CHAPTER 2

J and E

Two Clues Converge

Two and a half thousand years after the events that I described in the last chapter took place, three investigators of who wrote the Bible each independently made the same discovery. One was a minister, one was a physician, and one was a professor. The discovery that they all made ultimately came down to the combination of two pieces of evidence: doublets and the names of God. They saw that there were apparently two versions each of a large number of biblical stories: two accounts of the creation, two accounts of each of several stories about the patriarchs Abraham and Jacob, and so on. Then they noticed that, quite often, one of the two versions of a story would refer to God by one name and the other version would refer to God by a different name.

In the case of the creation, for example, the first chapter of the Bible tells one version of how the world came to be created, and the second chapter of the Bible starts over with a different version of what happened. In many ways they duplicate each other, and on several points they contradict each other. For example, they de-
scribe the same events in different order. In the first version, God creates plants first, then animals, then man and woman. In the second version, God creates man first. Then he creates plants. Then, so that the man should not be alone, God creates animals. And last, after the man does not find a satisfactory mate among the animals, God creates woman. And so we have:

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<tr>
<th>Genesis 1</th>
<th>Genesis 2</th>
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<td>plants</td>
<td>man</td>
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<td>animals</td>
<td>plants</td>
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<td>man &amp; woman</td>
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<td>woman</td>
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The two stories have two different pictures of what happened. Now, the three investigators noticed that the first version of the creation story always refers to the creator as God—thirty-five times. The second version always refers to him by his name, Yahweh God—eleven times. The first version never calls him Yahweh; the second version never calls him God.

Later comes the story of the great flood and Noah's ark, and it, too, can be separated into two complete versions that sometimes duplicate each other and sometimes contradict each other. And, again, one version always calls the deity God, and the other version always calls him Yahweh. There are two versions of the story of the covenant between the deity and Abraham. And, once again, in one the deity introduces himself as Yahweh, and in one he introduces himself as God. And so on. The investigators saw that they were not simply dealing with a book that repeated itself a great deal, and they were not dealing with a loose collection of somewhat similar stories. They had discovered two separate works that someone had cut up and combined into one.
The Discovery of the Sources

The first of the three persons who made this discovery was a German minister, Henning Bernhard Witter, in 1711. His book made very little impact and was in fact forgotten until it was rediscovered two centuries later, in 1924.

The second person to see it was Jean Astruc, a French professor of medicine and court physician to Louis XV. He published his findings at the age of seventy, anonymously in Brussels and secretly in Paris in 1753. His book, too, made very little impression on anyone. Some belittled it, perhaps partly because it was by a medical doctor and not by a scholar.

But when a third person, who was a scholar, made the same discovery and published it in 1780, the world could no longer ignore it. The third person was Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, a known and respected scholar in Germany and the son of a pastor. He called the group of biblical stories that referred to the deity as God “E,” because the Hebrew word for God is El or Elohim. He called the group of stories that referred to the deity as Yahweh “J” (which in German is pronounced like English Y).

The idea that the Bible’s early history was a combination of two originally separate works by two different people lasted only eighteen years. Practically before anyone had a chance to consider the implications of this idea for the Bible and religion, investigators discovered that the first five books of the Bible were not, in fact, even by two writers—they were by four.

They discovered that E was not one but two sources. The two had looked like only one because they both called the deity Elohim, not Yahweh. But the investigators now noticed that within the group of stories that called the deity Elohim there were still doublets. There were also differences of style, differences of language, and differences of interests. In short, the same kinds of evidence that had led to the discovery of J and E now led to the discovery of a third source that had been hidden within E. The differences of interests were intriguing. This third set of stories seemed to be particularly interested in priests. It contained stories about priests, laws about priests, matters
of ritual, sacrifice, incense-burning, and purity, and concern with dates, numbers, and measurements. This source therefore came to be known as the Priestly source—for short, P.

The sources J, E, and P were found to flow through the first four of the five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. However, there was hardly a trace of them in the fifth book, Deuteronomy, except for a few lines in the last chapters. Deuteronomy is written in an entirely different style from those of the other four books. The differences are obvious even in translation. The vocabulary is different. There are different recurring expressions and favorite phrases. There are doublets of whole sections of the first four books. There are blatant contradictions of detail between it and the others. Even part of the wording of the Ten Commandments is different. Deuteronomy appeared to be independent, a fourth source. It was called D.

