CHAPTER 4
Myths of origins

1 The origin stories of humanity

Although the creation story in the first chapter of Genesis may appear to us as very naive, it still honestly reflects the world that people experience. Light, earth, air and water, the four basic elements of the creation story, answer to the expectations of traditional elements in Hellenistic philosophy, namely, earth, air, fire and water. They also answer to experience. There is a great light that controls the day and a small one for the night. These lights and the stars are the basis for our calendars. They tell us when to have our holidays. Earth, air and water are three basic aspects of the world we experience. They are separate from each other, and each might well be described as having its own life-forms: animals, fish and birds. And the earth lets plants and trees of all kinds grow including those that give us food and some that are beautiful. Who but a literalist would deny that the earth gives birth to animals as the sea does to its creatures? The images of the sky as a barrier that holds back water high above us, and of the land surrounded by and floating on the sea, are metaphors that have grown from the observation of rain and storms on the one hand and of wells, springs and rivers on the other.

When it comes to people, the poet who wrote the creation story of Genesis was hardly the first person who had imagined people to be unique and with some special value. Few humans avoid this conceit. Nor was the teller of the garden story the first to present the case in a different way. What were people like? They were like gods, made, as in Genesis 5: 1, in the divine image. It is not for nothing that ancient critics described humans ironically as 'gods with clay feet'. They were male and female, like the gods and goddesses of all the world's temples. They looked just like the gods in temples do. That the poet might have smiled when he uttered this metaphor, and could hardly have avoided thinking of Jeremiah's cynical comment that the best one could say of such gods was that they were made

by clever men, is not grounds for dismissing either the perception or the humour of the metaphor. No more should we dismiss the garden story's contrasting proposal that animals and people alike came from the ground, and that it was life that was divine – and wisdom – and definitely not people. Neither life nor wisdom was possessed wholly by humans. Neither remained with them. Life stayed with men for only a short time, as it were a Visitor, and it has always been hard to hold to the belief that men truly possessed wisdom. If, by chance, it is found here and there, we still call it 'inspiration'. It has been most unbecoming for theologians to bicker so long about whether it was a man or a woman who was made first, and which brought sin into the world. Both theses distort Genesis' story, which includes us all in each of the garden's couple; in Adam as the 'earthly' source of our 'humanity' (*adamak/adam*),. and in Eve as the 'mother of all living' (*hevah*). The story sketches vividly the alienations that are so fundamental to our being human: women from the men they love and all of us from the earth we were born from. Nor can we hope to deny the ironic contradictions that both stories shame us with. We must think of this perspective on people with the full impact of Genesis 1:26's tragic irony. God would have the world good as he saw it. Then he made people just like him.

Does the garden story talk about the first historical human beings? Does it state that such early humanoids lived in a garden paradise at the beginning of time? Is the whole of the cosmos evolved in the space of six days, replete with geological stratification and fossils to test our faith? Or do we have to create scenarios of how seven days might somehow be God-speak for seven eras of millions of years? Is this crisp, striking story really threatened by any modern desire to read geology and anthropology with intelligence? Are we condemned in each generation to argue anew that our knowledge of the great antiquity of the world and of the process of life's development in the past does or does not contradict the Bible? Surely not.

The authors of biblical texts knew precious little about the immediate past and next to nothing about the distant past. They had neither magic glasses nor any special knowledge. But they were good poets and skilful story-tellers. Their theology was adventurous and at times courageous, though their philosophy was unexceptional. With their own human limitations, their stories take us, not back to the beginning of time, but to an

imaginary time, a mythical time, before the world was the way it is. Such a time is enclosed within the transcendent space of a Narnia-like, legendary land of Qedem in which our world comes into contact with the transcendent. It is here that our world was born in story, and from Qedem that the narrative begins.

The garden story doesn't begin with the first man, 'Adam'. It begins with *humanity*, which is personified as an individual. That's what the Hebrew word *adam* means: not male, not female – they come later in this story. What does it mean to be a human being? Well, this is an old story. It comes from a time when most people were farmers, and all – like today – lived because of farmers. Farmers of course live from the ground. And so our story tells us that this humanity (*'adam*) was made out of a piece of ground (*'adamah* in Hebrew). This pun on *'adam* and *'adamah* runs the story. We begin with the soil from which we were made, just as we return to the soil when we die. This speaks to the essence of being human within a world of metaphor. The reason God's Yahweh first made the human being was to be his gardener; the garden had need of him. Later in the story, when the human is transformed into Adam and Etc, Adam becomes the farmer, fighting his losing battle with the ground for life, alienated from what made him what he was. This frustration – as we all know – doesn't end. One doesn't have to attend too many funerals in order to understand humanity's final transition to that peaceful reconciliation with its essence. Emotionally, the story is perceptive.

The garden story is no less sparing in its humour when it discusses what it means to be a woman. Debates about women's equality and descriptions of the oppression that is created by their subordination to men of power and wealth didn't begin with the suffragettes. Certainly this story-teller needs to be recognized as one of the first of such Yokes. The tale's politics of sexual alienation begins with a simple truth that we have all experienced as one of the most painful aspects of being human; 'It is not good for people to be lonely.' The deity, having been the first of us to notice, decides to make a second living creature to be 'mates'with his human. He hopes with this to overcome the problem of loneliness. The task the story assigns Yahweh is to make a creature just like the first one. Now, there are two simple ways of doing this, which most every ancient villager would know. The first is the way of the potter. The task seems easy: use the same materials and do it the

same way. And so God's Yahweh takes more soil and forms another creature. He brings it to the human. In this episode, the deity of the story becomes the victim of the narrator's sense of humour, and he is forced to play the dumbling until the end of the scene. Something's wrong! It doesn't work. Over and over, the creator forms one creature after another. Each time he brings it to the person he had originally made. Each time, the person is dissatified. What the deity brings is not quite right: not quite his mate. We might imagine hearing his complaints to the ever-helpful Yahweh: 'No, that's a horse. That's a cow. That's a cat!' None of them is quite like the person; none is quite the creature to overcome loneliness. This is how all the animals of the earth and all the birds of the air were created, yet now the creator was at a loss.

