INTRODUCTION

I have written on these chapters before, both in my first book (which I leave unnamed, preferring that people not look up what I now consider a youthful production, from whose positions I have mostly departed) and in my second, *Irony in the Old Testament* (1965; second edition, 1981).

Thinking about the Hebrew Bible throughout my academic career and since my retirement, I have come to think of it centrally with that title, and not how I was first trained to know it: as the Old Testament. I am very conscious of its "Hebrewness" and its antiquity, its setting in a culture so different from ours that we would be quite helpless if transported into it. As the Old Testament, it is the first volume of a two-volume Christian book, and a great many people suppose they are very comfortable with reading Christian books. The New Testament, however, is also the product of an ancient culture, or a combination of them, Jewish, Greek, and Roman, of the first centuries of the Common Era. As products of their times, both volumes think in unfamiliar ways.

Many are quick to gloss over this strangeness, partly because there is a long theological tradition of a doctrine of divine inspiration, which says that God made the book so it would bring us truth. Well, perhaps,

but in the twenty-first century it is no longer comfortably familiar, for example, to use the metaphor of a shepherd for the deity. I know there are still shepherds to be found in our country. In a long life, I have never actually met one, and I doubt that many of my readers have. We have some sentimental paintings that we suppose represent what shepherds do, but their sentimentality is misleading. Moreover, the constant use of the term "Lord" for both the deity and Christ has come to us from cultures immersed in structures of kingship and aristocracy, where what "Lords" were, or even "lords," was well known. We are not bound in such structures anymore, and the metaphor of a "Lord" or "King" is an anachronism. The kings (or queens) in our own day are without political power. I will not suppress evidence from the ancient world of the use of such metaphors for the divine. But I prefer to translate "The LORD is my shepherd" as "Yahweh is my shepherd," and that may propose some healthy unfamiliarity. In any case, I do not suppose that readers are Christian, and I hope that many are Jewish and any other current persuasion or nonpersuasion. It seems to me that recent decades have newly seen the Bible, whether Hebrew or Christian, as an artifact in the public and secular possession rather than as the exclusive property of the pious.

My issue in any case is not the search for contemporary relevance. As a longtime student of antiquity, I am most impressed by the fact that the Hebrew Bible, and therefore the book of Genesis, was not written for us. I suspect the thought that their work might ever be translated into any other language never came to the storytellers' minds. Though I have tried to translate the Hebrew text in a way that will be intelligible to contemporary readers, it is nevertheless important to me to help you realize that even in an English translation, you are reading an ancient Hebrew book.

Nor is this in any common sense a "Jewish" book. Only in the last centuries before the Common Era was there a religious culture that could sensibly be called Jewish. Before much of the earlier Israelite population was effectually removed from its homeland in the eighth century B.C.E. by the Assyrians (think "the ten lost tribes"), the nation was "Israel," and following the Babylonian invasion of the remaining

territory of the tribe of Judah in the sixth century B.C.E., it was mostly a province of one foreign empire after another. In any case, "Jew" means a member of the tribe of Judah. So my effort here is to assist your entry into an ancient culture to see how it did what it did with some of its tales and its lore.

Some readers may wonder why I have stopped at the end of chapter 11 of Genesis. It is not as arbitrary as it might seem. With chapter 12 begins the story of the nation of Israel, focusing on several generations of that tribally constituted nation's prime ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. The first eleven chapters focus on the world's beginning (the "earliest world" of the book's subtitle), dealing with the whole world's people, as they understood it, rather than with a people who would be a distinctive nation and culture. Those chapters, then, form a frequently identified prologue to the story of Israel itself, from the creation to the birth of Abraham and the beginning of his migration from Mesopotamia to what became Palestine.

In the interest of entry to that ancient culture, I have made a number of decisions about translating and interpreting. I have made my own translation of the Hebrew text, which is in many details somewhat different from other translations. For one thing, my policy is to avoid what I think are inadequately demonstrated meanings of words. If I concluded that I could not figure out what a given word meant, I have left an ellipsis (...) where the word ought to be, with a note explaining it. There are not many of these. In one or two instances I have used the same ellipsis to stand for a word that is clearly not applicable in the context and could be made relevant only by changing the Hebrew text. I have a longstanding policy against changing any consonant in the Hebrew text—I explain this in more detail later—although I freely change vowels. In some places it seems clear that one or more words somehow dropped out of the Hebrew text in the course of its being copied, probably in the early Middle Ages. The same ellipsis stands for those gaps.