The discovery that the Torah of Moses was really four works that had once been separate was not necessarily a crisis in itself. After all, the New Testament also began with four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—each of which told the story in its own way. Why then was there such a hostile reaction, among Christians and Jews, to the idea that the Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible) might begin with four “gospels” as well? The difference was that the Hebrew Bible’s four sources had been combined so intricately and accepted as Moses’ own writing for so long, about two thousand years; the new discoveries were flying in the face of an old, accepted, sacred tradition. The biblical investigators were unraveling a finely woven garment, and no one knew where these new investigations would lead.

The Story of Noah—Twice

These first books of the Bible had as extraordinary a manner of composition as any book on earth. Imagine assigning four different people to write a book on the same subject, then taking their four different versions and cutting them up and combining them into one long, continuous account, then claiming that the account was all by
one person. Then imagine giving the book to detectives and leaving them to figure out (1) that the book was not by one person, (2) that it was by four, (3) who the four were, and (4) who combined them.

For those readers who want to get a better sense of how this looks, I have translated the biblical story of Noah's ark, as it appears in Genesis, with its two sources printed in two different kinds of type. The flood story is a combination of the J source and the P source. J is printed here in regular type, and P is printed in boldface capitals. If you read either source from beginning to end, and then go back and read the other one, you will be able to see for yourself two complete, continuous accounts, each with its own vocabulary and concerns:

The Flood—Genesis 6:5–8:22

(Priestly text in boldface capitals, J text in regular type)

GENESIS 6:
5 And Yahweh saw that the evil of humans was great in the earth, and all the inclination of the thoughts of their heart was only evil all the day.
6 And Yahweh regretted that he had made humans in the earth, and he was grieved to his heart.
7 And Yahweh said, "I shall wipe out the humans which I have created from the face of the earth, from human to beast to creeping thing to bird of the heavens, for I regret that I have made them."
8 But Noah found favor in Yahweh's eyes.
9 These are the generations of Noah: Noah was a righteous man, perfect in his generations. Noah walked with God.
10 And Noah sired three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth.
11 And the earth was corrupted before God, and the earth was filled with violence.
12 And God saw the earth, and here it was corrupted, for all flesh had corrupted its way on the earth.
13 And God said to Noah, "The end of all flesh has come before me, for the earth is filled with violence because of them, and here I am going to destroy them with the earth.

14 Make yourself an ark of gopher wood, make rooms with the ark, and pitch it outside and inside with pitch.

15 And this is how you shall make it: Three hundred cubits the length of the ark, fifty cubits its width, and thirty cubits its height.

16 You shall make a window for the ark, and you shall finish it to a cubit from the top, and you shall make an entrance to the ark in its side. You shall make lower, second, and third stories for it.

17 And here I am bringing the flood, water over the earth, to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life from under the heavens. Everything which is on the land will die.

18 And I shall establish my covenant with you. And you shall come to the ark, you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you.

19 And of all the living, of all flesh, you shall bring two to the ark to keep alive with you, they shall be male and female.

20 Of the birds according to their kind, and of the beasts according to their kind, and of all the creeping things of the earth according to their kind, two of each will come to you to keep alive.

21 And you, take for yourself of all food which will be eaten and gather it to you, and it will be for you and for them for food."

22 And Noah did according to all that God commanded him—so he did.

Genesis 7:

1 And Yahweh said to Noah, "Come, you and all your household, to the ark, for I have seen you as righteous before me in this generation.

2 Of all the clean beasts, take yourself seven pairs, man and his
woman; and of the beasts which are not clean, two, man and his woman.

3 Also of the birds of the heavens seven pairs, male and female, to keep alive seed on the face of the earth.

4 For in seven more days I shall rain on the earth forty days and forty nights, and I shall wipe out all the substance that I have made from upon the face of the earth.”

5 And Noah did according to all that Yahweh had commanded him.

6 And Noah was six hundred years old, and the flood was on the earth.

7 And Noah and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives with him came to the ark from before the waters of the flood.