God's Yahweh then tries a second way, the way of the gardener, and performs the world's first clone. If you really want a second plant in every way comparable to the first, the best way is to use part of the one you have. It works the same with humans: like from like! Aiming at closing the scene with an old well-known rhyming ditty about families and patronage, the story moves quickly. The deity puts the human to sleep, takes one of its ribs and forms it into a woman. He brings her to what the story now calk 'the man'. Immediately, and without the least effort to hide his exasperation with the deity, the man sings out: 'Now, finally! Bone of my bone; flesh of my lesh.' The further citation of an obscure proverb about marriage rounds off the story.

Having changed the person into male and female, with the woman a recognized equal, a true mate to her husband, the story does not end. That isn't at all the way the real world is. We all know that. It is, after all, rather a very harsh world in which we and the story's audience live. The garden story is an aetiology. It is a fictional tale that evokes a perspective of reality that helps us understand the truth of things, and here, the truth about being human. The garden story isn't a story about a romantic place of paradise where no one is hungry, no one suffers and no one dies. Quite the contrary, its story's goal is the real world we live in, where hunger, pain and death are commonplace, and where each, unfortunately, does a thorough job of defining us as human. The story does not talk about history. It talks about the realities of human life, and how we are defined through our hunger, our pain and our deaths.

This story is a very ambitious one. Although the garden or ‘paradise’ story is often explained as a story of ‘original sin’ and a contest between evil and good, Satan and God, in fact it is not about these things at all. It is both more subtle and more fragile. Yahweh and the talking snake do not represent good and evil, God and the devil. Yahweh and the snake are characters in a story; they are what they say and do there. Yahweh does reflect the world of the divine, but the snake is not evil, he is merely a friendly talking snake who knows what is really going on in the story. He helps people get what little knowledge is ours. Whatever that knowledge is worth, the snake is punished for his efforts. He is alienated forever – as real snakes are – from those he would befriend.

The story is painted with quick strokes and in bold colours. To be human is first and foremost to be nothing in oneself. Only the divine has lasting value. To be alive is to share in the divine. God takes this worthless piece of clay and breathes into it, and so it becomes a living creature. To die is to return to one’s essence. People are not gods, and the story-teller and his audience know that. One can use poetry about God’s spirit and his breath, but it does not stay. People do not succeed. They do not last. Human beings die. A doubling of this metaphor is explored in the motif of wisdom. People are not naturally intelligent. Our story understands this well. People need to learn to know. The wisest learn to know that they do not know. The couple of the garden story – having eaten the fruit to achieve wisdom – only know that they are naked.

It begins in a scene, comic and ironic. The deity tells the person that the whole garden is at its disposal. Yet one small demand is made: do not eat any of the fruit from the ‘tree of knowledge of good and evil, because it will kill you!’ It is important to remember that the people in this story are not yet very bright. They still do not know they are naked. So they don’t recognize this strange idea – this tool of oppression – that knowledge is dangerous and can kill the one possessing it. One can, however, be sure that no audience will miss such an emphatic echo of retlity’s world. It is only when the friendly talking snake enters the story that humanity’s ignorant bliss is shattered. Unlike people, the snake understands. In fact, the snake is wiser than any other of God’s creatures. When the woman tells him of the danger of the Tree of Wisdom, he takes what she tells him quite literally. He tells her that God knows this isn’t true. The snake explains to her that in fact if

she eats this fruit, she won't be killed. Her eyes, in fact, will be opened and she will become like God, having wisdom herself. A Tree of Wisdom is, after all, a tree of wisdom! And so the woman looks at the tree and sees it once again. She doesn't see the dangerous tree of the divine patron's warnings. It appears to her now as attractive. She sees it as good to eat in order to gain knowledge.

In this scene in which the woman and her husband take their fate in their own hands, the story stresses an implicit contrast and alienation between human understanding and divine wisdom, a perspective similar to Genesis 1. With the woman playing the everyman's role in the garden story, she takes the world as it seems good to her, from her own perspective. The garden story explores this human perspective as the woman sees eating the forbidden fruit as good, because it will make her wise. When she reaches for the fruit to eat it, the story presents her as the philosopher seeking wisdom. She takes on the cloak of the philosopher king. She is Solomon of the Book of Ecclesiastes. He too gave his life to seek wisdom, only to find that he had been chasing the wind. Only in the Book of Ecclesiastes does a philosopher offer such self-criticism as our narrator of Genesis' tale does.

The literatist predictions of the snake now come true. The eyes of the woman and her husband are opened. They now possess wisdom and understanding. But what is that wisdom they now have? What is human knowledge and understanding? In answer, the story-teller offers us heavy-handed mockery. His summation of human wisdom, is that great divine quality that distinguishes us from other animals – that, in the language of the Bible, makes us a little less than angels. What is the wisdom? Nothing less than knowing we are naked! The irony doesn't stop there. As soon as they find out that they are naked, they busy themselves making skirts of fig leaves to hide all that they have learned! As it does to us, knowledge makes the couple afraid: they become afraid of their nakedness and hide when Yahweh walks through the garden.

