

Aetiologies

The Legends of Genesis, Hermann Gunkel, 1901 (repub. 1964)

p. 25 "aetiological" legends, that is, those that are written for a purpose, or to explain something. There is no end of the questions which interest a primitive people Some of these questions are the following:

Ethnological Legends

p. 26 There is a desire to know the reasons for the relations of tribes. Why is Canaan the servant of his brethren? Why has Japhet such an extended territory? Why do the children of Lot dwell in the inhospitable East? How does it come that Reuben has lost his birthright? Why must Cain wander about as a restless fugitive? Why is sevenfold vengeance proclaimed against the slayer of Cain? Why is Gilead the border between Israel and the Aramaeans? Why does Beersheba belong to us and not to the people of Gerar? Why is Shechem in possession of Joseph? Why have we a right to the holy places at Shechem and Machpelah? Why has Ishmael become a Bedouin people with just this territory and this God? How does it come that the Egyptian peasants have to bear the heavy tax of the fifth, while the fields of the priests are exempt? And with especial frequency the question was asked, How does Israel come to have this glorious land of Canaan?

The legends tell in many variations how it came about that the patriarchs received this particular land: God gave it to Abraham because of his obedience; when on the occasion of the separation at Bethel Lot chose the East, the West fell to Abraham; Jacob obtained the blessing of the better country from Isaac by a deception; God promised it to Jacob at Bethel, and so on.

p. 27 The usual nature of the answer given to these questions by our legends is that the present relations are due to some transaction of the patriarchs: the tribal ancestor bought the holy place, and accordingly it belongs to us, his heirs; the ancestors of Israel and Aram established Gilead as their mutual boundary; Cain's ancestor was condemned to perpetual wandering by the word of God, and so on. A favorite way is to find the explanation in a miraculous utterance of God or some of the patriarchs, and the legend has to tell how this miraculous utterance came to be made in olden times. And this sort of explanation was regarded as completely satisfactory

Childish as these explanations now seem to us

Etymological Legenas

p. 29 The city of Babel is named from the fact that God there confused human tongues (babil, xi); Jacob is interpreted as "heelholder" because at birth he held his brother, whom he robbed of the birthright, by the heel (xxv.26); Zoar means "trifle," because Lot said appealingly, "It is only a trifle" (xix.20,22); Beersheba is "the well of seven," because Abraham there gave Abimelech seven lambs (xxi.28ff); Isaac (Jishak) is said to have his name from the fact that his mother laughed (sahak) when his birth was foretold to her (xviii.12), and so forth . . . for instance Cain (more exactly Kajin) from kaniti, "I have acquired." (iv.1), Reuben from rah beonji, "he hath regarded my misery" (xxix.32), etc. Every student of Hebrew knows that these are not satisfactory etymologies. In one case many theologians even are wont to declare one of these explanations, a very ingenious one indeed (Jahveh = "I am that I am," Ex.iii.14) as an established etymology. But etymologies are not acquired by revelation. The etymological legends are especially valuable to us because they are especially clear illustrations of the aetiological variety of legend.