and listened to her and opened her womb; she conceived and bore a son, saying, "Elohim has taken away (Hebrew 'asaph') my humiliation", and she called him Joseph.<sup>35</sup>*

All these seven sons, whose births were described in texts that also mentioned Elohim, were given names that were the names of Northern tribes. This is one of the keys to the recognition that E was the work of a northern, Israelite, author.<sup>36</sup> It contrasts with the last verses of the Genesis 29, a J text, in which the births of Simeon, Reuben, Levi and Judah and are described in verses that also mention Yahweh. Hurrian marriage contracts often required that the wife must, should she prove barren, provide a slave woman to bare her husband children. But the wife had authority over any children born. It was in accordance with this law that the children of Zilpah were counted amongst the six sons of Leah and those of Bilhad amongst the sons of Rachel.<sup>37</sup>

Jacob did a deal with his father-in-law Laban by which lambs with certain characteristics would be his, whilst all the rest would be Laban's. Unlike J, the Elohist did not consider that Jacob used sympathetic magic to manipulate the characteristics of new lambs so that they had the attributes that would make them his. Any success that Jacob had was due, in his view, to the fact that Elohim was with Jacob. Both J and E deal with the Jacob's parting from Laban; the Elohist version ran as follows: -

*Jacob saw that Laban did not regard him as favourably as he had previously. So Jacob sent and called Rachel and Leah into the field where his flock was, and said to them, "I see that your father does not regard me as favourably as he did before. But the god of my father has been with me. You know that I have served your father with all my strength; yet your father has*

<sup>33</sup> Note the use of 'elohim' here as an adjective meaning 'great' or perhaps 'godlike'.

<sup>34</sup> Genesis 30:1b-13

<sup>35</sup> Genesis 30:17-24a

<sup>36</sup> The chapter probably also includes material derived from a second source – possibly J, possibly an independent source; there are double aetiologies for Issachar, Joseph and Zebulum and J could be the source for one set. Thus there may be a J comment on E's account of the birth of Issachar ('bought with a mandrake root'), of Zebulum ('my husband will give me presents') and of Joseph ('Yahweh adds another son'). Similarly, there is a secondary comment, possibly from E, on J's account of the birth of Reuben ('my husband will love me'; Genesis 29:32)

<sup>37</sup> See ANET p 220 for an example of a Hurrian marriage contract with this stipulation.

*cheated me and changed my wages ten times, but Elohim did not permit him to harm me. If he said, 'The speckled shall be your wages,' then all the flock bore speckled; and if he said, 'The striped shall be your wages,' then all the flock bore stripes. Thus Elohim has taken away the livestock of your father, and given them to me.*<sup>38</sup>

He referred to a dream he once had in which these arrangements were explained to him by an angel of Elohim. (Dreams were characteristic devices of the Elohist.) Rachel and Leah agreed with his decision to leave saying: -

*"Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our father's house? Are we not treated by him like foreign women? For he has sold us, and he has eaten up the money given for us."*

In Hurrian law, part of the marriage dowry was reserved for the wife – provided she was local. But foreign wives were not given the property rights that native-born women enjoyed. The terminology used ('sold', 'eaten up') accurately reflects the usage in the relevant Hurrian legislation.<sup>39</sup>

Jacob fled and Laban pursued him. The two groups confronted each other in the hill country of Gilead, but in the night Laban, 'the Aramean', had a dream in which Elohim warned him not to take any action against Jacob, either good or bad. The anachronistic use of the word 'Aramean' in this context indicates something about the time of writing and the use being made of this ancient story by the Elohist. The Arameans are not attested prior to the 11<sup>th</sup> century BCE. They became a major concern to Israel, whether as ally or opponent in the 9<sup>th</sup> and early 8<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Elohist was probably writing after these events and may have been using Laban as a metaphor for Aram. The Elohist's story continued with Laban stating: -

*It is in my power to do you harm; but the god of your father spoke to me last night, saying, 'Take heed that you do to Jacob neither good nor bad.'*

*But Jacob became angry, and upbraided Laban, "What is my offense? What is my sin, that you have hotly pursued me? These twenty years I have been with you; your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried, and I have not eaten the rams of your flocks. That which was torn by wild beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it myself ...*

...and so on, reiterating the complaint he had outlined to his wives earlier. Amongst other things, he accused Laban of not sticking to the law of Hammurabi (probably the common law of the time<sup>40</sup>) with regard to the loss of animals torn by wild beasts. He concluded: -

*"If the god of my father, the god of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac had not been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. Elohim saw my hardship and the labour of my hands, and rebuked you last night."*

*Then Laban said to Jacob, "See this cairn which I have set between you and me. This cairn is a witness that I will not pass beyond this cairn to you to harm you, and you will not pass beyond this cairn to me. May the god of Abraham and the god of Nahor judge between us." And Jacob swore by the Fear of his ancestor Isaac<sup>41</sup>, and Jacob offered a sacrifice on the height and called his relatives to eat bread; and they ate bread and remained all night in the hill country. Then Jacob went on his way and the angels of Elohim met him. When he saw them he said, "This must be the Camp of Elohim", so he named that place "Mahanaim" (Two Camps)<sup>42</sup>.<sup>43</sup>*

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<sup>38</sup> Genesis 31:2 & 4-9

<sup>39</sup> Speiser (1962) 'Genesis' p244-245.

<sup>40</sup> ANET p266 (section 266). See also Exodus 22:13

<sup>41</sup> The normal meaning of '*pachad*' is fear or terror. Used here as a name it becomes a reference to the ordeal of Isaac. The Hebrew '*ab*' can mean biological father, but the term can also be understood more generally as a term of respect, or for an elder, or the 'father' of a profession. Since Isaac could not be Jacob's biological father given the previous Elohist story, the more general term 'ancestor' is preferred here.

<sup>42</sup> Mahanaim was one of the towns that Pharaoh Sheshonk raided in the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>43</sup> Genesis 31:42 & 31:48a & 31:52-32:3. The text in today's bible contains material added by a later editor. This includes another explanation of why the cairn was called Gilead, together with a reference to the name of an associated stele – '*mizpah*' meaning 'watchtower. (vv 48b-49) Further references to the stele were added in vv 51-53 to harmonise with this concept. These additions have been omitted in an attempt to get back to the original E text. The source of 31:43-47 is unclear.

Thus the story concluded with an Elohist version of the covenant between Laban and Jacob sanctified by their respective gods – as a later editor commented. It was common practice to include such references in treaties contracted in the Ancient Near East, which were often cemented with a ceremonial meal, as it was here. There may well have been a real treaty between Israel and Aram Damascus in which the border was fixed by a marker in the form of a cairn. If that was after Israel had broken free of Aramean vassalage, an event symbolised by Jacob’s decision to cease working for Laban, then this story must have been created sometime around the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> century - perhaps during the reign of Jeroboam II (786 to 747).

The story of Rachel’s stealing of her father’s household idols with which the above story is interwoven in today’s bible has many elements that suggest that it was Yahwist (although there are those who hold the contrary view.<sup>44</sup>)

Just as the dispute between Laban and Jacob may have mirrored the political relationship between Aram and Israel, so the story of Jacob’s cautious approach to Esau may also have reflected the relationship between Israel and Edom. It is therefore not surprising that the approach of the two men is described in terms that would be appropriate for the meeting of two kings. Whilst still some way off, Jacob sent substantial gifts ahead to pacify and impress the apical founder of Edom, Israel’s ‘brother nation’. Nowhere in any Elohist text has Esau been mentioned prior to this.

On the way, Jacob struggled with a man in the night. This story is probably Elohist, although some would assign this story to the Yahwist or even the Priestly author<sup>45</sup>: As a result of the struggle Jacob was wounded on the thigh and developed a limp. This may have been the foundation story of the shrine at Peniel (which means the ‘Face of God’). It was a village that Jeroboam, Israel’s first king, allegedly rebuilt<sup>46</sup>. Jacob’s injury is given as the reason why the tendon attached to the hip socket is not eaten by Israelites.

*Then he said. “Let me go, for the day is breaking.”*

*But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”*

*“What is your name?”*

*“Jacob.”*

*“You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Isra-El, for you have striven with a great spirit<sup>47</sup> and with humans, and have prevailed.”<sup>48</sup>*

In fact, Jacob continued to be known as ‘Jacob’ as well as ‘Israel’, the two names being used interchangeably – sometimes with both names occurring in the same verse. The main purpose of the new name seems to have been to establish Jacob as the ‘father’ of the Israelites. A possible meaning of Israel may be ‘one who strives with God’. The word play was based on matching the first part of Isra-el with ‘sarah’ meaning ‘to strive’. But Isra-el may also be interpreted to mean ‘The Highly Placed of El’ or ‘The heights of El’ or ‘Men of the mountain of El’ – and these are perhaps the more realistic etymologies for the name of the people who worshipped El in the hill country<sup>49</sup>.

<sup>44</sup> Friedman and Speiser attribute the story to E. This conclusion has not been followed here because there are elements of J in the style of its telling, its vocabulary, its wordplay, the prominence given in the story to a clever woman and similarities with the Benjamin in Egypt story. A fuller explanation is given in the discussion concerning the text of the Southern Epic in Chapter 9.

<sup>45</sup> Friedman makes it Elohist; Speiser in his book ‘Genesis’ in the AB series assigns it to the Yahwist. Neither regards his choice as sufficiently controversial to justify an explanation! To further confuse things, the renaming of an individual, such as Abram to be Abraham, is often regarded as a characteristic of the Priestly author. This particular renaming (Jacob to Israel) also occurs in the accepted Priestly text now found in Genesis 35:10.

<sup>46</sup> The town is mentioned in Judges as having been destroyed by Gideon. It may have been one of the towns conquered by Sheshonk (No 54).

