

The Genesis of Fiction

Modern Novelists as Biblical Interpreters

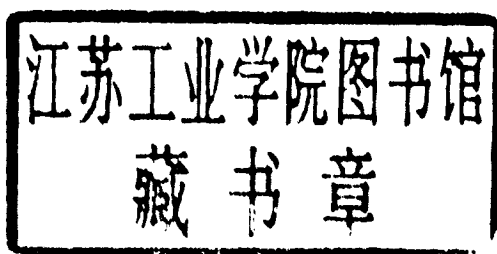
Terry R. Wright



The Genesis of Fiction

Modern Novelists as Biblical Interpreters

TERRY R. WRIGHT
Newcastle University, UK



ASHGATE

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Preface

I should at the outset explain the title of this book, one of those self-consciously ‘clever’ titles which work on several levels. It refers most obviously to novels which take stories from the Book of Genesis as their starting point, attempting to make sense of them in the twentieth century. Secondly, the book explores the ways in which fiction is generated, how one story prompts the telling of another, a process which can be traced back to the Bible itself (stories from Genesis themselves reworking earlier Babylonian and Sumerian accounts of creation and the flood). Rabbinic midrash, to be discussed along with modern theories of intertextuality in the opening chapter, also found it useful when interpreting biblical narrative to do so creatively, producing additional stories to explain details which were unclear or only implicit in the original. There are additional intertextual allusions in my own title, firstly to Nietzsche, whose books on *The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Genealogy of Morals* lurk in the background of this study. Some of the authors considered in this book, most notably Thomas Mann, were familiar with Nietzsche’s strong misreading of the Book of Genesis, his admiration for the power of the original stories being tempered by a dislike of the way in which they had been maimed firstly in the process of redaction (by the Priestly Writer) and then by generations of weak institutional appropriation (the churches instructing their emasculated members how to read them). Finally, to pull the last allusion out of my title, there is a tribute here to Frank Kermode, whose study of *The Genesis of Secrecy* provided me with a model of the way a literary critic could bring narrative theory to bear upon the Bible.

Kermode puzzled over the significance of ‘the boy in the shirt’ who flees from the Garden of Gethsemane in Mark 14:51-2, whether he is a secret lover, an authorial signature representing Mark himself, or simply what Roland Barthes called a ‘catalyser’, a piece of insignificant detail giving an air of realism to the scene.¹ Gabriel Josipovici asked similar questions of ‘the man in the field’ who directs Joseph towards his brothers in Genesis 37:15-17, a mysterious figure whose role in the story seems altogether unnecessary but is made highly significant both by the midrash and by Thomas Mann, who identify him as an angel.² For the midrash the angel is protective, a messenger of God sent to accomplish his providential plan (that Joseph should be sold to the Midianites and taken into Egypt, where he would be joined by the rest of his family). For Mann, as we shall see, the angel is much more ambiguous, a literary device to emphasise the moral freedom and resultant complexity of human beings.

These details are illustrative of the difficulties of reading an ancient text in the modern period, the inevitability of our bringing very different expectations and

1 Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), p.53.

2 Gabriel Josipovici, *The Book of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), pp.276ff.

questions to the text from those brought (and anticipated by the authors) at the time of writing. The rewriting of biblical stories by modern novelists nearly always brings changes; the novelists inevitably bring to the original stories horizons of understanding vastly different from those pertaining when the stories were first told. I have to use the plural for these horizons both because of the plurality of worldviews circulating in the modern world and because of the very different times at which the biblical stories were first told.

The Book of Genesis, of course, is a collection of stories from vastly different times and cultures brought together and to some extent harmonised by later editors. The details of this process, the whole, now less confidently-held, documentary hypothesis will be discussed in more detail in chapter one. These stories, of course, were never supposed to be taken literally though they nevertheless contain important 'truths' about the purpose of creation, the moral responsibility of human beings and the mixed, not always pleasant, nature of their existence. Although in some ways 'primitive', lacking the sophistication and complexity of the modern novel (they are certainly much shorter), these stories remain powerful and provocative, which is why they have stimulated so many modern writers to emulate them, to produce their own versions of the stories, attempting to tease out their mysteries and ambiguities, to make sense of them, for our own time.