The second prediction was that they will become like gods. This too comes true in its own way, as God himself tells us at the close of the story. Even so, this fruit turns to ashes in their mouths. In the next scene, the couple hear God coming for a walk in the garden 'in the spirit of the day'. The language here, with its echoes of the classical world's *carpe diem*, exposes ironic implications of creative opportunities lost through the

couple's, implicitly contrasting, lack of a true 'fear of God'. They rather trust in their own understanding of what is good. With their so human knowledge, they now hide, while the spirit moves them to 'fear God' and to the beginning of wisdom. Adam explains that when he heard God's Yahweh coming, he hid in fear. This motif grows out of the joke on the anxieties of nakedness. Having failed to understand the 'fear of God' (namely, discernment and understanding), they live out the added irony of fearing the knowledge of their nakedness; that is – from a philosopher's perspective – the knowledge of their own ignorance. This is the essence of the biblical wisdom tradition's 'fear of God'!

The motifs of comic irony in the scene about the nakedness of human wisdom prepare the audience for the scene of questioning that now opens. Yahweh's response does not address the issue that the man has been startled. He rather asks: 'Who told you that you were naked?' Quite clearly this God realizes that they didn't have the intelligence to notice this themselves. He takes only this short time to ask and to draw his rhetorical conclusion; 'Did you eat the fruit that I forbade you to eat?' The implications of this guess at once resolve the story's tension. Yahweh well understood – as the talking snake had explained to everyone already. This fruit did give knowledge.

There follows a brief comic scene, in which the man and the woman, both try to pass the blame along the poet's chiasm: from the woman to the snake, and from the man to God, with the exquisite sexism of the line: 'The woman, whom *you* gave me . . .' Now the deity turns to establish the destinies of the three conspirators with his curses. As in the tower of Babel story, he alienates those who once cooperated with each other: there, alienation is the fate of our languages; here, it lies in our hatred, our sex and our humanity. The woman is condemned to love one who would rather dominate her. She is to be alienated from her own passion, and it will bring her only pain and labour. With blunt humour, the man has his sexism thrown back at him: 'Because you listened to your wife . . .' Adam's curse is the all-paraphrasing curse of everyman. The author plays once again with the pun of Adam and adamah: with the humanity and earth of our essence. Our alienation is such that it is even echoed in our longing for the reconciliation that is to be our deaths. This is the world of the story's referent.

But we still have a problem with the story's plot. Did eating the fruit of the tree of wisdom bring death? Adam and Eve live on in the story, and in other stories to come. Theirs is not a story about mortality. Humanity's mortality, its substance of clay, is already implicitly marked from the story's opening scene. The motif of death is directly associated with wisdom. The metaphor is rather a commentary on the impoverishment of human knowledge and understanding compared to divine wisdom. The issue of mortality still remains unresolved after the curses. It is the theme of the story's closing soliloquy. Here God's Yahweh asks himself what is to be done now that people have become 'like gods, having understanding'. What might happen if they now get to the tree of life and, eating that fruit, live forever? It is to prevent people from becoming gods that the divine Yahweh puts them out of the garden. He guards 'the way to the tree of life' with the monstrous cherubim. Return is impossible; we can not re-enter Qedem. The path to the tree of life is closed, as the monsters are armed with a magic, laming sword; one that cuts in all directions at once and can not be parried. The closure of the story extends the threefold alienation of human destiny. This is the death that humanity's independence has wrought; that impulse to do what is seen as good in one's own eyes, to be like God, to choose for oneself, to have knowledge oneself both of what is good and evil. That, the story tells us, excludes us from the garden of Yahweh, from the path of life, where we might be his servants, and live.

Life as the life of piety, of submission; this is the way of life that the ideology of this story illustrates. The narrative voice of this story is aware of tradition's Yahweh. His use of irony and humour, moreover, suggest the divine incompatibility with human self-worth. The narrative is not uncritical of the piety it illustrates. In fact, it is this sense of critical observation, which marks so much of biblical narrative, that distinguishes it so markedly from religious propaganda. God and humanity are not compatible. The whole of the Bible that follows develops within the tension of this discourse.

While there are few stories in the Bible that match the *tour de force* of our garden story, many lesser stories use the same techniques of punning declarations of destiny to explain how our world got to be the way it is. These stories talk about the present, not the past. They talk about the real world of the story's narrator. Like the garden story and the creation story

before it, they do not tell us about what God once did, but rather about how the implied authors and their audience saw and viewed their world. Puns and ‘cue-names’ abound. As the Hebrew meaning of Adam’s name expresses our humanity, and Eve’s echoes the word for ‘life’ (Gen. 3: 20), Abel’s name (from *hebel*, ‘dew’: Gen. 4: 2) reflects the fragility of his life, and Enosh’s name (Gen, 4; 26) is the same word for the ‘mankind’that descends from him. Noah’s cue-name echoes his story in an ironic joke. Humanity finally ‘finds rest’ (*nah*) from its alienation from the ground. Babylon (*babel*) reflects the babble (*balal*) of voices that once occurred within its walls, as well as the everyday experience of the alienating potential of human communication.