<sup>47</sup> This is probably an occasion where *Elohim* should not be translated as God. See also the appearance of the spirit of Samuel to Saul.

<sup>48</sup> Gen. 32: 26-28. Whilst Friedman assigns this text confidently to E, Speiser cautiously assigns it to J (AB Genesis p 255). The word play is indeed a common J device, as is the implied direct contact between man and god. However, the identification of Jacob as the father of Israel would have been especially important to the Northern author, who uses the term subsequently more profligately – except in the Joseph cycle where Jacob is preferred!

<sup>49</sup> The argument is that Israel is a contraction of *ysrh’l* but whilst *yrsh* could be the imperfect or jussive form of the root *srh* (to contend, fight, strive etc.), it could also be an archaic substantive from the same

In the morning Jacob saw Esau approaching ‘with four hundred men’, a substantial force for the time<sup>50</sup>. The two men embraced each other and Jacob bestowed on Esau substantial gifts (Genesis 33:1-17). They agreed to part and Esau returned to Seir whilst Jacob went on to Succoth (meaning ‘shelters’) and from there to Shechem, *which is in the land of Canaan ... and he bought for one hundred qesitah the plot of land on which he had pitched his tent. There he erected an altar and called it El-elo’he-Is’ra-el* (which means ‘God, the god of one who strives with God’ or perhaps “God, the god of the men of the mountain of El)<sup>51</sup>.

Shechem was an important town of the Northern Kingdom – said to be a temporary capital - and in this text Shechem was honourably purchased. There was also a J story about how Shechem was acquired which involved tricking the men of Shechem into circumcision and then, while they were still in pain, massacring them all. Thus Shechem, a northern town, was honourably purchased according to this northern text, but obtained by deceit and murder according to the southern text.

But Elohim called upon Jacob to return to Bethel and required him to “*make an altar to El,*” who had appeared to him there, “*when you were fleeing from your brother Esau*”. In preparation for the consecration of the altar, Jacob’s men and their families are required to put away their foreign gods (elohim). Jacob did not destroy them, but buried them under the oak at Shechem. As they travelled the ‘*Terror of Elohim*’ fell upon the towns around them and they were not pursued.<sup>52</sup> The altar was built and he called the place El Bethel (meaning ‘God of the temple of El’).

They journeyed on towards Ephraph (elsewhere known as Ephraphah) an area in the vicinity of Bethlehem.

*Rachel gave birth; but she had difficulty in her labour...and it was as her soul was going out, for she died, that she called his name Benoni, but his father called him Benjamin. ...And Jacob set up a pillar on her grave. It is the pillar of Rachel’s grave to this day.*

The meaning of the names is controversial; perhaps Benoni meant ‘son of my vigour’, but tradition has adopted the meaning ‘son of misfortune’ from the context but using a different root. Benjamin probable meant ‘son of my right (hand)’, the youngest son, the one on whom Jacob expected to lean, but parallels with Maris texts suggest that it could be an Amorite term for ‘southerner’.

### Joseph

The Joseph saga was probably based on an ancient source; one that was used by both the Elohist and Yahwist. The story of Joseph’s treatment by his brothers in today’s bible is an intimate mixture of the Yahwist and Elohist versions. The Elohist’s account can be separated out, and when that is done it reads as follows: -

Joseph Episodes	
Episode	E Text (all Genesis)
Joseph is sold	37:3a&4&12-18&21-22&24&25a&28a&29-30&36
Joseph serves in the prison	40:1-end
Joseph interprets Pharaoh’s dream	41:1-45a; 47-end
Joseph’s Brothers in Egypt	42:5&7&11&13-14&18b-25&35-37 &43:14&15b&23b
Joseph reveals himself	45:2-4a&6-8&14-27
Israel’s Dream	46:1-5a
Blessing of Joseph’s children	48:1-2&8-end
Death of Joseph	50:15-21&23-26

*Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all of his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him. Now his brothers went to pasture their flock near Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, “Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.” He answered, “Here I am.” So he said to him, “Go*

verb but with a sense preserved in the Arabic derivation from the same root meaning ‘to be high, elevated, highly placed’. (Salibi (1985) pp 124 – 125.) The ‘highly placed of El’ could therefore have indicated either El’s chosen people or, more prosaically, a group of hill dwellers who worshipped El. A similar conclusion can be derived from the possibility that Israel is a contraction of ish-har-el, meaning ‘men of the mountain of El’.

<sup>50</sup> In correspondence to Akhenaten’s officials (14<sup>th</sup> century BCE), the ruler of Jerusalem asks for 50 men to protect the town from attack by a neighbouring power – possibly Shechem. Thus a force of 400 men would indeed have been a national military force in those days.

<sup>51</sup> Gen. 33: 18-19

<sup>52</sup> This is the only instance of this word for ‘terror’ in the Hebrew bible.

*now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me.”*  
*He sent him from the valley of Hebron. He came to Shechem, and a man found him wandering in the fields. The man asked him, “What are you looking for?”*  
*“I am looking for my brothers,” he said; “tell me please, where they are pasturing the flock.”*  
*The man said, “They have gone away, for I heard them say, ‘Let us go to Dothan’.” And Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan.*  
*They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, “Let us not take his life.” Reuben said to them, “Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him”- that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty, there was no water in it. Then they sat down to eat. When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit. When Reuben returned to the pit, and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes. He returned to his brothers, and said, “The boy is gone; and I, where can I turn?”<sup>53</sup>*

Thus unwound from the Yahwist version, the Elohist version is revealed as a complete story with no internal contradictions. Reuben – the good guy – was of course the name of a northern tribe<sup>54</sup> Note that, in this version of the story, the brothers did not sell Joseph. They knew he was missing and would eventually presume him to be dead. The reader, however, knows differently: -

*The Midianites sold him to Egypt, to Potiphar, chief of the guards, an official of Pharaoh. Some time later, the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt offended their master, the king of Egypt...and he put them in custody in the house of the chief of the guards – the place where Joseph was kept. The chief of the guards assigned Joseph to them, and he attended them.<sup>55</sup>*

In the Elohist text, Joseph met these two prisoners as a result of his duties as a slave of the chief of the guards, and not as a result of being thrown into prison himself.<sup>56</sup> In due course, Joseph interpreted the dreams of his charges and his interpretations were borne out by events. Two years later, Pharaoh had a dream and the cupbearer remembered Joseph’s successful interpretations and recommended him to Pharaoh. Pharaoh called for Joseph, who was rushed from the dungeon, given a wash, some fresh clothes and presented to Pharaoh. Joseph explained that he cannot interpret dreams himself, but that the interpretations come from God. The dream was told and interpreted through Joseph. Then Joseph went on to offer this advice: -

*Now let Pharaoh look for a discerning and wise man and put him in charge of the land of Egypt. Let Pharaoh appoint commissioners over the land to take a fifth of the harvest of Egypt during the seven years of abundance. They should collect all the food of these coming good years and store the grain under the authority of Pharaoh, to be kept in the cities for food. This food should be held in reserve for the country to be used in the seven lean years of famine that will come upon Egypt, so that the country may not be ruined by famine. The plan seemed good to Pharaoh and to all his officials. So Pharaoh asked them, “Can we find anyone like this man, one in so endowed with the divine spirit?”*  
*Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has made all this known to you, there could be none as wise and discerning as you. You shall be in charge of my palace and all my people shall submit to your orders.”*

Joseph travelled the land and men shouted ‘Abrek’ before him (possibly the Egyptian for ‘make way’) and he was called Zaphenath - Paneah (which may mean ‘God speaks; he listens’). He was given Asenath, daughter of a priest of On (which is Heliopolis), as a wife. He managed Egypt as he had suggested, and thus Egypt was protected from the worst effects of the famine. This account can be found in Genesis 40 and 41 which are, except for an isolated P comment, solidly Elohist. But the next story is heavily intertwined with Yahwist material. Nevertheless, the two texts can be separated and when this

<sup>53</sup> Gen. 37: 3a & 4 & 12-18 & 21-22 & 24 & 25a & 28a & 29-30 – using the NRSV text throughout. Clues to the separation include the use of Reuben rather than Judah as the rescuer; the use of Midianites as the slavers (the birth of Midian was reported in an earlier E passage); the absence of J links; and the literary continuity of both sources.

<sup>54</sup> In the Yahwist version, the ‘good guy’ is Judah and the traders are Ishmaelites.

<sup>55</sup> Genesis 37:36 & 40:1-4

<sup>56</sup> The seduction episode with Potiphar’s wife is a Yahwist story.

is done the Elohist text reads as follows: -

*All the world came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain, because the famine became severe throughout all the world. And the sons of Israel were among the other people who came to buy grain, for the famine had reached the land of Canaan. And Joseph saw his brothers and recognised them, but he made himself unrecognisable to them and spoke harshly to them as if they were spying out the land<sup>57</sup>.*

*“Where do you come from?” he said.*

*They said, “From the land of Canaan, to buy food. We are a family<sup>58</sup>. We are honest men – not spies.”*

*And they said, “Your servants are twelve brothers, sons of one man who lives in the land of Canaan. The youngest is now with our father; and one is dead.”*

*Joseph said to them, “It’s as I said: you are spies. Do this and you will live – for I fear God. If you are honest men, let one of you brothers stay here in prison; but you go; take food to your starving families. But bring your younger brother to me, so that your words may be verified and that you may not die”. And they agreed.*

*To one another, however, they said, “Surely, we are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother; we saw his distress when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us.”*

*Then Reuben answered them, “Did I not tell you not to wrong the boy? But you would not listen. So now comes a reckoning for his blood.”<sup>59</sup>*

*They did not know that Joseph understood them, for he spoke to them through an interpreter. He turned away from them and wept; then he returned and spoke to them. And he picked out Simeon and had him bound before their eyes. Joseph then gave orders to fill their bags with grain, to return every man’s money to his sack, and to give them provisions for their journey. This was done for them.<sup>60</sup>*

The remaining brothers returned to Jacob and E has them report the interrogation more or less verbatim. In fact, the account here is probably a good record of the words the Elohist originally used to describe the interrogation itself – before it was edited together with the J account.