I have chosen to focus upon six such novelists, each of whom engages deeply with one of the key stories in Genesis. My choice reflects my own preferences, though I hope that others will share my view that the questions these writers pose, along with some of the answers they propose, are worth careful consideration. I have limited myself to only one novelist per story because in each case I want to explore the whole intertextual process, not only the central encounter between biblical text and novel but the role of other intervening intertexts, in particular of books that feed into the readings the novelists produce. I want, in other words, to consider in each case where the novelists come from as well as the texts at which they finally arrive, the creative process as well as the product.

Another factor in my choice is the extent to which these authors were aware of, and in some cases modelled their work on, rabbinic midrash, which I will discuss in more detail in the opening chapter. It is enough for now to say that all the novelists considered in this book were aware of rabbinic midrash, some rather more than others. Twain's own publishing firm, for example, published an anthology of rabbinic midrash while Steinbeck had his own editor consult Louis Ginzberg, author of *The Legends of the Jews*, about the translation of a key Hebrew word in Genesis chapter 4. Winterson's knowledge of midrash, as far as I have been able to discover, is indirect (through her reading and reviewing of Harold Bloom) but both Jenny Diski and Anita Diamant have acknowledged serious study of midrash. Thomas Mann, as I will demonstrate in the final chapter, incorporates into *Joseph and His Brothers* whole passages from two German anthologies of midrash. This awareness of the midrashic tradition, as I will argue in chapter one, on the part of all these novelists reinforces the plausibility of the seemingly extravagant claims made by Geoffrey Hartman, Harold Fisch and others in *Midrash and Literature* that there is some historical and intertextual continuity between the rabbinic retelling

of biblical narrative and the way in which a number of modern novelists attempt to make sense of these stories.³

The novelists are considered in the order in which the stories which they retell appear in the Book of Genesis. This almost (but not quite) coincides with the chronological order in which the novels were written (Diski's novels appeared just after Diamant's while *Joseph and His Brothers* is the most obvious exception, chronologically prior to all but Twain). I begin in chapter two with Mark Twain agonising over the story of Adam and Eve at the turn of the twentieth century; he started writing about the subject in the 1890s, in fact, but his obsession continued until his death in 1910. I could, of course, have selected D.H. Lawrence for this opening chapter, since he too was fascinated by Adam and Eve, as by the Flood, but I have written of his rewriting of the Bible elsewhere.⁴ John Steinbeck, the subject of chapter three, is one of a number of modern novelists to retell the story of Cain,⁵ but his, I would argue, is by far the most sustained interrogation and supplementation of that tale. Jeanette Winterson, as I acknowledge at the beginning of chapter four, is only one of a number of recent novelists who have retold the story of the Flood (I give the details) but her engagement with this particular story is both more prolonged (over time) and incisive (with an awareness of what is at stake for readers of the Bible). She may play with the biblical narrative but she does so in a manner which contributes to our understanding of the difficulties in the original text.

It is in the work of the last three writers studied in this book that the engagement not only with the biblical stories but with their midrashic interpretations becomes the most sustained. This is partly, of course, because both Jenny Diski and Anita Diamant, the subjects of chapters five and six, are Jewish. Having returned at a relatively late and self-conscious stage of their lives to their religious roots, they have been delighted to discover their rabbinic precursors. In the case of Thomas Mann, for whose four-volume novel written over sixteen years the word sustained is less than adequate, there were other historical forces at work in Germany from the late 1920s which made a return to the Jewish roots of western culture compelling. Seeking a counterbalance to Nazi propaganda, Mann discovered in the religion he had previously scorned the values necessary to withstand the threat of fascism.

