

Conscience, Oral Tradition, Natural Religion, or Later Insertion?: Unwritten Revelation in Genesis 1–11

William D. Barrick, Th.D.
Professor of Old Testament
The Master's Seminary

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As a reader moves through the early chapters of Genesis, a number of questions come to mind related to unwritten revelation:

- How did the patriarchs obtain knowledge of matters like sacrifices (Gen 4:3–5)?
- Could they have actually called upon “the name of Yahweh” (4:26) at such an early date in mankind’s history?
- Did the author (or an editor?) of 7:2 insert later levitical concepts of clean animals into the patriarchal narrative?
- Could the patriarchs have understood the concept of “covenant” (6:18) prior to the existence of the vassal treaties of the late second millennium B.C.?

Exegetes and theologians wrestle with these issues. Such questions about the text of Genesis 1–11 relate to matters of composition, revelation, textual updating, intertextuality, general vs. special revelation, and even to reading the NT back into the OT. These few issues potentially impact the interpretation of other patriarchal texts (e.g., 26:5;¹ Exod 6:3²) as well. Does a viable explanation or solution exist that maintains Mosaic authorship of Genesis as well as the inerrancy and integrity of the biblical text?

This study will not deal with the matter of natural revelation, or what some call “the book of the world,”³ to which biblical texts like Psalm 19:1–6 and Romans 1:18–32 refer. Instead, I will focus on matters that theologians normally do not include within the category of natural revelation (e.g., the source for Abel’s understanding regarding animal sacrifice).

As John Sailhamer points out, medieval Protestants held that the biblical patriarchs relied on unwritten Scripture, meaning biblical revelation in prewritten form, and that the patriarchs “were partakers of divine revelation first hand.”⁴ He also identifies this tenet with “the orthodox

¹ “because Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws” (NAU).

² “and I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as God Almighty, but *by My name, LORD*, I did not make Myself known to them.”

³ Bonaventure (1221–1274), the Franciscan scholastic theologian, employed this title for natural revelation (*Collationes in Hexaemeron*, 13.12); see Gordon R. Payne, “Augustinianism in Calvin and Bonaventure,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 44, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 10. Matthew Henry employed this phrase in his comments on Eccl 3:11–15 in *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume*, electronic ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994).

⁴ John H. Sailhamer, *The Meaning of the Pentateuch: Revelation, Composition and Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 137, cf. 184–97. He distinguishes this revelation from natural revelation (*ibid.*, 567).

concept of ‘primeval revelation’ (*Uroffenbarung*).⁵ He himself makes the observation that texts such as Exodus 15:25 and 18:16 indicate laws were already well-known and followed in ancient Israel, even prior to Sinai.⁶ Later in his volume, after stating that the patriarchs “built altars and sacrificed much like the Israelites, though they had no written Scripture,” Sailhamer asks, “Does the Pentateuch endorse that kind of ‘unwritten’ religion? Or does it set out to establish a religion grounded in written religion—*sola scriptura*?”⁷ That is the larger question: Do we have within the pages of our Bibles all of the revelation that God ever spoke to mankind?

Here we must make one point of clarification: The unwritten revelation which this study examines must be distinguished from the so-called “Oral Torah” of Judaism. The oral Torah, according to the rabbis,

has been preserved through oral tradition, beginning with Moses and Joshua, and had later been transmitted by the prophets to especially eminent and authoritative personages of subsequent times, culminating of course with the rabbis themselves. The major function of this rabbinic conception was the injection of flexibility into the written Torah, sufficient to transform and transmute many ancient injunctions, thereby maintaining them as relevant, instructive, vitalizing, and edifying to Jews living in contexts quite removed from those of earlier ages.⁸

This paper examines more objective elements of divine revelation with a view to understanding the source (or sources) for revealed events recorded in Scripture, specifically in Genesis 1–11.

We will look at four texts in Genesis 1–11 that appear to raise a question concerning potential unwritten revelation. Outside Genesis 1–11, texts like Exodus 6:13 (“Then the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, and gave them a charge to the sons of Israel and to Pharaoh king of Egypt, to bring the sons of Israel out of the land of Egypt”) record that God has spoken to someone, but do not provide His words.⁹ Can any of these four texts in Genesis 1–11 depend upon that type of special revelation, unwritten revelation?