*But when they were emptying their sacks, there in each man’s sack<sup>61</sup> was his bag of silver; and they and their father saw the bags of silver and they were afraid. Their father Jacob said to them, “You have bereaved me of children. Joseph is gone, and Simeon is gone and now you’ll take Benjamin. Everything is against me!”<sup>62</sup>*

*But Reuben said to his father, “Kill my two sons if I don’t bring him back to you. Put him in my hand, and I will bring him back.”*

*“May El Shaddai give you mercy before the man, so he will let your other brother and Benjamin come back with you. As for me, I’m bereaved, bereaved.”*

*They hurried down to Egypt and presented themselves to Joseph. He brought out Simeon to*

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<sup>57</sup> ‘...as if they were spying out the land’ has been restored here from v 30. Verses 30-34 are the report the brothers give of this interview: it is almost a verbatim report, but it also includes this phrase which appears to have dropped out from the account of the actual interview – possibly when the E and J accounts were merged. Both texts are E because they are bound by logic and vocabulary into an account that has the brothers returning immediately to rescue Simeon (In J the brothers delay, since there is no hostage). Simeon is only mentioned in E texts. These texts mention Reuben and the apparent death of Joseph. For vocabulary links, see the note on ‘bags’ that follows.

<sup>58</sup> ‘Family’; literally ‘we are all one man’s son. That is, they were not a military unit.

<sup>59</sup> The leadership of Reuben and the brother's belief that Joseph is dead indicate that this is an E text.

<sup>60</sup> The separate J and E versions of Joseph’s interrogation of his brothers are hard to excavate from this combined account. It may be that in merging the two texts the editor used some common material or omitted some words from one or other version in order to avoid excessive repetition. The words assigned to E here follow the report of the interrogation as given to Jacob by the brothers in vv 29-34. The E interrogation is held together by the ‘honest men’ phrase which is linked to the hostage issue by Joseph in v19, and to his overhearing of Reuben's speech in v24. Only a small part of the J interrogation is given in chapter 42; most of it comes in the report Judah gives to Jacob in chapter 23. See Chapter 9 on the Yahwist Epic for a more detailed discussion of the J account.

<sup>61</sup> ‘sack’: the Hebrew is *saq*. This is E’s preferred term. J’s preferred term is *amtachat*

<sup>62</sup> Only in the E version is Simeon held as a hostage.!

*them and he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard, and Pharaoh's household heard about it. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I'm Joseph, is my father still alive?" And they were unable to answer him, because they were terrified in his presence. And he said to his brothers, "Come near to me". And they came near. And he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept; and Benjamin wept. And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. And afterwards his brothers talked with him.*<sup>63</sup>

Pharaoh was now aware that Joseph's brothers were in Egypt. He invited them to go and fetch their relatives, provided them with transport and many generous gifts including 'the best of the land of Egypt'. When Jacob saw his sons returning with all these gifts his spirit revived. All this (45:16-27) is exclusive to E. In J, it is Joseph who invites the family to Egypt (45:9-13) and then has to explain their arrival to Pharaoh (46:28 – 47:4).

The opening verses of Genesis 46 describe a dream of Jacob/Israel in which he was reassured by Elohim that it will be safe to go to Egypt with his entire family ('I will go down with you to Egypt and I shall also bring you up'). Thus reassured, Jacob left Beersheba.

The passage in Genesis 47 that contains a description of Joseph's land-for-grain policy (vv13-26) could be either E or J. Genesis 48, whose source is largely Elohist, describes the death bed blessing given by Jacob/Israel to Joseph's children. The poem in the following chapter is the Yahwist's version of the death bed blessing in which Judah was singled out for prominence, but here in the Elohist's version it was Ephraim, Joseph's younger son, who was given the main blessing. When Joseph tried to turn his father's hand back to Manasseh's head, Jacob said

*He too will become a tribe and he too will be great. Nevertheless, his younger brother will be greater than he and his descendants will become a group of nations.*

Ephraim was the dominant northern tribe; indeed, the Northern Kingdom, Israel, was sometimes referred to as Ephraim. Jeroboam, Israel's first king according to the Deuteronomic Historian, was from the tribe of Ephraim, and his capital (Shechem – also referred to in the blessing) was in Ephraim. After Jacob's death, the brothers sought Joseph's forgiveness, which was granted<sup>64</sup>. And Joseph lived to see his grandchildren; -

*Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die; but Elohim will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." Joseph made the Israelites swear, "When Elohim comes to you, you shall carry my bones from here." And Joseph, died being one hundred and ten years old; he was embalmed and put in a coffin in Egypt.*

The Elohist clearly knew of the Egyptian practice of mummification. In his story he implies that not only was Joseph's family wealthy enough to be able to afford this but also that they were sufficiently converted to Egyptian ways to want this to be done. This concluded the Elohist's Joseph story – and in today's bible it also concludes the book of Genesis. The excavated Elohist version of the Joseph story can be compared with the Yahwist version to be discussed later. The main differences are: -

- In E, Joseph was left in a pit. The brothers did not sell him: In J they did.
- In E, Joseph was taken to Egypt by Midianites; in J, by Ishmaelites
- In E, the brothers as well as his father believed him to be dead. In J, the brothers fooled Jacob into believing that Joseph was dead
- In E, Joseph worked in the prison as a slave, In J, he was sent to prison as a punishment for allegedly seducing his owner's wife.
- In E, Reuben, not Judah, was the leader of the brothers.

<sup>63</sup> This passage is spread over a number of chapters in today's bible. It comprises 42:35-37 & 43:14&15b&23 & 45:2-4a&14-15: nothing from chapter 44. El Shaddai is otherwise used only by P in the Pentateuch; it refers back the god of Jacob's ancestors. Note that 'the Egyptians heard'; they will later invite Jacob to come to Israel – only in E. In J, Jacob's arrival has to be explained to Pharaoh rather carefully.

<sup>64</sup> Gen 50:15-21

- In E, Simeon was retained in Egypt as a hostage; in J, all the brothers returned to Jacob
- In E, the brothers discover the silver in their sacks only when they get back to Canaan; In J, they discover the silver at a night stop on the way.
- In E, the brothers return immediately to rescue Simeon; in J, they waited until the first year's food ran out.
- In E, Pharaoh, invited Jacob to come to Israel; in J the invitation came from Joseph alone.
- In E, Jacob blessed Joseph's children, promoting the younger Ephraim – a name by which the northern country was known.

Given the substantial differences, it is a remarkable testament to the skills of the redactor who combined the two that the combined version he produced makes a satisfactory tale. With the end of the Joseph saga, the Elohist completed the episodes dealing with Patriarchs and prepared the reader with the background for his major work – one that would deal with the life and laws of Moses. This part of the E account commences in what is Exodus in today's bible.

### The call of Moses

Before introducing Moses, the Elohist included a short note describing the oppression of the Israelites.

*A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, "Look, the Israelites are more numerous than us. Come let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and in the event of war, join our enemies, fight against us and escape from the land. Therefore they set masters of slave-gangs over them to oppress them with forced labour."<sup>65</sup>*

He used the term 'missim' to describe the overseers and their slave-gangs – the gangs that built the store cities he knew as Pithom and Ramses. This is the term that was later used by the authors of the books of Kings to describe the forced labour required of the Canaanites when they were conquered. Both David and Solomon were described as having officials in charge of the 'missim'<sup>66</sup>.

The store city of Ramses was probably built by the Pharaoh of that name on the same site as the ancient city of Avaris – the Hyksos capital. Thus Avaris would have been known as Ramses at the time that the Elohist was writing. There is controversy over the location of Pithom, but the probable sites were also occupied by Canaanites during the Hyksos period and were re-occupied later around 1200 BCE.<sup>67</sup>

The more the Egyptians oppressed and degraded the Israelites, the Elohist wrote, the more they came to loathe them. Pharaoh told the Hebrew midwives to kill the male children at birth. But they did not do so, telling Pharaoh that the Hebrew women were so vigorous that the births took place before the midwives could get there. Two midwives are named – Puah and Shiprah – and both names appear to have been North Western Semitic names in the first half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Millennium BCE. They appear amongst Egyptian slave lists<sup>68</sup> It was a characteristic of the Elohist that he did not waste time on birth stories. Thus he introduced Moses directly after the midwives' story with the words, "*Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb<sup>69</sup>, the mountain of Elohim.*"

Early Moses	
Event	E Text (Exodus)
Enslavement	1:8-12
Midwives story	1:15-20
Moses call	3:1 & 4b & 6 & 9-12
Yahweh's Name revealed	3:13-15
Instructions to Moses	3:16-4:18 & 4:20b-21a & 22-23 & 27-31
Confrontation with Pharaoh	5:3-6:1
Plagues	See text

<sup>65</sup> Gen. 50:24-26 & Ex. 1:8-12

<sup>66</sup> Joshua 16:10 & 17:13; Judges 1:28-35; 2 Samuel 20:24; I Kings 4:6 & 5:13-14 & 9:15-21 & 12:18

<sup>67</sup> See the 'Israel in Egypt' section in William Dever's article on The History of Israel (Archaeology and the Israelite 'conquest') published in ABD.

<sup>68</sup> W.F Albright, 1954. Journal of American Oriental Society 74:222-233. Puah probably means 'girl' and Shiprah 'beauty'.