None of these writers, it should be recognised, subscribe to any form of 'orthodoxy', though all at some stage of their lives have belonged to communities of faith. It is partly the tension between their own personal response to the biblical stories and that of the communities to which they once adhered, it could be argued, which forced them away from 'orthodoxy'. All, however, can be called 'religious' in the broadest etymological sense of that term, driven by temperament and inclination to seek meaning and purpose in life, to bind their lives into some kind of unity. This is why they continue to read the Bible in this attempt to find significance, even if the

3 Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick, eds, *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

4 T.R. Wright, *D.H. Lawrence and the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

5 See Ricardo Quinones, *The Changes of Cain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

meanings they eventually find there are at odds with orthodoxy. Mark Twain's rage and indignation at the doctrine of the Fall as a harmful misreading of the opening chapters of Genesis is perhaps the most extreme example of this although Winterson's subversive account of the Flood and Diski's revulsion at the traditional readings of the Akedah follow close behind. All three find the 'God' of the original narrative either incomprehensible or reprehensible. Of the other novelists considered, neither Steinbeck nor Diamant give much credence to God; only Mann makes a sustained attempt to provide an alternative theological understanding of the leading character in the original Book of Genesis.

That in itself is significant: modern writers, it appears, have difficulty in giving imaginative substance to the concept of God. Nor is He the only character with whom they have difficulties: the patriarchs too come out of the re-writing process in a fairly poor light, not least for their treatment of their wives and daughters. This emerges most clearly in the work of Diamant and Diski, who offer contrastingly optimistic and pessimistic accounts of the effect of patriarchy and the possibility of overturning it. Diamant finds enough encouragement in the presentation of women in the Book of Genesis to build a more positive role for them within Judaism. For Diski, in contrast, the damage inflicted by the father (Abraham) both upon his wife and his son cannot be undone.

The fact that all of these writers return to the Book of Genesis, however, reflects not only the power of the original stories but a belief that the Bible still remains worth reading, still retains a value in the modern world. For Mann, as we shall see, it was the foundation for the only effective values with which to resist the ideology of the Nazi period. Like all stories, biblical narratives are not in the end reducible to abstract doctrines, even though any believing community will feel a need to define the limits of acceptable interpretation. What I hope will emerge from a study of all the novelists considered in this book is that each has made a significant contribution to the understanding of the Book of Genesis, from which everyone can benefit. At the very least they illustrate the difficulties involved in making sense of some aspects of these stories. At best, like the rabbis responsible for midrash, these novelists succeed in opening up the biblical texts creatively, posing new and different questions of the text which may point towards new answers to the 'big' questions of our lives. As Hermann Hesse told Thomas Mann after reading his expansion of the story of Tamar from a few verses in Genesis to several chapters of *Joseph and His Brothers*, this book may serve to demonstrate that even in questions of biblical criticism, 'poets are not altogether superfluous'.⁶

6 Donald Prater, *Thomas Mann: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.348.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Wrestling with the Book of Genesis

The Stories of Genesis: Literary and Biblical Criticism

'In Jerusalem, nearly three thousand years ago, an unknown author composed a work that has formed the spiritual consciousness of much of the world ever since.'¹ These are the opening words of Harold Bloom's introduction to *The Book of J*, a new translation and 'interpretation' of the oldest strand of the Pentateuch, including much of the Book of Genesis. Bloom, of course, is a strong believer in the originality and power of individual authors of great genius. He therefore plays down the extent to which the Yahwist (distinguished from the Elohist by his name for God, which begins with a J in German) would himself have drawn on earlier oral traditions from his own and other ancient near-east cultures. Unlike another Jewish literary critic who has produced his own translation of the Book of Genesis, Robert Alter,² he also plays down the role of R, the redactor responsible for the final form of the text, who wove together not only J and E but those other hypothetical personages invented by Higher Criticism, P, the Priestly Writer, and D, the Deuteronomist. Bloom is not very keen on the whole documentary hypothesis, which he sees as the product of overconfident German biblical critics, Hegelians to a man, who 'saw Israelite faith as a primitive preparation for the sublimities of the true religion, high-minded Christianity, a properly Germanic belief purged of gross Jewish vulgarities and superstitions'.³ He is also dismissive of the 'long, sad enterprise of revising, censoring and mutilating J' within normative Judaism, beginning with the Priestly Writer and continuing with orthodox rabbis of the present.⁴ This process, by which 'an essentially literary work becomes a sacred text' and its reading 'numbed by taboo and inhibition', Bloom argues, blinds us to the power of the original text.⁵ Like an art historian, Bloom seeks to scrub away the layers of varnish with which J has been encrusted to reveal the ancient narrative in all its original glory.