8 Of the clean beasts and of the beasts which were not clean, and of the birds and of all those which creep upon the earth,

9 Two of each came to Noah to the ark, male and female, as God had commanded Noah.

10 And seven days later the waters of the flood were on the earth.

11 In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, in the seventeenth day of the month, on this day all the fountains of the great deep were broken up, and the windows of the heavens were opened.

12 And there was rain on the earth, forty days and forty nights.

13 In this very day, Noah and Shem, Ham, and Japheth, the sons of Noah, and Noah's wife and his sons' three wives with them came to the ark,

14 They and all the living things according to their kind, and all the beasts according to their kind, and all the creeping things that creep on the earth according to their kind, and all the birds according to their kind, and every winged bird.

15 And they came to Noah to the ark, two of each, of all flesh in which is the breath of life.

16 And those which came were male and female, some of all flesh came, as God had commanded him. And Yahweh closed it for him.
17 And the flood was on the earth for forty days and forty nights, and the waters multiplied and raised the ark, and it was lifted from the earth.
18 And the waters grew strong and multiplied greatly on the earth, and the ark went on the surface of the waters.
19 And the waters grew very very strong on the earth, and they covered all the high mountains that are under all the heavens.
20 Fifteen cubits above, the waters grew stronger, and they covered the mountains.
21 And all flesh, those that creep on the earth, the birds, the beasts, and the wild animals, and all the swarming things that swarm on the earth, and all the humans expired.
22 Everything that had the breathing spirit of life in its nostrils, everything that was on the dry ground, died.
23 And he wiped out all the substance that was on the face of the earth, from human to beast, to creeping thing, and to bird of the heavens, and they were wiped out from the earth, and only Noah and those who were with him in the ark were left.
24 And the waters grew strong on the earth a hundred fifty days.

Genesis 8:
1 And God remembered Noah and all the living, and all the beasts that were with him in the ark, and God passed a wind over the earth, and the waters were decreased.
2 And the fountains of the deep and the windows of the heavens were shut, and the rain was restrained from the heavens.
3 And the waters receded from the earth continually, and the waters were abated at the end of a hundred fifty days.
4 And the ark rested, in the seventh month, in the seventeenth day of the month, on the mountains of Ararat.
5 And the waters continued receding until the tenth month; in the tenth month, on the first of the month, the tops of the mountains appeared.
6 And it was at the end of forty days, and Noah opened the window of the ark which he had made.
7 And he sent out a raven, and it went back and forth until the waters dried up from the earth.

8 And he sent out a dove from him to see whether the waters had eased from the face of the earth.

9 And the dove did not find a resting place for its foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for waters were on the face of the earth, and he put out his hand and took it and brought it to him to the ark.

10 And he waited seven more days, and he again sent out a dove from the ark.

11 And the dove came to him at evening time, and here was an olive leaf torn off in its mouth, and Noah knew that the waters had eased from the earth.

12 And he waited seven more days, and he sent out a dove, and it did not return to him ever again.

13 And it was in the six hundred and first year, in the first month, on the first of the month, the waters dried from the earth. And Noah turned back the covering of the ark and looked, and here the face of the earth had dried.

14 And in the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth dried up.

15 And God spoke to Noah, saying,

16 "Go out from the ark, you and your wife and your sons' wives with you."

17 All the living things that are with you, of all flesh, of the birds, and of the beasts, and of all the creeping things that creep on the earth, that go out with you, shall swarm in the earth and be fruitful and multiply in the earth."

18 And Noah and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives went out.

19 All the living things, all the creeping things and all the birds, all that creep on the earth, by their families, they went out of the ark.

20 And Noah built an altar to Yahweh, and he took some of each of the clean beasts and of each of the clean birds, and he offered sacrifices on the altar.
21 And Yahweh smelled the pleasant smell, and Yahweh said to his heart, “I shall not again curse the ground on man's account, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from their youth, and I shall not again strike all the living as I have done.

22 All the rest of the days of the earth, seed and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.”

Each in Its Own Words

The very fact that it is possible to separate out two continuous stories like this is remarkable itself, and it is strong evidence for the hypothesis. One need only try to do the same thing with any other book to see how impressive this phenomenon is.