The stories collected in the Bible’s first book open with a poem describing the beginning of the world. In this poem, the divine spirit: touches chaos, and, separating and distinguishing what had been undifferentiated matter, brings form and order from barren darkness. It creates a world that the poem presents as the work of God, a world that is understood by the divine craftsman as good. However, the following stories, from the garden story of Adam and Eve to the tale of the building of the city of Babylon and its tower, complicate the plot, long before the world comes to be anything that any of us might recognize as historical. These stories tell us of the human desire for wisdom and of the dangers of a little knowledge. The stories are humorous and ironic. They are presented in a stream of wordplay and puns. They end with a sceptical story about humans working in harmony and peace, building something for themselves. It will be a great city with a tower as high as the sky! The author, with his Babylonian mirror of Jerusalem, and with his tower hardly veiling David’s Zion of legendary fame, offers us a world in conflict with God, where people do their own will, and make a world that *they* see as good. It is a pious narrative, yet it is one that hardly expects much good to come of a creation that increasingly resembles the world we live in. The moral of this whole story from Genesis 1-11 is about conflict and alienation. It is intentionally unsettling.

2 Of nations and heroes

In the book of Genesis, we find lists of names attached to, introducing and expanding into many kinds of stories. The lists themselves hardly make thrilling reading. Many today skip past them when reading the Bible. Many put up with them for the sake of the stories that surround them. Nevertheless, these lists lie at the heart of the central story-line. While the stories of Moses in the wilderness that are collected in the next four books of the Pentateuch deal with Israel as an example, Genesis starts from the perspective of the unity of mankind. Its perspective ever remains broader than that of Israel alone.

The 'table of nations' of Genesis 10 and the tower of Babel story of Genesis 11 are variant parallel stories. Conceptually independent, they cannot be read as if Genesis 11 happens after Genesis 10. They evoke the same aetiological reality. Both begin in an imaginary world of human unity. The one takes its departure from the flood, with Noah's family. The other begins as a single people with a single language, who come out of the mythical land of Qedem to the valley of Shinar. Both give an account of how the earth's many peoples developed, each with its own land and language. Genesis 10 does this with a genealogical tree that portrays a single family of mankind. This genealogical list presents the eponymous 'fathers' of countries, cities and peoples of the ancient world; Canaan and the Semites, Tarsis and Rhodes, Gush, Egypt and Sheba, Babel and Akkad, Sidon and Gaza and many, many other nations and places of history and story. It organizes them geographically according to the three great continents known to the ancient Near East. Shem, Ham and japhet reflect in turn Asia, Africa and Europe. Geographical names play the roles of characters of story. This kind of list lends itself readily to expansive and creative story collection. Notes of commentary, explaining the origin of the coastal peoples, tracing the Philistines to Caphtor, or adding an historical note on when the Canaanites had spread into their land, give us insight into how ancient geography was taught. Other similar lists of names in Genesis, such as Genesis 4, present us with origin stories and aetiologies for trades and occupations. Jabal is the father of shepherds and tent-dwellers, while his brother Jubal was the ancestor for everyone who plays the lyre and flute. The composite Tubal-Cain is given the role of patron for desert-dwelling metal-workers. Other lists, like the Ishmael genealogy of Genesis 25, trace

and speculate on political alliances. Still others, like Esau's in Genesis 36 about Edom, present dynastic lists of Iron Age states.

The tale of the tower of Babel gives us a different view from Genesis 10's: an aetiology of the origins of nations, as well as of the quarrelling disunity of a single mankind. The story has little interest in any specific nation. It is a story that explains how it is that people are scattered, why they speak different languages and, like today, are incapable of getting along together. The story also ironically plays the tragic theme of the hubris of all human efforts to make one's name great.

The end of Genesis 11, following the tower of Babel story, continues the theme of this story's closure. By using the long genealogy of Shem, the narrator sketches another geographical picture, this time giving us a list of Semitic-speaking towns of northern Mesopotamia, which closes with Abraham's immediate family. The ancient Assyrian cities of Til-sha-Turachi (Terach), Til-Nachiri (Nachor) and the great North Mesopotamian tradingntre of Harran are given story roles here as Abraham's brothers. The name of Abraham itself is not an eponym, but a 'cue-name'. In Genesis 17: 5, Abraham is called *aber-hamon*, 'the father of many nations'. Abraham as the father of Palestine is the central plot motif in the stories collected in Genesis 12–36, It tells us how all the many peoples of Palestine came into their lands and developed their languages and nations. Lot was the ancestor of Ammon and Moab of the Transjordan. Isaac's wife Rebecca and her father Bethuel, Jacob's wives Leah and Rachel with their brother Laban, all link Abraham closely to the Aramaeans of the Northern Transjordan and Syria. Jacob's brother Esau is presented as the father of Edom and Seir. He links Abraham to the south and southeast. Isaac's brother Ishmael ties him to many of the Arab tribes of the desert fringe. Abraham through his concubine Keturah becomes the ancestor of yet other Arab groups of the steppe. Jacob, in his quarrels with everyone, including God, epitomizes ancient Israel. He is presented as the father of twelve sons, the legendary twelve tribes of Israel Joseph is the father of the Palestinian highlands of Ephraim and Manasseh, while Judah plays the role of the southern highlands'eponym and David's ancestor. It is not historical realities that create the genealogies. The links within the lists create a self-understanding regarding closeness and distance among different groups.