Bloom suffered much ridicule from reviewers for speculating, on the grounds of the narrative's sympathy towards women, that J might have been a woman, possibly the wife or daughter of a member of King Solomon's court. The misogyny often

1 Harold Bloom, *The Book of J*, trans. David Rosenberg (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), p.9.

2 Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: Norton, 1996).

3 Bloom, *The Book of J*, p.19.

4 *Ibid.*, p.21.

5 *Ibid.*, p.33.

associated with the Book of Genesis he attributes to 'a long and dismal history of weak misreadings of the comic J', who devotes six times the space to Eve's creation than to Adam's.⁶ She has Rebecca totally efface Isaac, 'the first of the mama's boys', producing in Tamar 'the most remarkable character in the book' and in the attempted seduction of Joseph by Potiphar's wife one of her 'most delicious episodes'.⁷ 'The only grown-ups in J', according to Bloom, are the women, Sarai, Rebecca, Rachel, Tamar, whose sheer *gevurah* (toughness) he clearly admires.⁸

J, for Bloom, is not really 'a religious writer', certainly 'no theologian'.⁹ Her central character Yahweh has fierce qualities which make him threaten to murder both Moses and Isaac. Later revisionists would be embarrassed by his sheer 'impishness', replacing him with a less obviously anthropomorphic, more abstract figure.¹⁰ It is difficult, Bloom recognises, to classify J's work generically. But she tells stories, some of them claiming to be partly historical, and she also creates personalities, so the nearest modern equivalent would be a novelist, though not one in the classic realist tradition: 'There is always the other side of J: uncanny, tricky, sublime, ironic', which makes her 'the direct ancestor of Kafka'. It is this 'antithetical element', Bloom claims, 'that all normative traditions—Judaic, Christian, Islamic, secular—have been unable to assimilate, and so have ignored, or repressed, or evaded'.¹¹ She is, above all, a powerful *creative* writer and this means (for Bloom) that the most appropriate response is further creative writing.

The following section of this chapter will develop the argument (also to some extent indebted to Harold Bloom) that in rabbinic midrash and modern intertextual fiction we have precisely such an imaginative response. For the moment, however, I want to focus on the Book of Genesis in its final form as a collection of the most powerful and influential fiction in world literature. This is not, of course, to deny that it contains elements of other genres, including myth, saga, history, folklore, poetry, genealogy, and even theology, but to recognise with Robert Alter that 'prose fiction is the best general rubric for describing biblical narrative'.¹² There may be significant differences between the Bible and other ancient forms of narrative. Erich Auerbach's pioneering study of *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* analysed some of these differences between the Bible's mysterious secrets, for example, and Homeric epic, in which 'a clear and equal light floods the persons and things with which he deals'.¹³ In the biblical narrative of the sacrifice of Isaac, as Auerbach demonstrates, we are given very few details about the main characters and events, 'only so much of the phenomena as is necessary for the purpose of the narrative':

6 *Ibid.*, pp.146-7 and 175.

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 183 and 192.

8 *Ibid.*, p.194.

9 *Ibid.*, pp.243 and 12.

10 *Ibid.*, p.23.

11 *Ibid.*, p.13.

12 Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981), pp.23-4.

13 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1957), p.23.

Time and place are undefined and call for interpretation; thoughts and feelings remain unexpressed, are only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches; the whole, permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed toward a single goal...remains mysterious and 'fraught with background'.¹⁴

This, according to Auerbach, forces readers to engage with this mystery, to penetrate the surface of the text and thus to supply the 'secret' meaning of a God 'hidden' in history: 'Far from seeking, like Homer, merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours, it seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world'.¹⁵ If it is fiction, then, it is fiction of a very special kind. 'What we witness in Genesis and elsewhere' in the Bible, Meir Sternberg argues, 'is the birth of a new kind of historicized fiction' whose 'very raggedness and incoherence forces the reader into an extra effort of imagination'.¹⁶ It is certainly not easy reading.