<sup>69</sup> In Elohist texts the mountain of God is Horeb, not Sinai; and his father-in-law is Jethro, not Reuel. Horeb is referred to here and in Exodus 17:6 and 33:6 in this text, nine times in Deuteronomy, twice in I Kings, and once in Chronicles, in psalm 103, in Malachi and in Sirach

Thus Moses was introduced as a married man in Midian. Nothing that followed in the Elohist's text would correct this initial image. Aaron, Moses brother Levite, has a name with no Hebrew etymology. It is possibly derived from the Egyptian<sup>70</sup>. The name Levi, as found in second millennium BCE Egyptian texts appears to refer to a region in SW Arabia<sup>71</sup> – perhaps somewhere near where this story has Moses herding his father-in-law's sheep. Some would argue that the text has lost a passage explaining why Moses was in Midian, but that is to view the story from the perspective of J, who is the only source to provide such an account. Here, however, E told of a Moses for whom the deity needed to explain that when he said 'my people' he was referring to the Israelites, a Moses who was distinctly puzzled as to why he should bring the Israelites out of Egypt, and a Moses who needed to ask the name of the god of the Israelites. Mount Horeb was first mentioned here. It was in Midian, and it was the mountain to which Moses will return to receive the commandments.

*And Elohim called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am."  
Then Elohim said, "I am the god of your father, the god of Abraham, the god of Isaac, and the god of Jacob." And Moses hid his face for he was afraid to look at Elohim. "The cry of the Israelite has now come to me; I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So now go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."*

*But Moses said to Elohim, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"*

*Elohim said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who send you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall all worship Elohim on this mountain."*

*But Moses said to Elohim, "If I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The god of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"*

*Elohim said to Moses, "I am who I am". but he went on, "Say to the Israelites, "'I Am' has sent me to you".*

*(Then Elohim also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'Yahweh, the god of your ancestors, the god of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is my name forever, and by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation')"*<sup>72</sup>

'Yahweh' is probably the third person singular of the causative imperfect of the verb 'to be' meaning 'he causes to be'. This name encapsulates the creation account as expressed in Genesis 1, where Elohim commands 'light be!', thereby causing light to be.<sup>73</sup> The imperfect 'aspect'<sup>74</sup> of the verb relates to past present and future ongoing actions. Because the original author's intentions with regard to vowels, and therefore pronunciation, are lost to us, we cannot be certain of the original intended name. We cannot even be certain of the particular form of the verb, since the causative stem of the imperfect of the verb 'to be' is never used in an ordinary biblical sentence. But, however it may have been pronounced, the revelation of the name was a turning point for the Elohist. From this point on, he often, but not invariably, wrote the name of the deity as 'YHWH'.<sup>75</sup>

The Elohist described Yahweh's instruction to Moses - telling him what to say to Pharaoh. He told of Yahweh's prediction that Pharaoh would resist. Then followed the first of three passages that referred to a tradition that the Israelites despoiled Egypt. Here it took the form of Yahweh's instruction that; -

*Each woman will ask her neighbour and anyone staying in her house for silver and gold articles and for clothes; and you will put them on your sons and your daughters and you will despoil Egypt.*<sup>76</sup>

Moses was reluctant; so Yahweh demonstrated how he would enable Moses to deliver powerful signs –

<sup>70</sup> John R Spenser. Aaron. ABD

<sup>71</sup> John R Spenser. Levi. ABD

<sup>72</sup> Ex. 3:1 & 4b & 6 & 9-18. The word 'also' in the last sentence is suggestive of an editorial insertion.

<sup>73</sup> Genesis 1:3 This is one of a series of 'let x be' commands by which Elohim causes the created world to be. Genesis 1 is widely held to be the work of a priestly author who wrote after the Elohist

<sup>74</sup> Hebrew does not have tenses in the sense of past, present and future. Instead it distinguishes between the perfect 'aspect' of a verb that is used to convey completed actions, and the imperfect aspect of a verb that conveys continuing actions. Each of these aspects is expressed in seven different 'stems' such as active, passive, reflexive, emphatic, causative etc.

<sup>75</sup> But note that the Hebrew for 'I am', is not 'Yahweh' but 'Ehyeh'.

<sup>76</sup> Ex 3:22. Similar words concerning the despoiling of Egypt are used in 11:2 and 12:35 - also E

his staff changing into a snake, his hand turning white – and finally provided Aaron as his spokesman. So Moses took his leave of Jethro and was given his final instructions from Yahweh: -

*“Say to Pharaoh, “Israel is my son, my firstborn, and I say to you, “Let my son go and worship me. But should you refuse to let him go, I will kill your son, your firstborn.””<sup>77</sup>*

Just before this line, however, Yahweh apparently told Moses, *“I myself will harden Pharaoh’s heart, so that he will not let the people go.”* Some hold this to be an insert by the editor who combined the Priestly account of the plagues with the Elohist’s, but if so the editor is imposing the sense that Pharaoh will have no chance to save his firstborn, for Yahweh is in complete control and the final outcome is pre-destined.

Moses and Aaron convinced Israel’s elders that they had been sent by Yahweh, but were less successful with Pharaoh, who responded by increasing their workload - having them collect their own straw for brick-making.<sup>78</sup>

### The Exodus

The Elohist provided the major part of the long struggle with Pharaoh that now runs from Chapter 7 through to Chapter 11 of Exodus.

*Then Yahweh said to Moses, “Pharaoh’s heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go. Go to Pharaoh in the morning as he is going out to the water; take your staff by the river bank to meet him, and take in your hand the staff that was turned into a snake. Say to him, “Yahweh, the god of the Hebrews, sent me to you to say, “Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the wilderness.” But until now you have not listened. Thus says Yahweh, “By this you shall know that I am Yahweh.” See, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall be turned to blood. The fish in the river will die, the river itself will stink, and the Egyptians will not be able to drink from the Nile.””<sup>79</sup>*

And the Elohist described at least seven of the plagues: -

- the river is turned to blood (7:14-18 & 20b-24)
- the frogs (7:25-29 & 8:3b-11)
- the flies (8: 16-28)
- the diseased cattle (9:1-7)
- the hail (9:13-34)
- the locusts (10: 1-19)
- the darkness (10: 21-23 & 28-29)

There were seven plagues before the final crisis – a significant number in Canaanite and Israelite writing. In all of these it was Moses that took the leading role. In none of them were Pharaoh’s magicians mentioned. All these plagues were reversed and the reversal was part of the demonstration of Yahweh’s power.<sup>80</sup> (It is fairly clear that two other plagues, those of the boils and the gnats, do not come from E but rather from the Priestly author. The priestly author has his own version of the first two plagues as well, and all four ‘priestly’ plagues – and these alone – involve Aaron in the action and mention Pharaoh’s magicians.)

In the seven Elohist plagues, Pharaoh agreed to Moses request whilst under pressure, but reverted to his uncompromising stand when the pressure was removed. In the later plagues, when it appeared that Pharaoh was about to give way, a phrase was introduced into the text that read, *“But Yahweh hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he did not let them go”*.<sup>81</sup> – exactly as had been promised to Moses before he left Midian. Even if that phrase was an editorial insert, it is clear that the Elohist wanted to show that Yahweh was controlling Pharaoh, for he quoted Yahweh as saying, *“I have hardened his*

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<sup>77</sup> Exodus 4:22. The use of the present tense ‘I say to you’ is legitimate here. It is used in the Authorised Version, which is fairly literal. No previous conversation need have taken place.

<sup>78</sup> Ex 5:3 – 6:1

<sup>79</sup> Ex 7: 14-18

<sup>80</sup> It is possible that the flies and deceased cattle were Yahwist, but the evidence for this is flimsy.

<sup>81</sup> Exodus 10:20, 10:27 and 11:10b.

*heart for the purpose of setting these signs of mine among them, so that you may tell your children...about how I abused Egypt ...and you will know that I am Yahweh.”*<sup>82</sup>

The Elohist increased the length and complexity of his description of these events as time progressed, so that he built towards a climax which comes in today’s bible at the start of chapter in which Moses declared Yahweh’s final threat to Pharaoh: -

*“About midnight I will go through Egypt. Every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the female slave who is behind the hand-mill, and all the firstborn of the livestock. Then there will be a loud cry throughout the whole land of Egypt, such as has never been or will ever be again. But not a dog of the Israelites shall growl— not at people, not at animals – so that you may know that Yahweh makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel. Then all these officials of yours shall come down to me, and bow low to me, saying, ‘Leave us, you and all the people who follow you.’ After that I will leave.”*

And in hot anger Moses left Pharaoh and called the elders of Israel together and instructed them:-

*“Go out and take a lamb for your families, and kill the pass-over. You shall take a bunch of hyssop, and dip it in the blood that is in a basin, and touch the lintel and the two side posts with the blood that is in the basin; and none of you shall go out at the door of his house until the morning. For Yahweh will pass through to strike Egypt; and when he sees the blood upon the lintel, and on the two side posts, Yahweh will pass over the door, and will not permit the destroyer to come into your houses to strike you.”*

And at midnight,

*Yahweh struck down all the firstborn in the Land of Egypt as Moses had indicated, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on the throne to the firstborn of the prisoner who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock...<sup>83</sup>*

Pharaoh rose up in the night, and went to Moses and Aaron and said, *“Get up, Go from my people, you and the Israelites! Go! Worship Yahweh... “*. And the Israelites left in haste, their bread still unleavened, because *‘they had been driven out of Egypt and did not have time to prepare food for themselves’* (Exodus 12:39). And they took with them the Egyptian’s gold and silver, for thus *‘they plundered the Egyptians’*. (12:36).