Similar fantasies creating self-identity grow with stories as well as genealogies. Many of these are positive stories, but they need not be. Judges 19 and Genesis 34, with their tales of rapes leading to the massacres of the tribe of Benjamin and the town of Shechem, are profound examples of the dark side of self-understanding. The stories of Isaac at Gerar (Genesis 26) on the other hand, as well as the conflict story chain of Jacob-Laban (Genesis 31), Rachel-Leah (Genesis 32) and Jacob-Esau (Genesis 33), are good stories of conflicts resolved. The Philistines of Gerar are presented as honest, trustworthy and peace-loving people with whom both Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 20 and 26) created the closest of alliances. The Hittites of Hebron were those from whom the patriarch's burial grounds were purchased (Genesis 23). The king of Salem blessed Abram and his brothers-in-arhis from the towns around the Dead Sea (Genesis 14). Even the Egyptians were good neighbours to the patriarchs (Genesis 12 and especially the Joseph story of Genesis 37–50). Eliezer of Damascus was Abraham's heir (Genesis 15). Such references to the larger world of Palestine continue to be used in the books of Exodus, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Chronicles and extend these geographical commentaries on associations and alliances to the Amalekites, the Kenites, Jebusites, Gibeonites and others. The Philistines, and especially the Canaanites, on the other hand, play roles of implacable hostility and come to represent false religious belief.

In most of the Bible's narratives, the conflict is not one of ethnic hatred, though it is too often understood this way. The polarity, epitomized by Israel and Canaan – both essentially fictive realities – is determined by a theological structure of sectarianism from Exodus through II Kings. As Israel follows the will of Yahweh, who brings them out of Egypt and leads them to the promised land, and there governs them as their king, they 'find refuge in him'. He defeats their enemies and saves them with inspired saviours and messianic kings. In the theological language of piety, Israel 'walks in the way of Yahweh', in the 'path of righteousness'. Within this paradigm, Amorites, Canaanites and Philistines are all illustrations of 'the godless'. They 'walk in the way of evil'. The opposition is black and white; implicitly sectarian. Who is not with us, is against us. In II Kings, 'foreign wives' corrupt first Solomon and then, in Ezra's reiteration, Israel as a whole. The northern kingdom, with its evil king Jeroboam, draws Yahweh's

people into ‘the way of the godless’, the ‘way of Jeroboam’. They are destroyed as the Canaanites and Amorites had been before them. The reforms of the pious kings of Jerusalem, Hezekiah and Josiah, delay the coming ‘day of wrath’ for Judah. Judah too, however, must stand condemned for its hubris, for abandoning the way of its God. II Kings closes with Yahweh rejecting the people he himself created. He destroys Jerusalem where his name had its home. The story is a tragedy, not a piece of national propaganda.

3 Of God’s people

When Exodus 19 states that Israel was Yahweh’s people and Yahweh Israel’s God, it reflects a way of looking at the world that was very common in antiquity. A similar theme is expressed in the song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32, which views the world as divided among gods and nations. This song presents Israel as Yahweh’s inheritance. When the world was created there were different peoples. Each had its own language and each its own form of religious expression. The relationship that was described between gods and lands was a rational refection on international politics. The story structures of religious thought understood the world of the divine and the world of peoples as mirror reflections of each other. The god of a nation protects it, provides for its people and determines the destiny of its political life. The fate of a God in such a world of story was inextricably linked to the fate of his people. Through obedience to the law given by God, to one’s king understood as a servant of God, and to one’s traditions understood as established by God, a person fulfils conditions of piety. If gods acted in the world, provided and cared for their peoples and assured their survival and destiny, one required a divine world that was just as complex as the political world. The metaphors of a people chosen by their God, and of a people as being the possession of their God, existed long before the Bible. Long before they were taken up in the stories about old Israel, such metaphors were common throughout the entire ancient Near East. These motifs about gods were central in the development of the divine as personal and as caring. An understanding of one’s God as personal is the very essence of belief as a commitment Faith in the divine was expressed as

in the role of a client to his patron, namely, with love and loyalty. Within the West Semitic world of Syria and Palestine such an understanding was gradually integrated, beginning first in the Assyrian period, with the growing dominance of a more inclusive understanding of the divine as universal spirit.

Those who collected and wrote the Bible, wrote about being human. They wrote their philosophy in competing stories, in the form of divine laws, and in songs and moral poems sung by the old kings, priests and prophets of history and legend. Like the knowledge condensed in old folk sayings, placed in the mouth of the wise king and teacher of the distant past, origin stories used the concept of past on the principle that one is what one has been. To describe what one has been is to express one's self-understanding. The story told is instruction.

While giving expression to the complex and often conflict-ridden relationship between humanity and their idea of God, the Bible's compilers also created a past: a history. The Bible's creation stories, for example, centre themselves in the flood story. Foreshadowing the story of his own people, Israel, God is angry and regrets that he has made humanity. It was a mistake. He now sees them simply as evil, without any redeeming quality. He sends rain and floods to kill them all. . . except Noah whom he likes, just as arbitrarily! After Noah and his sons make a new beginning, the story-line continues through a series of tales linked through the next five books. They form a chain of fathers and sons, from Noah, the survivor of the lood, to the wandering ancestors of Israel; Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The story reaches Egypt with Jacob and his family at the end of Genesis. In Egypt, Jacob's family becomes the people Israel. The collective thread of the next few books follow a very simple story of God searching for his people.