It is possible perhaps to make too much of the *art* of biblical narrative. Robert Alter, in his influential book of that title, constantly compares the effects of biblical story-telling with that of the great novelists. As in Flaubert, he argues, there is minimal narrative intrusion; literary effects are achieved through dialogue and unspoken contrasts of character.¹⁷ Elsewhere, for example in the focus on 'blessing' and 'birthright' in the Jacob tales or on 'master' and 'slave' in the Joseph stories, a word or word-root 'recurs significantly in a text', along similar lines to Fielding's playing with the word 'prudence' in *Tom Jones* or Joyce's repetition of the word 'yes' in Molly Bloom's monologue in the final part of *Ulysses*.¹⁸ Such subtle effects are clearly suggestive of a designed artfulness in these stories. But Alter recognises that it is sometimes the very terseness of biblical narrative that requires readers to supply details: 'we are compelled to get at character and motive, as in Conrad...through a process of inference from fragmentary data'. Key information is 'strategically withheld', forcing us to read psychological complexity into surprising changes of character.¹⁹ In Genesis 42, for example, Joseph recognises his brothers without in turn being recognised by them; in 'a rare moment of access to a character's inward experience', he recalls his earlier dreams before accusing them of being spies. 'No causal connection is specified....The narrator presumably knows the connection or connections but prefers to leave us guessing'.²⁰ Here, as in some of Alter's examples of sophisticated techniques of 'montage', where the redactor of Genesis is attributed with extraordinary subtlety in weaving together the separate documents at his disposal, I would be less confident than Alter how much is produced by the art of the narrator and how much by the subtlety of the reader, trained to pick up the nuances of later and more sophisticated narratives. It is clear nevertheless that biblical narrative

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.12.

¹⁶ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p.24. He cites Herbert N.Schneidau, *Sacred Discontent: The Bible and Western Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p.215.

¹⁷ Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, p.86.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.93-4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.126.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.163.

in general and the Book of Genesis in particular display 'a surprising subtlety and inventiveness of detail', a delight in 'imaginative play...deeply interfused with a sense of great spiritual urgency'. By learning to enjoy the biblical stories as stories, as Alter argues, we can 'come to see more clearly what they mean to tell us about God, man, and the perilously momentous realm of history'.²¹

Biblical critics themselves, at least in recent years, have also come to recognise the power of these stories as they stand (rather than seeking behind the text for their original life-contexts or place in ancient cult). For Wellhausen and Graf, originators of the documentary hypothesis in the late nineteenth century, the main interest was historical. The point of Wellhausen's *Geschichte Israels* was 'to understand, evaluate and use the sources available in order to present a picture of Israel's history in the Old Testament period'. To that end he used criteria of vocabulary, style, theology and local colouring to identify the sources.²² Even for Hermann Gunkel, sensitive as he was to the generic qualities of oral and written story-telling, the goal of *Gattungsgeschichte* (form or type criticism) was primarily historical: 'to uncover from the Old Testament writings a picture of the spiritual life and ideals of early Israel'.²³

Gunkel's analysis of *The Stories of Genesis*, however, along with the other powerful German commentaries on the Book of Genesis by Gerhard von Rad and Claus Westermann, are worth close attention for their recognition of the nature and power of the stories to be found in this opening book of the Bible. For Gunkel they were *Sagen*, 'popular, poetic narrative handed down from of old' and collected (rather than written or even significantly redacted) by J, E and P.²⁴ Gunkel goes out of his way in his opening chapter to explain the value and purpose of stories: 'story is not life', he insists, 'it is rather a particular type of poetical writing'. He draws on contemporary literary criticism of secular folk-tales to demonstrate that such 'poetical narrative is much better suited than simple prose to convey ideas'; they are also 'deeper, freer and truer than chronicles and histories'.²⁵ Stories of this kind are not about great political events but about ordinary people; they are not realistic, often involving implausible events narrated without much concern for verisimilitude. So the 'first woman was not surprised when the snake began to talk to her; the narrator did not ask how Noah managed to get the animals into the ark, and so on'.²⁶ The God portrayed in the oldest of these folktales is completely anthropomorphic: he

21 *Ibid.*, pp.188-9.