But it is not only that it is possible to carve out two stories. What makes the case so powerful is that each story consistently uses its own language. The P story (the one in boldface) consistently refers to the deity as God. The J story always uses the name Yahweh. P refers to the sex of the animals with the words “male and female” (Gen 6:19; 7:9,16). J uses the terms “man and his woman” (7:2) as well as male and female. P says that everything “expired” (6:17; 7:21). J says that everything “died” (7:22).

The two versions do not just differ on terminology. They differ on actual details of the story. P has one pair of each kind of animal. J has seven pairs of clean animals and one pair of unclean animals. (“Clean” means fit for sacrifice. Sheep are clean; lions are unclean.) P pictures the flood as lasting a year (370 days). J says it was forty days and forty nights. P has Noah send out a raven. J says a dove. P obviously has a concern for ages, dates, and measurements in cubits. J does not.

Probably the most remarkable difference of all between the two is their different ways of picturing God. It is not just that they call the deity by different names. J pictures a deity who can regret things that he has done (6:6,7), which raises interesting theological questions, such as whether an all-powerful, all-knowing being would ever regret past actions. It pictures a deity who can be “grieved to his
heart" (6:6), who personally closes the ark (7:16) and smells Noah's sacrifice (8:21). This anthropomorphic quality of J is virtually entirely lacking in P. There God is regarded more as a transcendent controller of the universe.

The two flood stories are separable and complete. Each has its own language, its own details, and even its own conception of God. And even that is not the whole picture. The J flood story's language, details, and conception of God are consistent with the language, details, and conception of God in other J stories. The P flood story is consistent with other P stories. And so on. The investigators found each of the sources to be a consistent collection of stories, poems, and laws.

The Doorstep

The discovery that there were four separate, internally consistent documents came to be known as the Documentary Hypothesis. The process was also called "Higher Criticism." What had begun as an idea by three men of the eighteenth century came to dominate investigations of the Bible by the end of the nineteenth century.

It had taken centuries of collecting clues to arrive at this stage which one could regard as fairly advanced or really quite minimal, depending on one's point of view. On the one hand, for centuries no one could easily challenge the accepted tradition that Moses was the author of the Five Books, and now people of acknowledged piety could say and write openly that he was not. They were able to identify at least four hands writing in the first five books of the Bible. Also, there was the hand of an extremely skillful collector known as a redactor, someone who was capable of combining and organizing these separate documents into a single work that was united enough to be readable as a continuous narrative.

On the other hand, what these detectives of biblical origins had arrived at was only the doorstep. They were able to see that a puzzle existed, and they were able to begin to get an idea of how complex the puzzle was going to be. True, they could identify four documents and a redactor, but who wrote those documents? When did they
live? What was their purpose? Did they know each other's work? Did any of them know that they were writing a *Bible*, a work to be held as sacred and authoritative? And the mysterious redactor: was it one person, or were there several? Who were they? Why did they combine the documents in this complex way? The answers were buried in the pages of the Bible and in the soil of the Middle East. By digging into both, my predecessors and I found out how the stories in those pages were connected with that world.

Two Countries, Two Writers

The first two sources, J and E, were written by two persons who lived during the period that I described in the last chapter. They were tied to the life of that period, its major events, its politics, its religion, and its catastrophes. In this chapter I intend to demonstrate this and to identify the persons who wrote them.

First, the author of J came from Judah and the author of E came from Israel. A number of biblical scholars before me have suggested this, but what is new here is that I mean to present a stronger collection of evidence for this than has been made known before, I mean to be more specific about who the two writers were, and I mean to show more specifically how the biblical stories actually related to these two men and to the events of their world.