The Elohist’s account of Israelite’s struggle with the Egyptians began with Pharaoh’s attempt at culling the male Israelite children at birth and ended with Yahweh’s culling of the firstborn of all Egypt and of them driving them the Israelites out. I

In this account Elohim did not lead them out by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was shorter: -

The Exodus	
Event	E Text (Exodus)
Threat to Egypt’s firstborn	11:1-8
Passover and ...	12:21-23
D: Passover	12:24-27
...Israelites depart	12:29-36&37b-39
D: Consecration of firstborn	13:1-16
Pharaoh’s pursuit	13:17-19 & 14:5b & 7 & 11-12 & 19a & 20a & 25a
Miriam’s song	15:20-21
D: Listen	15:25b-26
Water at Meribah	17:2-7
Fight with Amelek	17:8-16
Jethro’s visit	18:1-27

*For Elohim thought, “If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt”*

So Elohim led the people by the way of the wilderness and the Sea of Reeds. The Elohist noted that : -

*“The Israelites went out of the land of Egypt prepared for battle. And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph who had required a solemn oath of the Israelites, saying, “Elohim will surely take notice of you, and then you must carry my bones with you out of*

<sup>82</sup> Ex 10:1-2

<sup>83</sup> Ex 11:4-8 & 12:21-27 & 29-30

here.”

*But the hearts of Pharaoh and his staff were changed toward the people, and they said, “What have we done? We have let the Israelites go and lost their service!” So he took 600 chariots – chosen from all of Egypt’s chariots - with officers over them all.*

But the Israelites’ resolve was weak and they cried out sarcastically to Moses, “Was it because of a lack of graves in Egypt that you took us to die in the wilderness...? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die here...”, but: -

*The angel of Elohim who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel, and clogged their chariot wheels, so that they turned with difficulty.<sup>84</sup>*

This northern text, with its references to ‘*plundering the Egyptians*’, to leaving ‘*prepared for battle*’ and to the ‘*army of Israel*’<sup>85</sup>, seems to owe something to the memory of the Hyksos, their plundering of northern Egypt, and their retreat after the battle of Avaris. In this account, there is no miraculous parting of the waters; instead the Egyptians are delayed when their chariot wheels become clogged. It is this account which mentions the numbers - 600 ‘*eleph*’ of men on foot – coincidentally the same as the number of the Egyptian chariots pursuing them. ‘*Eleph*’ is often translated as ‘thousand’, but it can also be a military unit, a ‘troop’ or ‘platoon’, and that might make more sense here. By contrast, the Jahwist account never mentions an Israelite army when dealing with the Exodus: instead it is the ‘*people*’ that are pursued by an Egyptian army – not in order ‘*to drive them out*’, but in order to bring them back as slaves – and the Jahwist does not mention the number of people involved.

E’s fluent description of the Exodus that has been traced here is interrupted in the bible by insertions taken from other authors, a piece on the teaching of the meaning of Passover to children (Exodus 12:24-27), and a lengthy exposition on the consecration of the firstborn (13:1-16). These could be Elohist texts, but they have a style that would sit well within Deuteronomy. A similar comment can be made about the postscript to the story (15:26) in which Yahweh promises the people that, if they listen to his voice, they will not suffer the sicknesses that had been visited upon the Egyptians ‘*because I am Yahweh your healer*’. The general view is that it is likely that a Deuteronomist hand, writing a century or so after the Elohist, was involved at some stage in the editorial process through which today’s text passed before reaching its final form. The first insertion endorses the Passover in Egypt as the basis for future celebrations of the Passover. However, the painting of blood on the door lintels was not incorporated into the later ritual as described in Deuteronomy 16, so who endorsed it here? Is an editor mimicking Deuteronomist language, or was there a version of the ritual that did include these elements, whilst mainstream practice dropped them? The material in Exodus 13 even more clearly Deuteronomist; it is echoed in Deuteronomy 16:3b - 8. Whatever their source, these insertions seem to have been placed here by someone who was concerned to establish the theology, even at some cost to the fluency of the E’s narrative.

The main Elohist narrative resumed with the Israelites celebrating their escape by quoting from the ancient song: -

*Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her, with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them:*

*“Sing unto Yahweh, for he has triumphed gloriously.  
Horses and drivers, he has thrown into the sea”.<sup>86</sup>*

Then in Exodus 17: 2-7, the Elohist returned to the problem of dealing with the complaints from the people. Earlier it was the idea that it would have been better to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert; now the problem was water: they were dying of thirst. Yahweh instructed Moses as to how he was to obtain water from the rock at a place. The place was called Masah (Hebrew for ‘temptation’) and Meribah (Hebrew for ‘strife’). P has a version of this story that can be found in Numbers 20 - a story that is very similar at a place also called Meribah. In this E text, however, Moses is told to ‘*walk on ahead of*

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<sup>84</sup> Ex 14: 11-12, 19a, 20a, 25a (5a and 7 may also have been part of the E text)

<sup>85</sup> NIV and NRSV both have ‘army’; AV has ‘camp’. The Hebrew *machaneh* when used as ‘camp’ often means an army camp.

<sup>86</sup> Ex 15:20-21. There is a full version of this ancient poem in the early verses 1-18 – in that case it is considered to have been incorporated by J, who says it was sung by Moses and all the people.

*the people and take with you some of the elders...I will be standing before you there, on the rock/mountain, in Horeb*<sup>87</sup> Did Moses go on ahead of the people to Mount Horeb and did Yahweh reveal water for the people only once they were there? Or are the words *'in Horeb'* an erroneous editorial insertion? In the next scene, Moses is still with the people and neither has reached the Holy Mountain.

The battle with the Amelek at Rephidim followed and here Joshua entered the Elohist's story. Joshua was only mentioned by the Elohist – never by the Yahwist. Joshua came from Ephraim, the leading northern tribe. In the battle, the Israelites are successful whilst Moses kept his arms up, so Aaron and Hur supported Moses.

Then the Elohist described how Jethro came to meet him bringing Moses' wife and his two sons. Jethro gave some organisational advice to Moses including the establishment of an administrative and judicial hierarchy, and then departed – apparently alone – back to his own country.<sup>88</sup>

### The covenant

Israel camped opposite the mountain. Moses went up and received this promise from Yahweh:

*“And now, if you listen, really listen, to my voice and keep my commandments, you shall be my treasured possession out of all people, for all the earth is mine, and you will be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation”*

The promise was conditional, apparently allowing for the possibility that the people did not listen, for Yahweh did not declare that he would ensure their compliance in the way that he ensured Pharaoh's hardness of heart. The idea that Israel should be a priestly nation will be picked up in Deuteronomy – indeed the promise and the surrounding verses may be a Deuteronomic insertion.<sup>89</sup> Without the insertion, the passage would have read

*Then Moses went up to god and Yahweh said to Moses, “I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after.” And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet Elohim. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and Elohist answered him in thunder.*

*When all the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled in fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, “You speak to us and we will listen, but do not have Elohim speak with us – or we will die!”, But Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid, Elohim has come to test you, and to place the fear of him upon you – so that you will not sin.”<sup>90</sup>*

The people remained at a distance, and Yahweh declared to them the first of his laws, using Moses as an intermediary.

*You shall not make gods of silver alongside me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold. You need make for me only an altar of earth and slaughter on it your burnt offerings and your offerings of well-being, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you.<sup>91</sup>*

The opening verse concerning gods of silver and of gold may have evolved into the first and second commandments. As here expressed it seemed equally condemnatory of the cherubim in Jerusalem and the golden calves of Dan and Beth-el. There was no restriction as to where or who may slaughter meat. On the contrary rather it is stated that offerings could be made in *every* place where *“I have caused my name to be remembered.”* This would be consistent with the views of a dispossessed priesthood. It would appear that any believer was permitted to kill sheep and oxen provided he did it with due solemnity after making an altar of earth. The offering of well-being was a communion meal taken with God, since

<sup>87</sup> Exodus 17:6 Propp (1999) argues that *tsur* can be translated as 'mountain' as well as the more conventional 'rock'. Exodus 1-18 p 601 and associated note.

<sup>88</sup> Exodus 18

<sup>89</sup> Exodus 19:3b - 8 may be a Deuteronomic insertion. Ex 19: 5-6, quoted above, uses vocabulary that is similar to that of Deuteronomy.

<sup>90</sup> From Ex 19:3a & 9 & 16b-17 & 19 & 20:18-20.

<sup>91</sup> Ex 20:23-24. The Hebrew word *'zabach'*, can mean slaughter, kill or sacrifice.

most of the animal was eaten by the people bringing it to be slaughtered. Some scholars argue that this was probably the way all meat was eaten in ancient Israel, but there is no way to know for certain.

Then, starting immediately in what is now Exodus 21:1, the Elohist laid out the laws of the Covenant Code as if dictated by Yahweh on the holy mountain. This continues today throughout chapters

21 and 22 until 23:19. Many of these laws are very similar to some of the ancient laws of Mesopotamia, especially the laws of Hammurabi. They are likely to have come from a separate document – a law collection of mixed origins. This collection contained laws about slavery, violence, property, restitution, social and religious matters, the application of justice, the Sabbath, and the annual festivals. They are not the laws one would expect to be of immediate relevance to a group of escaped slaves, but rather the laws of a slave-owning, propertied establishment with a concern for law and order.