Sacrifices (Gen 4:3–5)

The biblical text lacks certain pieces of information in the telling of the account concerning Cain and Abel. As Paul House observes, “Though the text does not explain how they know to do so, both men bring offerings appropriate to their professions. Again without saying exactly why, the text reports the Lord accepts Abel’s sacrifice but not Cain’s.”¹⁰ John Davis raises the question directly: “Were their offerings in response to a command from God to give offerings?”¹¹ However, he concludes that absence in the text means absence of command.¹²

Eugene Merrill does not speak of the absence of revelation, but does remark that “the two worshippers clearly understood that access to the Lord demanded certain procedures.”¹³ Could

⁵ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 356n5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 564.

⁸ Michael J. Cook, “Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity: From the Pharisees to the Rabbis,” *Review and Expositor* 84, no. 2 (Spring 1987): 201–2.

⁹ Of course, one might also delve into the matter of *ipsissima verba* and *ipsissima vox* at this point, but we will leave that aside for the purpose of this study.

¹⁰ Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 66.

¹¹ John J. Davis, *Paradise to Prison: Studies in Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), 98.

¹² *Ibid.*, 99.

¹³ Eugene H. Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 287.

they have learned the principles of sacrifice from God’s slaying of an animal to provide coverings for Adam and Eve (3:21)? Merrill warns about going too far down this road: “One must be careful not to infer too much of the notion of substitutionary atonement from this rather cryptic account, though it will become clear at a later point that atonement for sin did indeed call for animal sacrifice.”¹⁴ At best, the text provides a hint at a means to remedy alienation. An additional problem for an atonement interpretation of Abel’s sacrifice involves the use of מְנִחָה for the offering, a word primarily referring to a “gift.”¹⁵ In fact, this appears to be the only use of the term מְנִחָה in the OT with “the technical meaning of an offering made to God.”¹⁶ For John Feinberg, however, 3:21 initiates the theme of sacrifice and was the means by which knowledge about blood sacrifice became available to Cain and Abel.¹⁷ Thus, Feinberg’s view identifies the revelation as signified or embodied in the symbolism of the provision of the garments of animal skin, rather than upon oral revelation. But, it is still unwritten revelation.

Another approach involves assuming “a logical corollary between work and thanksgiving,” because it is “too early to have specific prescriptions about the nature of sacrifice.”¹⁸ Thus, Bill Arnold seems to assume that Cain and Abel were somehow aware that God Himself gave the produce of both field and flock, so these two men showed their appreciation by their gifts. C. F. Keil took this same approach, explaining that these sacrifices originated “from the free impulse of their nature as determined by God . . . designed to satisfy the need of the heart for fellowship with God. . . . expressive of gratitude to God, to whom they owed all that they had; and were associated also with the desire to secure the divine favour and blessing.”¹⁹ H. C. Leupold agrees with Keil’s summation that the sacrifices consisted of spontaneous expressions of thanks to God.²⁰ An innate compulsion to offer merely verbal devotion to God, according to Gustav Oehler, falls short of the need to embody that devotion in “a corresponding action, in which man *deprives and denies himself of something*, and thus by deeds testifies the earnestness of his devotion to God.”²¹ Thus, a sacrifice fulfills this inner compulsion. Claiming that the narrative assumes the necessity of sacrifice in human life, Claus Westermann declares that, “It is quite unthinkable to accept the produce without some such gift or acknowledgement.”²² Therefore, this view depends heavily upon general revelation in the

¹⁴ Ibid., 228.

¹⁵ Ibid., 229.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ John S. Feinberg, “Salvation in the Old Testament,” in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg*, ed. by John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), 59.

¹⁸ Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 78.

¹⁹ C. F. Keil, “Genesis,” in *The Pentateuch*, 3 vols., trans. by James Martin, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. by C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch (repr., Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), 1:110–11.

²⁰ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, 2 vols., Barnes’ Notes (1942; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), 1:193. Cf. Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 32; R. R. Reno, *Genesis*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010), 97, “No divine commandments evoke or specify the ritual act. Instead, within the narrative atmosphere of the primal history, the impulse to sacrifice seems to follow from the sheer humanity of Cain and Abel. They are animated by what the later theological tradition calls a natural desire for God.” However, Reno admits that this natural desire for God “does not rest on any single verse of Scripture” (ibid., 98).

²¹ Gustav Friedrich Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. by George E. Day (1873; repr., Minneapolis, MN: Klock & Klock Christian Publishers, 1978), 261.

²² Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary*, trans. by John J. Scullion (1984; repr., Minneapolis,

human conscience rather than special revelation.