Again, as in the garden story, the people are nothing: slaves. Yahweh chooses an entirely unpromising fellow to be their leader. This odd choice of Moses is not quite as arbitrary as had been his choice of Noah. Moses is chosen with irony in mind: because he is unheroic. Not a single line of the narrator's pen sketches a heroic man. Moses has none of the stuff of greatness or leadership in him. His inabilities make it very clear to the audience that God is the one in charge here. This god wants to be treated like God; that is, the ultimate patron of his people. He wants to decide things, and he wants his people above all to follow and obey *him*. He

demands very little of this nation . . . only that they follow him wherever he should take them, and that they obey him. But they don't. They complain whenever anything goes wrong, and they do what they want whenever they get the chance. Finally, Yahweh decides they are hopeless. He gets rid of a whole generation of complainers by making them wander in the desert for forty years (a story-teller's full generation). A new generation can become his new people in their new land. This echo of the flood story marks the plot-line of the Pentateuch. It not only points back to that first destruction, but it also points ahead to destructions and new beginnings to come. The story is a story of loss, written about old Israel and its failure. It is also a survival story, written from the perspective of the new Israel. The Pentateuch is only the first movement of this theme. It pauses rather than closes in the testimony of Moses that comprises the three farewell speeches he delivers from Mount Nebo in Deuteronomy. These addresses offer a three-fold recap of the Pentateuch as a parable. Moses looks ahead to Israel's entry Into the land and warns them of the disaster to come.

The story chain continues. There follows a series of warlike heroes who take the role of Moses'successor. First there is Joshua. He is instructed by the deity to conquer the land. A loose collection of tales of conquest and settlement follow, grouped around figures of warrior saviours. Although arbitrarily linked to each other, they tell a story of inspired leaders, each hero possessed by God's spirit in turn. Each defeats Israel's enemies, against all expectation. The reiterated plot develops: God will save them when they turn to him in their need. This plays out in story form a central theme of the Psalter; 'Happy are they who seek refuge in him.' The tempo of this group of tales is set with the help of contrasting motifs; the saving deity and his backsliding people. The deity helps his people conquer all their enemies – whenever they let him. As soon as they turn to their own interests, their enemies gain strength and suppress them once again.

This chain of saviour stories does not dose. The last is the magnificent story of Samson and Delilah. The last chapters of Judges are bridge narratives, offering a prelude to the stories of the kingdom. They mark the time of the Judges as a dark and evil time. It was a time when 'everyone did what was right in their own eyes', a lawless time, a time of chaos. 'There was no king in Israel.' There was no servant of Yahweh, no one to carry out his will. Such, the story-line tells us, is a recipe for disaster.

Drawing direct attention to this leitmotif of the Bible's narrative, the plot turns to the theme of God as Israel's king. A new beginning is created with the birth of Samuel. His mother, miraculously impregnated by the divine spirit, dedicates him wholly and entirely to God. He is God's servant: priest and prophet alike. In his guidance of Israel, Israel knows exactly what God wants. Israel has peace and prosperity. The dramatic focus shifts away from the people to the leader. While Samuel is with them, all is well, because Yahweh rules his people through him. Samuel, however, grows old, and his sons are worthless. The people want a king like other people. The greater story's plot defines itself. How can they be like other nations and be Yahweh's people too? The story goes to great pains to point out that they are not like other people. Only God can be Israel's king. The request is treasonous; it 'tempts Yahweh'. The implicit and relentless cynicism, of the narrative voice leads the reader to expect disaster, even as Yahweh accepts a king whom he alone will choose, anoint as his own, and guide.

Saul is Yahweh's chosen messiah. He is a hero's hero: a head taller than all other men. He becomes the scourge of the Philistines, who now play the Canaanites'role as archetype of Israel's enemies. The picture of the early Saul is an attractive one. It is the story of good king Saul, who does what he believes a good king should do. Good King Saul, however, is shaped from a template of classical tragedy. It lies at the very heart of the narrative's description of its likeable hero that the narrator, in I Samuel 15, insists that Yahweh must reject the hero, this good king and good general. His tragedy and fault are none other than his being a man. This is the reason he is rejected. The God of this story does not want a king who does what he thinks is right. He wants a king who will do what *he, Yahweh, the true king*, sees as good. Goodness is not what lies intrinsic in actions. Good is what God sees to be right. What is astonishing in this presentation is not merely the personal, arbitrary, cruel or controlling personality of the deity. It is rather that *the author is aware* of Yahweh's action as despotic. In this way, he drives home the uncompromising nature of the religious demand of obedience.

The story of Saul offers t reverse reflection of the story of Abraham, whose faith was praised in Genesis 22 because he had been willing to sacrifice his son Isaac. However, we need to read our text carefully; we might easily grossly misread a simple, delicate story, constructed from

horrific motifs. Yahweh is not a God who likes killing children, or demanding that fathers do it for him! No more does the Yahweh of the Saul story reflect a God who likes decapitating enemy kings in order to give lessons in obedience. Both the gore and the terror, however, do belong to the Saul story. Nevertheless, they are disastrously misunderstood if historicized. So too, the picture of Yahweh as uncompromising godfather. Saul's story, like Abraham's, is a morality tale. They are both variations on the theme of piety's commitment to the divine will. They shock to draw their theme. They preach to their audiences; 'Walk in God's will,' Abraham passes his test, demonstrating unshakable confidence that 'God will provide.' Saul fails his for lack of that quality. In any real world, Saul would be a great man: we do not have enough soldiers like him. And Abraham would be ostracized. In the world of story, however, Saul fails and Abraham succeeds! Saul fails the only test he was ever given: to be Yahweh's servant. The plot draws on stories of battles and kings, stories of bravery, honour and personal integrity. It is, however, cast in the spirit of early tragedy, at the heart of which is a rather unworldly piety that calls for allowing the gods to rule one's life. Saul's story is a variant of the story of old Israel.