Covenant and Blasphemy	
Event	E Text (Exodus)
By the Mountain	19:2b-9 & 16b-17 & 19 & 20:18-26
Covenant Code	21:1-23:20
Angel, Covenant and Communion	23:20-24:11
Tablets of Stone	24:12-15a
Golden Calf	32:1-35
Moses with Yahweh	33:1-23

The last few laws in the Covenant code include laws which will form some of ‘Words’ with which be included in J’s Ritual Decalogue, the Ten words which J states were revealed to Moses on the Holy Mountain. One of these is an early version of the law of the Sabbath. Here it states that the fields shall be worked for six years and allowed to be fallow on the seventh, but with regard to persons and animals it states: -

*For six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall cease, so that your ox and your donkey may rest, and the son of your slave-woman and the resident foreigner may be refreshed.*<sup>92</sup>

You slave and your slave-woman were not to have rest under this code. The slave-woman’s son was permitted rest, probably because this person was also your son. This restriction of the Sabbath to free men and women would be relaxed in later versions of the rule of Sabbath.

Yahweh sent an angel to the people to watch over them. The people were required to listen to Yahweh’s voice. If they did, then Yahweh would be an enemy to their enemies. They were reminded not to worship the gods of the people into whose lands the angel will lead them, and promised that, if they worshipped Yahweh alone, then neither sickness, nor barrenness, nor bereavement would afflict them. And Yahweh said: -

*“I will send the ‘hornet’ ahead of you to drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites. I will not drive them out from before you in one year, or the land would become desolate and the wild animals would multiply against you. Little by little I will drive them out before you, until you have increased and possess the land. I will set your borders from the Reed Sea to the sea of the Philistines- from wilderness to the river.”*<sup>93</sup>

The author knew the local part of the Mediterranean as the Philistine Sea. The Philistines are generally thought to have been one of the ‘Sea Peoples’ who settled the coastal Levant in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century BCE between today’s Gaza and the Nile Delta. Israel did not enjoy a Mediterranean coastline in the author’s time. Indeed, it was not to acquire a Mediterranean port until it conquered Joppa in 148 BCE. The Reed Sea suggests a location near today’s Suez – perhaps one of the lakes that were linked up to form the Suez Canal. Wilderness is used here as a purely topographical term - the Hebrew text has no definite article but ‘the river’ does. Normally when people refer to ‘the river’ without naming it, they mean the local river – which in this case, in view of limited stretch of land between the Reed Sea and the Philistines, would be the Nile. It has been suggested that the expression ‘from wilderness to the river’ is simply a neat pairing implying everything, but then one would expect the definite article to be omitted from ‘the river’ as well, so that the text would have read “from wilderness to river”. Taken literally as written, the land described is bordered in the North by the Mediterranean and in the South by the Reed Sea; to the west by the river, (logically the Nile Delta) and to the east by the desert<sup>94</sup>. If this is linked to

<sup>92</sup> Exodus 23:12

<sup>93</sup> Exodus 23:28-31.

<sup>94</sup> It is true that other definitions of the Promised Land do refer to the Euphrates (for example Deuteronomy 1:7 and 11:24) but these do not mention the Suph Sea and the Sea of the Philistines as

the expulsion of the Hyksos, then the first ‘Promised Land’ was the land that they found immediately after they had crossed the Reed Sea.

But whilst at the Holy Mountain, Yahweh called to Moses, saying “*Come up to Yahweh, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu...*” The modern reader may well be puzzled by the sudden elevation of the previously unknown Nadab and Abihu, but the author’s contemporaries would not have been. They were the names of the sons of Jeroboam I, the first Israelite ruler recorded by the bible. By linking these names to Aaron, the Elohist was linking Aaron to Jeroboam and laying the groundwork for his charge against Aaron - that he committed the sin of Jeroboam in that he made a golden calf for the people to worship.

In his text, the Elohist related that Moses ascended the mountain to meet Yahweh. Moses experience on the mountain was linked by many literary associations to the story of Abraham when he ascended the mountain to sacrifice Isaac. Viewing these two passage side by side, with common words and emphasised by a bold type-face, the connections can be readily seen: -

Moses: Exodus 24:4b-14a	Abraham: Genesis 22:3-10 & 16-19
<p>...</p> <p><i><b>He (Moses) rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain ... He sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and peace offerings... Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins and half of the blood he dashed against the altar. <sup>7</sup> Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, “All that Yahweh has spoken we will do, and we will listen.”</b></i> ...Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, <sup>10</sup><i><b>and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. and he did not stretch out his hand on the chiefs of the people of Israel; and they beheld God, and they ate and drank.</b></i></p> <p><i>Yahweh said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain, and stay there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.”</i> So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of Elohim. To the elders, he had said, “<b>Wait here for us - until we come back to you....</b>”</p>	<p><i>So Abraham <b>rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out to the place that Elohim had shown him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place from a distance. Then Abraham said to his young men, “wait here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship - and then we will come back to you.”</b></i> Abraham <b>took</b> the wood of the burnt offering <b>and put</b> it on his son Isaac, and he <b>took</b> the fire in his hand and the knife. ...</p> <p><i>When <b>they came</b> to the place that God had shown him, Abraham <b>built an altar</b> there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and <b>put</b> him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham <b>stretched out his hand</b> and took the knife to kill his son.</i></p> <p><i>“By myself I have sworn, says the LORD: <b>Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son,</b> <sup>17</sup> I will indeed bless you, ... <b>because you have listened to my voice.</b>”</i></p>

There is a proliferation of common verbs (said, take and put, worship (or bow), rise early, do and listen, come, wait, come back) and phrases (build an altar, young men, stretch out his hand, at a distance). They demonstrate, at the very least, that the two passages have a common author. But these commonalities of language sound like devices whose purpose is to achieve a resonance between the two passages. Both leaders are accompanied by ‘young men’, both ‘rise early’ to make their burnt offering on the mountain, both build altars, both require others to ‘wait here – until we come back’, and whilst Abraham is rewarded because he listened and did what Elohim asked, Moses has the people promise that they too will listen and will do what Yahweh asks.

At the summit of the mountain, Moses was given the tablets of stone on which Yahweh had

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borders. Deuteronomy 1:7 describes it as being based on the Mountain of Amorites and all the places around it, whilst Deuteronomy 11:24 promises the land from the wilderness to Lebanon, from the river Euphrates to the ‘uttermost sea’. It seems that different authors have different views as to the extent of the Promised Land. Some commentators try and make all the descriptions of the Promised Land fit the same geographical entity and therefore apply the Euphrates mentioned in the Deuteronomic texts to the un-named river of Exodus. But the assumption that the Israelite perception of the intended land was constant across all time and all authors is not consistent with the texts.

written the law and commandment<sup>95</sup>. This can only mean the immediately preceding law and commandment – the Covenant Code. All the text from the ‘Covenant Code’ to the ‘giving of the tablets’ is continuously Elohist. There are no interruptions or insertions. The Elohist therefore did not believe that the words written on the tablets of stone formed the text that is now known as the Ten Commandments.

### Blasphemy

Whilst Moses was on the mountain waiting to receive from Yahweh the tablets of Stone which Yahweh had inscribed with the Covenant Code, the people, seeing Moses was delayed on the Mountain, gathered around Aaron and said *“Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; for we do not know what has become of this Moses...”* And Aaron was persuaded and made a golden calf using the gold rings from the ears of their wives, sons and daughters<sup>96</sup>. Then they all declared, *“These are your gods, Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.”* Why did the Elohist have them talk of gods (plural) when only one calf was made? This was possibly because he was quoting the phrase used by king Jeroboam, father of Nadab and Abihu, when he dedicated the calves that were set up in Israel at Dan and Bethel. The phrase was not accidental. It was repeated a few lines further down when Yahweh tells Moses what was going on in the camp. In neither instance was the plural an accidental slip of a copyist’s pen, since in both cases the plural was consistent with the surrounding grammar.<sup>97</sup> Aaron built an altar in front of the golden calf and called for a festival for Yahweh on the next day. The Elohist described that festival in words that initially echoed Moses’ experience on the holy mountain, for the people *“rose up early, and made burnt offerings and peace offerings and sat down to eat and drink”* But then people *‘got up to fool around’* – the same word used to describe Isaac’s fooling around with Rebecca or Sarah’s giggling response to the idea that she might get pleasure in her old age; so the eating and drinking seems to have gone on to include a bit of sex.

If the Exodus story was influenced by a recollection of the Hyksos’ departure from Egypt, then it is reasonable to speculate that this story would also have contained an echo of that event. The Hyksos worshipped the Canaanite ‘El’, whose symbol was a bull<sup>98</sup>. The survivors of Ahmose’s attack would have considered that ‘El’ had something to do with their escape, but yet their leaders in this story worshipped Yahweh. The Midianite Yahweh and the Canaanite El could thus have been the ‘gods’ that they believed had led them out of Egypt. The story recorded the people’s desire for an image of their traditional god, *‘because we don’t know what has become of this Moses’*. This makes sense both of the plural ‘gods’ and of Aaron’s declaration of a *‘festival for Yahweh’* alongside the commissioning of the statue of El’s symbol. Yahweh and El were to be celebrated together in the old way – with a feast and some fooling around. The historical evidence of settled Israel and the recorded declarations of the prophets show that the people never completely gave up the old religion.

In the text, Moses learnt what was going on from Yahweh, *“Your people, whom you brought up from the Land of Egypt have become corrupt”* and also heard Yahweh’s anger *“Now let me alone so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them.”* But Moses argued skilfully with Yahweh, pointing out that if the people are destroyed, the Egyptians would say that Yahweh had brought the people out of Egypt with evil intent, and Moses reminded Yahweh of his promises to the descendants of Abraham. And Yahweh changed his mind: -

*Then Moses turned and went down the mountain, carrying the two tablets of the covenant in his hands, tablets that were written on both sides, written on the front and on the back. The tablets were the work of god, and the writing was the writing of god engraved upon the tablets.*

*When Joshua heard the noise of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, “There is a noise of war in the camp.” But he said,  
“It is not the sound of singing in victory,*

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<sup>95</sup> Exodus 24:12

<sup>96</sup> Whether this was a cast or a plated calf is difficult to tell from the Hebrew. ‘Masseka’ could mean ‘metal’ (thus Propp in Exodus; Anchor Bible p 550). A wooden calf plated with metal could be destroyed by ‘burning’ as the text says was done in this case (v 20). Burning would be inappropriate for a cast statue. Translators can make cases both for it being formed (v 4) by a ‘mould’ as in NRSV or an ‘engraving tool’ as in the KJV.