22 R.E.Clements, *A Century of Old Testament Study*, Revised Edition (Guildford: Lutterworth Press, 1983), pp.10-11.

23 *Ibid.*, p.12.

24 Hermann Gunkel, *The Stories of Genesis*, trans. John Scullion, ed. William Scott (Vallejo, CA: Bibal Press, 1994). This is a translation of the introduction to the third edition of Gunkel's commentary on *Genesis*, the first edition of which appeared in 1901. The original English translation by W.S.Carruth of the introduction to the first edition was entitled *The Legends of Genesis* (1901). The third edition contains much more comparative reference to secular literature and literary criticism. The Translator's Introduction to the 1994 edition has a useful discussion of the nuances of Gunkel's terms *Märchen*, *Sage*, *Legende*, *Saga* and *Mythos* on pp.xvii-xviii.

25 *Ibid.*, p.2.

26 *Ibid.*, p.5.

strolls in the garden, forms human beings with his own hands, closes the door of the ark himself, enjoys the smell of Noah's sacrifice, appears to Abraham in the form of a traveller and speaks 'as one person to another'. We moderns may smile at such a naïve conception of God but, once we have understood their conventions, can recognise that these stories 'are perhaps the most beautiful and most profound ever known on earth'.²⁷

There is a difference, Gunkel explains in his second chapter, between the 'primeval stories' of the first eleven chapters of Genesis, which portray God in this anthropomorphic manner, and the 'patriarchal stories' of the rest of the book, which present Him as hidden, mysterious, only to be discerned through dreams and visions. The primeval stories are mainly mythical, attempting to answer basic questions:

The creation story asks: Where heaven and earth come from? Why is the Sabbath holy? The garden narrative asks: Whence the human intellect and the fate of death? Whence the human body and spirit? Whence language? Whence the love between the sexes (Gen. 2:24)? How is it that the woman experiences such pain in childbirth and that the man has to till the recalcitrant land...?²⁸

Other stories have more precise particular functions of an etiological, etymological or cultic kind, explaining the origin of certain words or practices.

Perhaps the most important chapter in Gunkel, in the context of later revisions to these stories by modern novelists, is the third, which explores 'The Artistic Form of the Stories in Genesis', making constant comparison between the kinds of story produced by an oral culture and more modern forms of written narrative. One of the distinguishing features of an oral story (and one of the criteria therefore for dating the oldest material in the Book of Genesis), Gunkel argues, is its independence: '*The more independent a narrative, the more certainly it is preserved in its old form*'.²⁹ Individual stories of this kind can be dominated by totally different moods: emotion in the sacrifice of Isaac, humour in the deception of Isaac, awe in the destruction of the tower of Babel. They can also be very short, often extending only for a few verses. Such conciseness, however, also brings benefits, since the storyteller has 'to focus all of his or her artistic power onto one tiny spot', increasing the intensity of insight.³⁰

Such terse narratives have to focus on a few characters at a time: 'the ancient story-teller did not require the listeners to fix their attention simultaneously on several characters, as does the present-day novelist'. There are thus:

two persons in the narrative of the separation of Abraham and Lot (Gen. 13), of Esau's sale of his birthright (Gen 25:29ff), and in the story of Penuel (Gen. 32:23ff). There are three characters in the story of the creation of the woman (God, the man, the woman), in the story of Cain's fratricide (God, Cain, Abel), in the story of Lot in the cave (Gen. 19:30ff), and in that of the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22).³¹

27 *Ibid.*, pp.6-8.

28 *Ibid.*, p.12.

29 *Ibid.*, p.33.

30 *Ibid.*, p.34.

31 *Ibid.*, pp.35-6.