The tale of the mad King Saul stands in stark relief to the heroic David, that Cinderella whom Samuel had found in Bethlehem. Saul, who had first tried to kill David, ends, humiliatingly, recognizing David as his heir and son. David's is a cue-name, the divine epithet 'beloved' (Hebrew; *dwd*), which marks the role he plays in the story. As Yahweh's 'beloved' he is the eponymous founder of the dynasty, through whom Yahweh is to be eternally king, the one whose son will build the once homeless Yahweh a house in Jerusalem. It is there that Yahweh will live and rule over Israel forever. At least that was the plan. The story offers the reader an invitation to reflect on God's plans, to remember his regret and the destruction of all that he had made in the flood, to recall Israel, his 'first-born's', fate in the wilderness and to think once again on the tragedy of Yahweh's chosen one, good king Saul Israel's new king is his 'beloved'. Yahweh believes he has found a home and a people to rule.

No one, however, reflecting on the tragic leitmotif of this tradition is likely to forget the uncomfortably threatening story-line, suggesting as it does, that having a king for Israel had been an unwelcome human idea to Yahweh! Rather than relaxing and closing in peace and serenity after

David's submission to God's will on the Mount of Olives in II Samuel 15, the story takes a relentless turn. David, Yahweh's faithful servant, goes on to arrange the murder of his own faithful servant. David, the once 'beloved' of Yahweh, is now rejected. His son Solomon is chosen to be God's beloved in his stead, to rale over Israel as Yahweh's messiah. With David's fate, the story-teller is entirely pitiless. After Yahweh brings t plague against his people as punishment for his crime, David is left to die an old man, humiliated, cold and impotent. He needs to be nursed like a child, with a young girl to warm his bed.

Solomon's story, the third of this series, repeats the pattern. The dominant theme is played out fully. God gives Solomon divine wisdom and understanding. Like Alexander, he plays the role of philosopher-king, ruler of a great kingdom. The tale presents him as world-renowned, fabulously rich, the lover of women. He builds Yahweh a home and the whole kingdom is at peace. This time it is forever.

However fabulous the story is, it is not a simple one. Just as the narrative describes Solomon as a saint who, *like his father before him*, followed God in everything, and just as the narrative reiterates the promise that God will live in his house in Jerusalem forever, so these promises of expectation also recur with a warning. The warning reiterates the one given to Moses in Exodus 23: 21, when the lost generation first set out on its wilderness trek: 'Do not disobey [my messenger]; for he will not forgive your sin. My name is in him.' This warning was reiterated when the people turned to the golden calf (Exodus 32: 34 and 33: 2), and again it was in fulilment of this threat that Yahweh first abandoned his people in the wilderness story (Num. 14: 27–30). The promise to David and Solomon, however eternal it may have been, is conditional. It is an eternal promise – as to Eli and his sons in the opening chapters of I Samuel. However, if the king does not obey, or if his successors do not and take other gods for their own, then Israel will be removed from the land. The eternal temple will lie in ruins. The promise to David does not bind Yahweh. Its permanence depends wholly on the arbitrary and, yes, despotic will of David's patron: 'Everyone will see the ruins and hiss scornfully, talking about the shame that brought on such evil.' Here is a statement obviously written from the perspective of just such humiliation, shame and loss (I Kings 9, especially verses 8–9).

This is a difficult theology. Its author stands among the scornful gossips. The story is never sad; nor does it allow pity. It is similar to classical tragedy. The human being – so terribly promising: the very image of God – cannot escape his clay feet. They are his destiny. From the height of Solomon's glory, when God was truly with Israel, the story moves inexorably towards its closure. Although the scenes need yet to be played, Israel's and Jerusalem's fate are both sealed by their common humanity. After Solomon's death, the narrative reconstructs the fragments of two dynastic lists, containing names and perhaps some of the regnal years of kings who had once ruled over the states of Israel and of Judah. It portrays these two kingdoms as siblings and rivals in a civil war, which the story presents as having broken out following Solomon's death. The pattern for this story is the break-up of the Hellenistic empire, which had separated into two integral parts; the southern Ptolemies of Egypt ruling from Alexandria, and the Seleucids of the north ruling from Antioch and Babylon. Seleucid Syria and the hated religious syncretism of Antiochus IV is reflected in II Kings' descriptions of Samaria, whose king goes to war with Solomon's successor. Samaria plays the metaphorical role of Hosea's faithless prostitute who abandons Yahweh her true husband (Hebrew: *ba'al*) and turns to the God Ba'al. Variously, Samaria's king Jeroboam replays the wilderness story of the golden calf. He makes two calves of gold and sets them up as statues of Yahweh in the towns of Bethel and Dan. Samaria's kings thereafter follow 'in the way of Jeroboam'; that is, in the way of the ungodly, a pattern which seals an inevitable fate. The unfaithfulness of Samaria's kings brings disaster after disaster, until finally God has enough and chooses the Assyrian king Shalmaneser and his army to rid himself of this people.

Only Judah and Jerusalem are left. Jerusalem's king, Hezekiah, is a reformer, a good king who brought Judah back to its religion. The country prospers, and when the Assyrians, now under Sennacherib's rule, come to lay siege to Jerusalem and threaten to destroy it completely, Jerusalem's God sends a plague against the Assyrian army as an act of grace to Israel. The king is forced to abandon the siege. The relief, however, is but temporary as the plot turns inexorably towards Jerusalem's final destruction. Yahweh promises Hezekiah that there will be 'peace in his

time'. He also warns that the end is coming; the storm-clouds are heavy over Jerusalem.