The mere fact that different stories in the first books of the Bible call God by different names of course proves nothing in itself. Someone could write about the queen of England and sometimes call her the queen and sometimes call her Elizabeth II. But, as I have said, there was something more suspicious about the way the different names of the deity lined up in the first few books of the Bible. The two different names, Yahweh and Elohim, seemed to line up consistently in each of the two versions of the same stories in the doublets. If we separate the Elohim (E) stories from the Yahweh (J) stories, we get a consistent series of clues that the E stories were written by someone concerned with Israel and the J stories by someone concerned with Judah.
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J from Judah, E from Israel

First, there is the matter of the settings of the stories. In Genesis, in stories that call God \textit{Yahweh}, the patriarch Abraham lives in Hebron.\footnote{Hebron was the principal city of Judah, the capital of Judah under King David, the city from which David's Judean chief priest, Zadok, came.} In the covenant that \textit{Yahweh} makes with Abraham, he promises that Abraham's descendants will have the land "from the river of Egypt to the... river Euphrates."\footnote{These were the nation's boundaries under King David, the founder of Judah's royal family.} These were the nation's boundaries under King David, the founder of Judah's royal family.

But in a story that calls God \textit{Elohim}, Abraham's grandson Jacob has a face-to-face fight with someone who turns out to be God (or perhaps an angel), and Jacob names the place where it happens Peni-El (which means "Face-of-God"). Peni-El was a city that King Jeroboam built in Israel.\footnote{Both sources, J and E, tell stories about the city of Beth-El, and both kingdoms, Judah and Israel, made political claims on Beth-El, which was on the border between them.}

Both sources, J and E, tell stories about the city of Beth-El, and both kingdoms, Judah and Israel, made political claims on Beth-El, which was on the border between them.

Both sources, J and E, tell stories about the city of Shechem, which Jeroboam built and made the capital of Israel. But the two stories are very different. According to the J story, a man named Shechem, who is the original prince of that city, loves Jacob's daughter Dinah and sleeps with her. He then asks for her hand in marriage. Jacob's sons reply that they could not contemplate this or any intermarriage with the people of Shechem because the Shechemites are not circumcised and the sons of Jacob are. The prince of Shechem and his father Hamor therefore persuade all the men of Shechem to undergo circumcision. While the men are immobile from the pain of the surgery, two of Jacob's sons, Simeon and Levi, enter the city, kill all of the men, and take back their sister Dinah. Their father Jacob criticizes them for doing this, but they answer, "Should he treat our sister like a whore?" And that is the end of the story.\footnote{This J story of how Israel acquired its capital city is not a very pleasant one. The E story, meanwhile, tells it this way:}

This J story of how Israel acquired its capital city is not a very pleasant one. The E story, meanwhile, tells it this way:
And [Jacob] bought the portion of the field where he pitched his tent from the hand of the sons of Hamor, father of Shechem, for a hundred qesita.\\(^{11}\)

How did Israel acquire Shechem? The E author says they bought it. The J author says they massacred it.

The Origins of the Tribes

In the stories of the birth of Jacob’s sons and grandsons—each of whom becomes the ancestor of a tribe—there is usually a reference to the deity as they name the child. The group of stories that invoke Elohim are the stories of:

Dan
Naphtali
Gad
Asher
Issachar
Zebulon
Ephraim
Manasseh
Benjamin\\(^{12}\)

In short, the Elohim group includes the names of all of the tribes of Israel.\\(^{13}\) The group of stories that invoke the name of Yahweh are the stories of:

Reuben
Simeon
Levi
Judah

The first three of the four names on this list are the names of tribes who lost their territory and merged into the other tribes. The only
name of a tribe with existing territory in the Yahweh narrative is Judah. 

The J story goes even further to justify the ascendancy of Judah. According to the story, Reuben is the firstborn son, Simeon is the second, Levi the third, and Judah the fourth. In the ancient Near East, birth order was extremely important, because the firstborn son was entitled to the birthright, which meant the largest portion of the father's inheritance (generally double the other brothers' inheritances). We should therefore have expected Reuben, the oldest son, to have the birthright. But there is a story that reports that Reuben sleeps with one of his father's concubines, and his father finds out. The next two sons in line for the birthright would be Simeon and Levi. But in the J Shechem story they are the ones who massacre the city and are criticized by their father. And so, in J, the birthright comes to the fourth son: Judah! In Jacob's poetic deathbed blessing of his sons, here is what he says about Reuben:

Reuben, you are my firstborn,  
My strength and the beginning of my power,  
Preeminent in dignity and preeminent of might.  
Unstable as water, you shall not be preeminent  
Because you went up to your father's bed.