Even when there are more characters involved in the whole story, it is one of the 'laws of folk narrative' that 'only two persons ever appear on the stage at the same time'. In the story of Ishmael's expulsion, therefore, in Genesis chapter 21,

we see successively: Sarah as she hears Ishmael laughing and as she takes up the matter with Abraham, Abraham as he expels Hagar, Hagar alone with the child in the desert, and finally the rescue by the angel. The story of Jacob's trickery (Gen. 27) deals first with Isaac and Esau, then with Rebekah and Jacob, next with Jacob and Isaac, then with Esau and Isaac, then with Esau's hate for Jacob, and finally with Rebekah's advice to Jacob.³²

Each episode focuses attention on the two central figures in this particular part of the story.

Even the description of these characters and their emotions, Gunkel argues, is 'remarkably meagre by our standards'. 'We are used to modern writers who, as far as possible, present each character as a complete individual'. The ancient storytellers by contrast focus only on a few characteristics, sometimes just one, even for major characters: Cain's envy, for example, Lot's avarice, or the snake's cunning.³³ Characterisation is entirely subordinate to action: 'The modern creative writer is wont to spend a long time in tracing the development of his characters' thought and moods' but in Genesis 'little is said about the inner being of its heroes'. Genesis is mostly silent about motive:

Nothing is said of the reasons why the snake wanted to seduce the first couple. There is not a word about Abraham's feelings as he left his homeland (Gen. 12), nor of Noah's as he entered the ark (Gen 7:7). We hear nothing of Noah's anger at Canaan's shamelessness (Gen. 9:24), of Jacob's disappointment when Laban deceived him with Leah (Gen. 9:24)....³⁴

These reactions on the part of the characters have to be supplied by the listeners or readers (or by later writers who take up the same stories).

The detailed psychological analysis of a Flaubert or a George Eliot, of course, is not the only means of conveying or suggesting emotion. Gunkel marvels at the 'art of indirect portrayal of people by means of actions that above all makes the stories so vivid'. Dialogue is another means: 'Two masterpieces of character portrayal by means of dialogue are the story of the temptation of the first couple (Genesis 3), and the conversation between Abraham and Isaac on the way to the mountain (Gen. 22:7-8).'³⁵ The ancient storytellers rarely provide detailed description of 'attendant circumstances'. There is no mention of Cain's murder weapon, no lavish description of the Garden of Eden. There is always, however, a strong 'narrative thread', a 'tight internal coherence, which makes the stories not only plausible but 'inescapable'. In Genesis 16, for example,

³² *Ibid.*, p.37.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp.38-9.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.42.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.44-5.

Sarah was barren, but wanted to have children....*Therefore* she gave her maid to Abraham as a concubine. Hagar conceived, and *as a consequence* looked with contempt on her mistress. *This* offended the proud lady of the house deeply. *As a result*, Hagar ran away from Sarah into the desert. *There*, however, God took pity on her and promised her a son.³⁶

Each episode leads directly into the next, drawing its readers ever deeper into the story.

These stories, in other words, are not 'rough narratives, carelessly thrown together'. They are 'glittering, twinkling works of art'.³⁷ Gunkel also recognises that some of the later cycles of stories such as those surrounding Joseph are more extensive in their attention to detailed description and characterisation. These he labels 'novelettes' (*Novelle* in German).³⁸ He also notices developments in their religious and moral elements, the later stories displaying more complex ideas of God, taking less open delight in the cunning and deceit of the patriarchs. The older stories are 'often quite earthy' in their humour, for instance in the manner of Rachel's outwitting of her father by playing on his embarrassment at her bodily functions (Gen. 31:33).³⁹ It may be impossible finally to distinguish between the stories collected by J and E, which 'were in essence taken over by the collectors as they found them', but in general, Gunkel suggests, 'J has the liveliest and most picturesque narratives', E has some 'moving and tearful stories'⁴⁰ and P, by contrast, is factual rather than poetic, concerned with formulas and religious instruction. Gunkel ends by celebrating the variety of the whole book, which he compares with a great cathedral 'in whose form and adornment the spirit of many generations expresses itself'.⁴¹ It is not the product of any individual but the combined achievement of a multitude of voices.