<sup>97</sup> When Nehemiah reminds people of God’s mercy by referring to this incident – centuries after the writing of E and the destruction of Jeroboam’s kingdom - he puts the phrase in the singular.

<sup>98</sup> The Hebrew talks of an *‘egel’*, usually translated as ‘calf’, but it could equally mean a young bull in its prime (Propp: Exodus; Anchor Bible; p 550.)

*nor the sound of singing in defeat.  
It's just the sound of sinning that I hear.<sup>99</sup>  
As soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses' anger burned hot,  
and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. He took the  
calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and  
made the Israelites drink it.<sup>100</sup>*

The Elohist text does not contain any account of a second copy of the tablets being made. Thus the Elohist implied it was fraudulent to suggest that intact tablets of stone were contained in the Ark – the claim made by the Jerusalem priesthood. If intact they must be a forgery. The best that the Jerusalem priesthood can claim was that they had the fragments of the tablets. Worse still, the Elohist was claiming that the first head of the Aaronite priesthood committed the blasphemy of making a golden calf at the very moment that God was giving his commandments to Moses. Joshua, the northerner, on the other hand, was not there but had joined Moses – we are led to presume – when he was part way down the mountain.

This disposes of the claims of the Jerusalem temple priests concerning themselves and their artefacts. But the symbols of the northern religion as practised by the priests of Dan and Beth-El were the golden calves - or bulls - that had been erected there. And the proper response to such idolatrous statuary, in the author's eyes, was that they should be burnt, ground up, mixed with water and forced down the throats of the idolaters. The anger of the author burns through here. It was an anger that could be shared by the Shiloh priests. Friedman argues that no other priesthood would hold these views, or tell this story.<sup>101</sup> It was an anger that could have been further inflamed by the refusal of the Aaronite priesthood to permit refugee priests from Israel to practice in the temple at Jerusalem. There probably would have been refugee priests seeking to officiate there even before the destruction of Israel by Assyria. They certainly would have been there afterwards.

In the text, Moses asked Aaron why he did it; Aaron blamed the people; his excuse, "*You know the people - they are bent on evil*" was flimsy. The accusation against Aaron was very serious.

*Then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, "Whoever is on Yahweh's side, Come to me!" And all the sons of Levi gathered around him. He said to them, "Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel, 'Each of you, put your sword on your thigh! Go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill your brother, your friend and your neighbour'" The sons of Levi did as Moses commanded, and about three thousand of the people fell on that day. Moses said, "Today, you have ordained yourselves for the service of Yahweh, each one at the cost of a son or a brother, and so have brought a blessing on yourselves this day."<sup>102</sup>*

Through this fratricidal bloodshed the Levites were ordained for the service of Yahweh. They were not just the sons of Aaron, but all the sons of Levi. But they were not non-Levitical priests at Beth-el; let the reader take note! The logic of the story may leave the reader surprised that Aaron and his sons survived. They did because they had to; Aaronite priests were an established fact in the author's day. The author may not have liked it, but he had to accept it. Nevertheless, this passage ended with an assertion of Moses primacy;

*Thus Yahweh used to speak with Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend  
..., but his young assistant, Joshua son of Nun, would go outside the tent.<sup>103</sup>*

The tent was the tent where Moses met Yahweh

*Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise and stand, each of them, at the entrance of their tents and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent. When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and Yahweh*

<sup>99</sup> There is a pun in the Hebrew text; 'sound' is the translation of the Hebrew 'anot' in this passage. But then text reads '*It is just the sound ('anot') of 'annot' that I hear*'. The Samaritan Targum and the Syriac version read 'sins' here which may be a clue to the meaning of the obscure 'annot'. There wordplay in English – not sound of singing, but the sound of sinning – is fortuitous.

<sup>100</sup> Ex 32: 15-20.

<sup>101</sup> See R.E.Friedman's 'Who wrote the bible' for a more extensive development of this argument.

<sup>102</sup> This text (Ex.32: 26-29) is part of the continuous Elohist writing comprising all of Exodus chapters 32 and 33

<sup>103</sup> Exodus 33:11

would speak with Moses.<sup>104</sup>.

Joshua, the Northerner, stood guard over it. The tent was an important symbol of the presence of Yahweh to these northern priests; as important to them as the Ark of the Covenant was to Southerners. The Ark was never mentioned in this northern epic; nor was the tent in the Yahwist text. The bible states that the 'Tent of the meeting' had once been in Shiloh (1 Samuel 2:22). It also states that a tent (Hebrew 'ohel') was placed within the temple, but this may not have been the original tent, but rather a new tent that David pitched there in readiness for the Ark (2 Samuel 6:17). There was a slightly larger outer tent (Hebrew 'mishkan') which covered the inner one (Exodus 26:13). This may have been the tent that the Shiloh priests had preserved.

Moses prayed to Yahweh. He asked to be taught Yahweh's ways and prayed that Yahweh would accompany them on their travels. Yahweh answered:

*"I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favour in my sight and I know you by name."*

*Then Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray."*

*He said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name 'Yahweh'. I will be gracious to those whom I will be gracious, and will have compassion on those for whom I will have compassion. But you cannot see my face, for no man can see my face and live." But Yahweh said, "See, there is a place by me, where you can stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft in the rock, and I will cover you with my hand while I pass by; then I will take away my hand, and you may see my back, but my face shall not be seen."<sup>105</sup>*

#### After the holy mountain

When the people complained it displeased Yahweh, and his anger was ignited: -

*Then the fire of Yahweh burnt amongst them, and consumed some outlying parts of the camp. The people cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to Yahweh and the fire abated....<sup>106</sup>*

After the Holy Mountain	
Event	E Text: Numbers
Manna & Quails	11:1-35
Leprous Miriam	12:1-15
Snakes	21:4b-8
Balaam	See text and notes
	E Text: Deuteronomy
Death of Moses	31:14-15

But the people continued to complain...

*The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites wept again and said, "If only we had meat to eat. We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing; the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, the garlic; but now our appetite is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."<sup>107</sup>*

And so Moses prayed to Yahweh, "Where am I to get meat to feed this people? ... I am not able to carry this people all alone... if this is the way you are going to treat me, kill me...". So Yahweh ordered Moses to gather seventy elders, to whom some of his spirit would be passed, and to tell the people to consecrate themselves in preparation for a whole month of meat-eating. Some of Moses spirit went from him to the elders and *they prophesied, but they did not do so again....*

*Then a wind went out from Yahweh, and it brought quails from the sea<sup>108</sup>, and let them fall beside the camp.... But while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was consumed, the*

<sup>104</sup> Exodus 33:8-9

<sup>105</sup> Exodus 33:17-19

<sup>106</sup> Numbers 11:1-3. This is the next E material in today's bible after Ex 33:23. There is no E material in chapters 34-40 of Exodus, nor anywhere in Leviticus, nor in the first 10 chapters of Numbers.

<sup>107</sup> In summer, small quantities of 'honey -dew' form on Tamarisk trees. It is known locally as 'mann'. It can be distilled into a flavouring syrup for drinks. (Propp; Exodus 1-18; p 600)

<sup>108</sup> To this day quails migrate across Sinai in great numbers, flying low over the land, so that they may be virtually snatched from the air.

*anger of Yahweh was kindled against the people and Yahweh struck the people with a very great plague. ...there they buried the people who had the craving... Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses' Kushite woman whom he had married.<sup>109</sup> ... and they said, "Has Yahweh spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us as well?" And Yahweh heard it. Now the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face the earth. Suddenly Yahweh said to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, "Come out, you three, to the tent of the meeting," ...And he said, "Hear my words:*

*When there is a prophet among you,  
I, Yahweh, make myself known to him in visions;  
I speak to him in dreams.  
Not so with my servant Moses;  
He is faithful in all my house.  
With him I speak mouth to mouth-  
Clearly and not in riddles;  
And he will see the form of Yahweh.*

*Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?"*

*And the anger of Yahweh was kindled against them, and he departed. When the cloud went away from over the tent, Miriam had become leprous, white as snow. And Aaron turned towards Miriam and saw that she was leprous. Then Aaron said to Moses, "Oh, my lord, do not punish us for a sin that we have so foolishly committed." ... And Moses cried out to Yahweh, "O God, please heal her." But Yahweh said to Moses, "...Let her be shut out of the camp for seven days, and after that she may be brought in"<sup>110</sup>*

This story reinforced the supremacy of Moses over Aaron, and by implication, the Mosaic tradition of priesthood over the descendants of Aaron – the priests in control of the Jerusalem Temple.