And here is what he says about Simeon and Levi:

Simeon and Levi are brothers,  
Implants of destruction are their tools of trade.  
... In their anger they killed a man,  
And by their will they houghed a bull.  
Cursed is their anger, for it is fierce,  
And their wrath, for it is harsh.  
I shall divide them in Jacob,  
And I shall scatter them in Israel.

But he says about Judah:

Judah, you are the one your brothers will praise...  
Your father's sons will bow down to you.
Judah gets the birthright in J.

Who gets it in E? In the E version of Jacob's deathbed scene, Jacob bequeathes the double portion to Joseph, announcing that each of Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, will receive a full portion, equivalent to the portions of Reuben, Simeon, and the others. Why did the author of E favor Joseph and his sons? The answer lies in one more detail of E's story. When Jacob is giving his deathbed blessing to Joseph and his sons, Joseph sets his sons in front of Jacob in such a way that Jacob will put his right hand on the head of Manasseh, the older son. The right hand is the sign of preeminence. But Jacob crosses his arms, so his right hand is on Ephraim's head. Joseph protests the reversal, but Jacob insists that Ephraim will become greater. What is it about Ephraim? Why does the author of E develop the hierarchy to culminate not in any of Jacob's sons, but in one of his grandsons who is not even a firstborn? Was there anything historically significant about the tribe of Ephraim in the writer's age? Answer: Ephraim was King Jeroboam's tribe. Jeroboam's capital city, Shechem, was located in the hills of Ephraim. Ephraim, in fact, was used as another name for the kingdom of Israel.

Evidence from the Stories

The J stories fit the cities and territory of Judah. The E stories fit the cities and territory of Israel. I found that other details of the stories consistently fit this picture as well:

Both J and E have versions of the story of Joseph. In both, Joseph's brothers are jealous of him and plan to kill him, but one of the brothers saves him. In E it is Reuben, the oldest, who saves him. But in J it is Judah who saves him. The E story of Jacob's deathbed testament has a pun in the Hebrew. In creating portions for Ephraim and Manasseh, Jacob tells Joseph, "I have given you one portion more than your brothers." The Hebrew word that is translated here as "portion" is sekem, or as we pronounce it in English, Shechem. Telling the father of Ephraim that he is getting an extra Shechem is like telling the governor of
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Michigan, "I have given the other states some trees, but I have given you an arbor."

The J stories meanwhile seem to be punning on the name of the first king of Judah after the division: Rehoboam. The Hebrew root of the name Rehoboam (r-h-b) occurs six times in the J stories, usually suggesting, as does the king's name, the expanse of the country. The root never occurs in E.

According to an E story, Joseph makes a deathbed request in Egypt that someday his bones should be carried back to his homeland for burial. At the end of the E story of the Exodus from Egypt, the Israelites do carry his bones back with them. This concern for the burial of Joseph only occurs in E. Where was the traditional location of the tomb of Joseph? In Shechem, capital of Israel.

Both J and E have stories of the enslavement of the people in Egypt. The J source usually refers to the Egyptians who oversee the slaves as "taskmasters," but in a passage that appears to be E they are called "officers of missim." Recall that missim was the term for King Solomon's forced-labor policy, a policy that was one of the main reasons for the secession of the northern tribes of Israel. The E wording appears to be an insult to Judah and its royal family.

The insult may be a double one, because the most prominent of Solomon's wives was the daughter of the pharaoh of that period. The book of 1 Kings lists her first among his wives. Such a marriage would have been a notable one, further, because the kings of Egypt disdained marrying their daughters to foreigners. There is no other case recorded in the ancient Near East of a marriage of an Egyptian princess to a foreign ruler.

In E, Moses' faithful assistant is Joshua. Joshua leads the people in battle against the Amalekites; he serves as watchman inside the Tent of Meeting whenever Moses is not meeting with the deity there; he is the only Israelite who is not involved in the golden calf incident; and he seeks to prevent the misuse of prophecy. In J, on the other hand, Joshua plays no role. Why the special treatment of Joshua in E but not in J? Joshua was a northern hero. He is identified as coming from the tribe of Ephraim, Jeroboam's tribe; Joshua's tomb is in the territory of Ephraim, and, according to the last chapter of the book of Joshua, Joshua's work culminates in a covenant ceremony at Shechem.

