

FORM CRITICISM AND THE NARRATIVES IN GENESIS

from John H. Hayes, *An Introduction to Old Testament Study* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979)

- I. Must read and appreciate the Genesis narratives as *legends*
 - A. Criteria to distinguish legend from history
 1. Mode of transmission is oral (not written)
 2. Subject matter: common people's concerns, private and family relations (not public occurrences or politically important matters)
 3. Sources: traditions and imagination (not eyewitness accounts and records)
 4. Type of action narrated: incredible
 5. Style and intent: poetic (not prosaic); aims to please, inspire, instruct, move (not simply to relate facts)
 - B. Basic constituent unit of Genesis is the *particular legend*
 - C. Olrik's laws about composition of oral literature
 1. Law of opening and closing
 2. Law of repetition
 3. Law of three (characters and repetition of events)
 4. Law of two to a scene
 5. Law of twin and contrasts
 6. Law of schematization
 7. Law of one or more major scenes
 8. Law of logic
 9. Law of unity of plot
 10. Law of concentration on leading character
 - D. Patriarchal legends of three types
 1. Historical
 2. Ethnographic
 3. Etiological (answer "Why?" "How?")
 - a. Ethnological—circumstances in the life of a people
 - b. Etymological—name of something (never appears alone, but in conjunction with other types)
 - c. Ceremonial or cultic—origin of cultic places and practices
 - d. Geological—uniqueness of a locality
- II. Two main groups of legends in Genesis
 - A. Myths re: origin of world and beginnings
 - B. Myths re: patriarchs of Israel
 - C. Groups differ in many ways
 1. Subject matter
 2. Spatio-temporal setting (remote v. imminent)
 3. Main actors (Gods v. humans)
 4. Polytheistic v. monotheistic
 5. Origin in questions re: world phenomena and humanity v. local phenomena and tribal history
- III. Origin and *Sitz im Leben* of legends
 - A. Origin no longer discernable
 - B. Folk literature
 - C. *Sitz im Leben* in folk culture
 1. Evening entertainment and at festivals
 2. Songs of professional bards
 3. Cultic legends at sanctuary or religious festival
 - D. Development to stage we have?
 1. Legend-cycles formed of stories with same or related themes, characters, and/or historical occurrences
 2. Probably already connected this far at the oral stage
 3. Single legend may be embellished to create a "novella" (e.g., Joseph story)
 4. Collection into J/E/P sources
 5. Formation of legends ended in pre-monarchic times
 6. Early monarchic period saw legends "re-modeled" into more national one
- IV. This complex process of the development of the legends makes it impossible to use them to reconstruct patriarchal history (i.e., oral tradition has skewed facts)