*After this, the people set out from the settlement and camped in the wilderness of Paran; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against Elohim and against Moses ... then Yahweh sent poisonous serpents among the people ... so many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against Yahweh and against you; pray to Yahweh to take away the serpents from us." ... So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone; that person would look at the serpent of bronze, and live.<sup>111</sup>*

The Elohist is thought to have incorporated a well-known Balaam story into his text at this point. Most of the narrative that surrounds these poems is generally considered to have come from the Elohist. The poems were probably composed in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE – possibly in Gilead, where other Balaam stories have been found written on plastered walls. In the prose passages, the name of god is either Elohim or Yahweh, but in the quoted poetry, which comes from a different tradition, the name Elohim is not used<sup>112</sup>. The Elohist's purpose seems to have been to incorporate an independent vindication of Israel's acquisition of land in Canaan and Moab from a prophet with an international reputation. Most scholars argue that two sources (E and J) can be detected in the Balaam stories based on the presence of a certain amount of duplication and contradiction. For example, they point out that god first tells Balaam to go to Balak (Numbers 22:20) and then sends an angel to prevent him from going (22:21-31). But others argue that such contradictions are not conclusive, and that attention should be paid to the language.<sup>113</sup> The language, however, is such that no clear-cut division can be definitively made; it is mainly similar to E's language elsewhere, but there are some flashes that are typically J, but not exclusively so. Those who argue that the evidence does not justify a division would assign the whole

<sup>109</sup> Kushan is a village in Midian, Zipporah's country, hence she was perhaps Moses' 'Kushite' wife. But Kush is also the Old Testament name for Ethiopia, and Josephus (but not the Elohist) tells a story of Moses leading an Egyptian army to the south and contracting a marriage there (see Antiquities 2:10).

<sup>110</sup> Numbers 11:31 – 12: 14

<sup>111</sup> Numbers 12:16 & 21:4b-9

<sup>112</sup> Numbers 23:21 The phrase 'Yahweh his god (*elohim*) is with him' is not an exception to the rule concerning the non-use of Elohim as the name of the deity, since '*elohim*' is here used in its descriptive sense – not as a name.

<sup>113</sup> Friedman in 'The Bible with sources revealed' assigns virtually the whole Balaam periscope to E; see p 280. Levine in AB's 'Numbers 21-36' provides a detailed analysis of the material but concludes the material emanates 'from a very different circle of biblical authors'. (p 208).

episode to E or to an unknown source. Here the division that Jo Ann Hackett claims to be the consensus position will be followed – albeit with a few minor adjustments. Essentially the introduction (Numbers 22:2-8) is divided between the two sources. Thereafter, the tale of the talking donkey and the introduction to the fourth oracle is assigned to J, and all the rest to E. The reasons for making the J assignments will be discussed when the J text is described in chapter 9.<sup>114, 115</sup>

In the probable Elohist version, Moab was in fear of the Israelites because they were so numerous, and

*Moab felt disgust for the people of Israel. Now Balak son of Zippor was king of Moab at that time. He summoned (Balaam), saying, “A people has come out of Egypt and has spread over the eye of the land; and have settled next to me. Come now, curse this people for me, since they are stronger than I; perhaps then I shall be able to defeat them”.*<sup>116</sup>

Moab’s officials went to Balaam and gave him the message sent from Balak, their King. They were invited to stay the night. But Elohim spoke to Balaam and said, “*You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed.*” The officials were sent home. So Balak sent higher ranking officials to Balaam. On arrival, Balaam warned them, “*Even if Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of Yahweh my god, to do less or more.*” Nevertheless, they too were invited to stay the night. And this time Elohim told him to go with the men, but only to say what Elohim told him to say. When he met Balak, Balaam was taken to a point where he could see a part of the Israelite camp. Seven altars were built and the two of them sacrificed a bull and a ram on each. Balaam wandered off, hoping to meet god, did so, and returned to give Balak the first oracle in which he declaimed that he cannot curse those whom El has not cursed, nor Yahweh denounced.

They move to a different site and try again, but with much the same result; Balaam in his second oracle points out that El does not change his mind. They move to a third place and sacrifice a third time, and the ‘spirit of Elohim’<sup>117</sup> came upon him and he said: -

*The oracle of Balaam son of Beor,  
the oracle of the man, whose eye is clear,  
The oracle of one who hears the words of El,  
who sees the vision of the Shaddai,  
who falls down, but with eyes uncovered:*

*How fair are your tents, O Jacob,  
your encampments, O Israel!*

After which Balak said “*I summoned you to curse my enemies, but instead you have blessed them these three times. Now get out! Go home!*”

In this version of the story, Balaam behaves like a classic prophet; even if what he has to say is unpopular, he cannot do other than repeat what Yahweh has told him. “*I am not able to go beyond the word of Yahweh*” He cannot be bribed or bullied into doing or saying anything other than his perception of the will of the gods, which in this case includes Yahweh who he also worships<sup>118</sup>.

The story served to describe the passage of the Israelites through Moab, and thus to the first of the territories they would settle. There does not appear to a story concerning the sending of spies into the land, at least not here<sup>119</sup>.

<sup>114</sup> ABD: Balaam: Jo Ann Hackett

<sup>115</sup> The adjustments are mainly responses to the criticisms of Friedman. The text assumed to be E, including poems quoted by E, is here taken as Numbers 22: 3 & 4b & 5b-6a & 7b & 8-20 & 36 & 38 & 41-23:30 & 24:2-14a & 24:25

<sup>116</sup> Number 22:3 & 5b-6a. Compare ‘disgust’ with Exodus 1:12 (E) and ‘the eye of the land’ with Exodus 10:5 & 15 (E).

<sup>117</sup> The ‘spirit of god’ is used by P and E (Gen 41:38) but not by J.

<sup>118</sup> The evidence from Gilead suggests that the people worshiped a pantheon of gods whose names were El, Shaddai, Shaggar and Astar. It is possible that they also knew of Yahweh.

<sup>119</sup> But a northern tradition may underlie the spy story of Deuteronomy 1:22-46. In that version, the sending out of the spies was the people’s idea and they were sent out for military reasons. As in the P and J versions of the story, the people were afraid to enter the land and Yahweh was incensed, but the story exculpates Moses from any blame – an indication of a Northern tradition. However there are traces of J and P in the story as well, since the author says the spies report ‘melted’ the people’s hearts (a J phrase)

Instead: -

*Yahweh said to Moses, "Your time to die is near; call Joshua and present yourselves in the tent of the meeting, so that I may commission him." Moses and Joshua went and presented themselves in the tent of the meeting, and Yahweh appeared in the tent in a pillar of cloud; the pillar of cloud stood at the entrance to the tent. Then Yahweh commissioned Joshua son of Nun and said, "Be strong and bold, for you shall bring the Israelites to the land I have promised them. And I shall be with you."*

*And Moses died by Yahweh's word. And no one knows his burial place to this day*<sup>120</sup>

### Conclusion

Thus the Elohist brought his Epic to an end. The scope of the work, as promised in its introduction, covered the time in Egypt, their departure, the revelation of Yahweh to them in the wilderness and their eventual arrival at the border of the land that had been conditionally promised to them. The main hero of the Epic is Moses, the one man whom Yahweh spoke to 'face to face, as a friend'. It did not concern itself with the foundation of the state of Israel, or with its history, or with the fateful events that might have been unfolding as it was being written – although traces of these things can be found embedded in the material. Its purpose was to record the life of Moses as a servant of Yahweh, and to place that life in its context against the background to the foundation of the religion whose greatest prophet he was.

The text we have may not be complete; some parts may have been lost in editing or copying, but what can be recovered is a coherent, consistent whole. It incorporates older, probably oral material such as the Isaac sacrifice, the Joseph story, the covenant code and possibly the Balaam oracles. The recovered text seems to flow even when the other texts with which it is now interspersed are removed. Equally, the material that remains if the Elohist passages are removed is also coherent as shall be shown in the following chapters.

The Elohist text has a consistent literary style and consistent theological and nationalist themes.

The Elohist never troubled his readers with the birth stories of his heroes; Abraham, Jacob and Moses are all introduced as grown men. His record of the birth of ancestors of the northern tribes, important to his national tradition, was short and concise.

The Epic stressed the 'fear of God'. One of the names of God found only in this text is the 'Fear of Isaac'. God may be harsh on his chosen servants, requiring the sacrifice of Abraham's son, marking Jacob with a permanent limp, threatening to kill Moses, compelling Pharaoh to refuse to let the Israelites go. In this text, it is made clear that Elohim can be so terrifying that it is safer to have priests intercede with him on behalf of the people rather than have the people approach God directly. God can be enigmatic saying 'I am who I am', 'I will be gracious to those to whom I will be gracious', "merciful to those to whom I will be merciful". Mankind should not expect to understand the actions of the Almighty. God speaks to those he chooses through dreams and visions.

The Elohist disliked the Aaronite priesthood. Indeed, if the people keep his commandments, they shall be for him a priestly people, and he will preserve them, for he is the God that heals. The covenant at Horeb was the central event. The Elohist called the people to obedience to the covenant.

The Elohist was no respecter of kings. They were either not mentioned, or they were defeated by the prophets - Moses defeated the Pharaoh; Balaam rebuked the king of Moab. Yet this is a nationalist Israelite work, favouring people from the Northern country. In the importance he gave to the covenant, and in the total lack of importance he gave to the secular powers, to national shrines and to the rites of sacrifice, his call was similar to that of the prophets.

It was the foundation story of the Mosaic Priesthood.

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and he refers to the P story where the people are concerned for their 'little ones who could become spoil'. All this indicates that the Deuteronomistic story was written after P and J

<sup>120</sup> Deuteronomy 31:14, 15 & 23 & 34:5(part) & 6b. The allocation of the last two lines is uncertain. In 'Who Wrote the Bible' Friedman assigned 34:5-6 to the Elohist along with the preceding verses; in 'The Bible with Sources Revealed' he assigned them to the Yahwist along with the following verse. "Yahweh's word" is literally 'Yahweh's mouth' and 'mouth' is often used in this sense by E and P, but Moses was the one person to whom Yahweh spoke 'mouth to mouth' (Numbers 12:8 – also E). The only other person of whom it is said that 'no-one one knows the burial place' is Elijah, and he was the other great prophet whose story is preserved through northern tradition.