According to a J story, Moses sends a group of spies from the wilderness into the promised land. All but one of the spies report
that the land is impregnable because its inhabitants are so huge and fierce. The one spy who challenges this report and encourages the people to have faith is Caleb. In the story, the spies travel through the Negev (the southern desert of the land), the hill country, as far as Hebron, then to the Wadi Eshkol. All of these places are in Judah's territory. In J, the spies only see Judah. As for the hero of the story, Caleb, he is the eponymous ancestor of the Calebites. The Calebites held territory in the hill country of Judah. The Calebite territory in fact included Hebron, Judah's capital.

The cumulative, consistent conclusion from all of this evidence, it seems to me, is: (1) the early investigators were right about the existence of the two sources, J and E; (2) the person who wrote J was particularly concerned with the kingdom of Judah, and the person who wrote E was particularly interested in the kingdom of Israel.

Still, as I said in the introduction we are interested in more than the authors' real estate preferences. The question is, why did they write these stories? What was happening in their world that prompted them to write these things?

The Twins

Take, for example, the biblical stories about the twins Jacob and Esau. In these stories, Abraham's son, Isaac, marries Rebekah, and she gives birth to twin sons. The first to come out of his mother's womb is Esau. The secondborn is Jacob. While they are still in Rebekah's womb, Yahweh tells Rebekah:

Two nations are in your womb,
And two peoples will be separated from inside you;
And one people will be stronger than the other people,
And the greater will serve the younger.

The boys grow. On one occasion, Esau comes back from the field famished. His brother, Jacob, is making red lentil stew. Jacob tells Esau that he will give him some of the food only if Esau swears to give him his birthright in return. Esau capitulates.
More time passes. Their father, Isaac, intends to give his deathbed blessing to Esau. Rebekah, however, encourages Jacob to pose as his elder brother and thus deceive his weak-eyed father into giving him the blessing instead. Jacob does it. He wears his brother's clothing, and he puts goat skins on his arms because his brother is "an hairy man." Isaac gives Jacob the blessing, which includes dominion over his brother. When Esau arrives, Isaac tells him that the blessing has already gone to Jacob. Esau asks for a blessing as well. His father gives him the following:

By your sword you will live
And you will serve your brother.
And it will be, when you are brought down,
That you will break his yoke from your shoulders.  

Why did someone write these stories, with these details? The answers are tied to the life of the writer's world.

Why red lentil stew? Because, the story says, Esau became known after that as "Red." The word for "red" in Hebrew is Edom. That is, Esau is traditionally regarded as the father of the Edomites.

Why twin brothers? Because the people of Israel-Judah regarded the Edomites as kin, as related to them ethnically and/or linguistically (as opposed to, say, Egyptians or Philistines, who were regarded as "outsiders").

Why the revelation to Rebekah that her younger son's descendants would dominate her older son's? Because the young kingdom of Israel-Judah, under King David, defeated the older kingdom of Edom and dominated it for two hundred years.

Why does Jacob get the birthright (a double portion) and the blessing (prosperity and dominion)? Because Israel-Judah became larger and more prosperous than Edom and dominated it.

Why does Esau/Edom get a blessing that "you will break his yoke from your shoulders"? Because Edom finally broke free and achieved its independence during the reign of the Judean King Jehoram (848–842 B.C.).

These stories all refer to the deity as Yahweh or show other signs of being part of J. Why do stories about relations with Esau/Edom occur in J and not in E? J is from Judah. Judah bordered Edom, Israel did not.

On each point, the details of the stories correspond to the histori-
cal record. The J author composed the stories of his people's ancestors with an eye to explaining and justifying the world situation in which he lived.

Sunday school versions of this story often try to vindicate Jacob. With slight changes or reinterpretations, they make Jacob the good son and Esau the bad one. But the J writer was more sophisticated than his later interpreters. He told a story in which Jacob was courageous and clever, but also dishonest. He did not make his heroes perfect (any more than the Court History of David made David perfect). His task was rather to compose a story that reflected and explained the political and social realities of the world that he knew. Anyone who reads the stories of Jacob and Esau can see how well he succeeded.