Later commentators on Genesis such as Gerhard von Rad inherit from Gunkel a notion of J as a collector of stories: 'With him began the writing down of those poetic or cultic narratives which previously had circulated orally and without context among the people'.⁴² But his (or her) contribution is not limited simply to collection. Von Rad celebrates the 'artistic mastery' and 'creative genius' of the Yahwist:

Wonderful clarity and utter simplicity characterize the representation of the individual scenes. The meagreness of his resources is truly amazing, and yet this narrator's view encompasses the whole of human life with all its heights and depths. With unrivalled objectivity he has made man the subject of his presentation— both the riddles and conflicts of his visible acts and ways of behaving as well as the mistakes and muddles in the secret of his heart. He among the biblical writers is the great psychologist.

36 *Ibid.*, pp.48-50.

37 *Ibid.*, pp.54-6.

38 *Ibid.*, pp.59-60.

39 *Ibid.*, pp.82-7.

40 *Ibid.*, pp.95 and 101.

41 *Ibid.*, p.119.

42 Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, revised edition, trans. John H. Marks (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), p.17. This edition is based on the ninth German edition of 1972, the introduction having been 'very extensively rewritten' from the original version, which first appeared in German in 1949 (Publisher's Note, p.9).

However,...he subjects the great problems of humanity to the light of revelation: creation and nature, sin and suffering, man and wife, fraternal quarrels, internal confusion, etc. But above all, he investigates God's activities in the beginnings of Israel, both their visible wonders and their hidden mysteries.⁴³

The cultic material of the ancient traditions is thus transformed, raised 'high above their sacred, native soil', by 'what seems to us like a cool breath from the freethinking era of Solomon'.⁴⁴ Material which may have 'existed popularly for a long time in more worldly narratives' was thus transformed within the tradition itself: 'the later the version of the saga, the more theologically reflective and less naïve'.⁴⁵ Von Rad limits 'the measure of freedom' which J or E or P would have allowed themselves with this material, 'freedom...much more limited than any modern Western author would be permitted to claim for himself'. The 'individuality of the Yahwist', he claims, 'his basic theological conceptions, are much less apparent within the individual narratives than in the character of the composition as a whole', the way the separate stories are linked and harmonised.⁴⁶ But while recognising that the 'long process of tradition' which many of the narratives had undergone necessarily left traces in the final form of the text of Genesis, von Rad ends his introduction to his commentary on Genesis by urging critics to abandon the attempt to identify the earliest levels of the tradition, searching as in New Testament scholarship for authentic historical elements. Rather, 'we should turn once again to exegesis of the texts in their present form', uncovering the meaning of this 'great narrative complex' as it stands.⁴⁷

Claus Westermann moves in the same direction, away from Gunkel's focus on individual stories, treating 'the classical criteria for source division with much greater caution' than previous critics, towards a consideration of the whole text.⁴⁸ He still recognises that this 'whole' would have taken some time to form, J and P probably working first with 'a clearly recognizable circle of stories which dealt with the primeval period or with the beginnings of the world and of humankind' and then with another group of patriarchal stories.⁴⁹ He makes J sound like an ancient Dostoevsky in the way he organises his primeval 'Narrative of Crime and Punishment'. While P, 'in accordance with the priestly theology, is interested only in the decision to destroy', J's interest

is directed to the reason for the destruction, the capacity of God's creatures to turn against him. J, as always, is vitally interested in the person, in the individual's potential and limitations. Consequently his treatment of the material which belongs to the stories of the origins is concerned on the one hand with the person's capabilities and accomplishments,

43 *Ibid.*, p.25.

44 *Ibid.*, p.29.

45 *Ibid.*, p.36.

46 *Ibid.*, pp.37-9.

47 *Ibid.*, pp.41-2.

48 Claus Westermann, *Genesis: An Introduction*, trans. John Scullion (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p.83. First published in English as the introduction to Westermann's three-volume commentary on Genesis (German 1974-82, English 1984-6).

49 *Ibid.*, p.62.