I have decided to use the Hebrew words for the deity, mostly Elohîm and Yahweh (or Yahweh Elohîm). The English habit, ever since the King James Version of 1611, of representing Yahweh, the Israelite god's proper

name, as "the LORD" (and in 1611 the English translators knew quite intimately what a "lord" or a "Lord" was) descends from the relatively early Jewish sense that the name of the deity was too holy to pronounce. I do not wish to run offensively in the face of that theological principle, but as I feel that it applies only to devout Jews, which I am not, I dare to hope that devout Jews will not give up on reading this book but will mentally make the right substitution. Moreover, I am dissatisfied to use the English word "God" to represent Elohîm. I think that too many readers assume they know what "God" means, and I am convinced that what the word means to most of us, Christian, Jewish, or other, in twenty-first-century America does not come near to matching what *Elohîm* meant to ancient Israelites. So I use the Hebrew words, and if they are void of connotations to English readers, that is fine. I hope readers will not just carry their assumptions about what "God" means to these words, but if they do, there is not a whole lot I can do about it.

These two words, Elohîm and Yahweh, later occur in patterns that suggest they represent varying strands of the traditional tales they are being used to tell. It is not necessary now to discuss exactly how they represent that, but you will notice, I hope, that Elohîm is the only term for the deity used in chapter 1 of Genesis, and Yahweh Elohîm is the only one used in chapter 2 from verse 4 on. And when we get to the two interwoven Flood stories, one of the observations by which they can be disentangled is the presence in what I call Flood 1 of Yahweh, and in Flood 2 of Elohîm. Additional observations besides those are necessary to analyze the two stories. These two narrative strands probably represent somewhat differing viewpoints as well as differing times in Israel's history when they took their current forms. We need not drive a wedge between Elohîm and Yahweh by suggesting that Israelites thought of them as different gods. It's somewhat more like the different styles of talk and prayer, for example, that can be observed among various Christian churches or among different branches of Judaism.

Still another departure from translational convention is the presentation of proper names of characters in the stories. I have decided against using the often mistaken English versions of them. So you will

see, for instance, Chavah (*ch* as in Bach) instead of Eve; Hebel instead of Abel; Qayin (the *q* without a following *u* is pronounced like *k* quite far back in the throat) instead of Cain; and Nōach instead of Noah. Part of the point is the reminder that you are reading a Hebrew book, with odd-looking, foreign-sounding names instead of familiar names, many of which have been transported into our own language and usage (I know people named Eve and Jared and Noah). Many names were brought into English from German, which explains why so many of our accustomed names with Hebrew origins have *j*'s in them. German pronounces written *j* as English pronounces *y*, so Yephet is what you will see here instead of Japheth. I hope these unfamiliar spellings assist some other possibly unfamiliar aspects of the texts to come through.

One of the standard complaints about Hebrew prose style is that nearly every sentence begins with "And." There are even books in the Hebrew Bible that begin with "And." Some translations prefer to bow to an English stylistic prejudice against beginning every sentence with "And," but I have decided to be more literal. It is possible that in a couple of cases I failed to notice my omission of an "And," and I dare to hope you'll forgive it.

Finally, and most important, unlike my earlier published entries into these chapters, I have decided not to engage here in debates with or references to other scholars who have written about the material. It's not because I suppose that others, such as Robert Alter (he comes first to mind, because we are both centrally concerned with the literary qualities of biblical texts), have thought badly about these chapters; it is merely that I am trying to bring my own eyes and mind to bear as closely as I can to this material. I have, of course, consulted dictionaries and grammars of classical Hebrew. And in search of facts that have not stuck in my head (what is the length of a cubit?), I have consulted standard dictionaries of the Bible, which give that kind of information. I have even dared to ask a couple of questions about Hebrew usage to some colleagues in the field. But I have not searched out recently published articles and books on Genesis to discover the current state of the scholarly discussion. Having been at work on other kinds of research

subjects, I have not been for some years closely in touch with the scholarship of the Hebrew Bible.

I have expanded on a number of points in the text in notes, which are arranged at the end of the book. These notes are designated in the text by superscripted letters, for example, [a].

In short, I have not had in the front of my mind scholarly readers, who know and follow the discussions of scholars. They are, of course, welcome to notice their own or competing positions on various aspects of the text and to cheer or grumble as their inclinations suggest. Instead, I am thinking mostly of their students or their friends, of whatever persuasions, as my prospective readers—and of my wife, a discussion with whom was the original inspiration for this writing, and who, though a superb reader and writer, does not regularly enter the Bible in any of its guises. I very much hope that many readers are like her.