As soon as Hezekiah dies, the new kings, each in succession, do more evil than any before them. One king brings temporary relief. Good King Josiah, like Hezekiah, reforms the country. In an ironic caricature of his Maccabean variant John Hyrcanus, he even attempts to force conversions with his soldiers. This has strikingly little effect on Judah's predetermined fate. Yahweh regrets having chosen Israel as his son and Judah as his firstborn. He remains resolved to rid himself of this people and to destroy Jerusalem and its temple. The audience fidgets Impatiently for Josiah's successors to do evil and for the Babylonians to carry out God's will. In three successive variants, they punish Jerusalem. First they attack the city with a series of armed bands. Then, the city is besieged and all but the poorest deported. Finally, the temple is burnt, the walls of the city torn down, and the rest of the population carried off. The story closes with a scene of exquisite banality. The last of David's dynasty is a guest at the king of Babylon's table . . . 'for as long as he lived', The story closes here. Old Israel is dead, and Judah too. The closure is unequivocal and complete. The heartless and humiliating image of Jerusalem's last king, living off an allowance granted him by his conqueror, brings down the curtain.

This is a past and a lesson learned, a history that only a new Israel can bear. It is the story of the old Israel, whom God loved and lost. What is a human, that God should think about it? A little less than the angels; almost a god; a fallen angel. The buildings that humans build are Babylon's tower, Jerusalem's walls. What began as a story of the whole of humanity, centres itself on the story of lost Israel. In its closure, it becomes again a story-paradigm for everyman. It affects the self-understanding of every reader: all the women and all the men who stand within the tradition and identify with it as their own.

4 A collapsing paradigm; the Bible as history

It is here that modern understandings of the Bible have come to grief. The voice of the tradition, only implicit in our text, has been lost to us in our efforts to make it our own. It is this voice that the present book hopes to

recapture – an interesting, powerful voice. It animates the stories and songs of the past. It plays the narrator, transcending millennia, and it assumes the role of God for old Israel. Yet – and this the reader is never allowed to forget – this old Israel is lost. This voice of memory remembers a shattered past and a God forgotten. That alone makes it interesting. The voice we listen to as we read the Bible, and especially the voice that animates those first twelve books that delne the origin and destiny of Israel's twelve tribes, opening with the creation of humanity in the image and likeness of God, and ending with the destruction of a God-forsaken Israel – this is not a voice that belongs to the past of any people. The Bible does not present us with a national literature or the book of a people. Genesis begins and remains 'the book of the development of humanity' (Gen. 5; 1). Abraham is a father of many nations. The story never abandons that universalist perspective. Beginning with a God that created a world that was good . . . as he saw it to be good, Genesis closes with this same understanding. This is the God of Joseph. What Joseph's brothers saw and did was evil, at least evil in so far as men can understand such things. 'God meant it, however, as good, to bring it about that many should have life, as they do this day (Gen. 49: 20).' The way of Joseph's brothers is the way of the world. It sees what is good or evil only from within its own, human, perspective. Good and evil, however, are as God sees them. Such a deity is not merely Israel's God, but the universal God of heaven. As the story continues into Exodus, and into the long story of Israel lost, its voice does not change. The story that recreates the past of old Israel is ever a paradigm of the way of mankind. It is the tower of Babel story in greater detail. Its voice holds to the universalist perspective, with an edge of self-identifying criticism. They were gods with clay feet, fallen angels.

We have in the Bible some of the most beautiful poetry: pious, lyrical and erotic, and also some of the angriest. We have narratives of epic proportions, aetiologies and folktales that are at times stunningly profound and evocative, romances and adventure stories, some of them are ideologically tendentious or moralistic. There is patent racism and sexism, and some of the world's earliest condemnations of each. One of the things the Bible almost never is, however, is intentionally historical: that is an interest of ours that it rarely shares. Here and there, the Bible uses data gleaned from ancient texts or records. It often refers to great figures and

events of the past. . . at least as they are known to popular tradition. But it cites such ‘historical facts’only where they may serve as grist for one of its various literary mills. The Bible knows nothing or nearly nothing of most of the great, transforming events of Palestine’s history. Of historical causes, it knows only one: Palestine’s ancient deity Yahweh. It knows nearly nothing of the great droughts that changed the course of Palestine’s world for centuries, and it is equally ignorant of the region’s great historical battles at Megiddo, Kadesh and Lachish. The Bible tells us nothing directly of four hundred years of Egyptian presence. Nor can it take on the role of teaching us anything about the wasteful competition for the Jezreel in the early Iron Age, or about the forced sedentarization of nomads along Palestine’s southern lank.

The reason for this is simple. The Bible’s language is not an historical language. It is a language of high literature, of story, of sermon and of song. It is a tool of philosophy and moral instruction. To argue that the Bible has it wrong is like alleging that Herman Melville has got his whale wrong! Literarily, one might quibble about whether Jonah has it right with his big fish, but not because the story could or could not have happened. On the story’s own terms, the rescue of Jonah is but a journeyman’s device as far as plot resolutions go. But no false note is sounded in Jonah’s Ig tree, in Yahweh’s speech from the whirlwind in the Book of Job, or in Isaiah 40’s song of comfort.