One response to this view involving the human conscience comes from Henry Morris, who argues that, if the sacrifices had been spontaneous, “it is difficult to understand why God would not have been pleased with an offering of Cain’s fruits as with an offering of Abel’s slain lamb.”²³ In actuality, however, the very thought that every fallen human being preserves internally a desire to please God by means of thank offerings, argues against Cain’s and Abel’s sacrifices arising from an internal compulsion. Instead, we would expect such a desire to reside only within someone rightly related to God by faith. It seems more likely that an unbeliever would look at such a “gift” as a payment to guarantee continued blessing, rather than rendering thankful worship (cp. Pss 40:6; 51:16; Isa 1:11; Hos 6:6; Mic 6:6).

In his exegetical treatment of the text, John Collins appears to present a popular explanation by looking to the audience (ancient Israel at the time of Moses or later) and proposing that the author adopted at least the language of the levitical sacrifices, if not the very concept itself.²⁴ However, within the section discussing theological implications, he indicates that

one purpose of this account is to pave the way for the sacrificial system of Leviticus. In particular, one function of this account would be to establish the antiquity of the practices—so that the detailed description of Leviticus might be seen as protecting the purity of the rites against the deviations brought in by human sin.²⁵

Although Collins’ statement might imply that the later writer made up or at least inserted levitical language and the concept of sacrifice at this point to “pave the way” for the later levitical sacrifices, it seems to me that he proposes that God had established the sacrifices at the beginning and that the Mosaic legislation provided nothing more than additional laws to preserve and protect that established system. In other words, that which God gave by verbal revelation finally becomes inscripturated revelation.²⁶

On the other hand, Keil argues that there can be no connection with the levitical system of sacrifices, since *מִנְחָה* in Leviticus applies only to bloodless sacrifices.²⁷ Interestingly, David Cotter marks the contrast between the absence of any divine statement to Abel or to his parents, as compared to God speaking to Cain.²⁸ Given the fact that God had spoken with Adam and Eve (1:28–30; 2:16–17; 3:3, 9, 11, 13, 16–19), as well as to the serpent (3:14–15), does it not seem odd that, when it comes to the matter of sacrifice, there is no record of God providing appropriate instruction? Would the God who gave Noah detailed instruction for building the ark (6:14–16) really neglect to give Adam, Cain, and Abel any verbal instruction regarding sacrifice? Leupold argues that the text introduces the episode so casually that one would believe that this might not have been the first time the brothers had brought sacrifices. Indeed, Adam might have originated the sacrifices.²⁹

MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1990), 295.

²³ Henry M. Morris, *The Genesis Record: A Scientific and Devotional Commentary on the Book of Beginnings* (1976; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2004), 136.

²⁴ C. John Collins, *Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 200.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 216.

²⁶ The writer has not confirmed this understanding of Collins’ comments with the author himself.

²⁷ Keil, “Genesis,” 1:109.

²⁸ David W. Cotter, *Genesis*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 42.

²⁹ Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, 1:193. Cf. Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, New American Commentary 1A ([Nashville, TN]: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 267, “Although this is the first recorded

Could God have given direct revelation to Abel concerning sacrifice? Few commentators or theologians seem to ask this question or to propose such a solution. A NT text, however, might provide some insight leading to a solution. In Luke 11:50–51, Jesus speaks of the prophets whose blood had been shed throughout the history of the OT. He cites the bookend examples of Abel (Gen 4) and Zechariah (2 Chron 24:20–21). Since prophets received revelation directly from God,³⁰ we expect to find that God had spoken to Abel. He is not the only early prophet, since Jude 14 indicates that Enoch had prophesied.³¹ In both situations, Genesis records nothing about such revelation. If they were true prophets, and if prophets received revelation, then their revelation is unwritten in the patriarchal narratives. This solution to the question of the source of Cain’s and Abel’s concept of sacrifice recognizes that God must have said much to Adam and Eve, to Abel, and to Enoch, that Genesis does not record. Surely God’s moving around in the garden of Eden at the breeze of the day (3:8), for example, consisted of more than just putting in an appearance.

One commentator who takes the revelatory view is Morris. As he puts it,

It seems more likely that God *did* give instructions, and that Cain had disobeyed. The entire occurrence can only be really understood in the context of an original revelation by God regarding the necessity of the substitutionary sacrifice as a prerequisite to approaching God. Such revelation was most likely given at the time God provided coats of skins for Adam and Eve, and then banished them from His presence, providing, however, a specific means by which they could still commune with Him at certain times, on the basis of a similar sacrifice.³²

Whereas Morris’ identification of the offerings with substitutionary atonement might be rightly questioned, his explanation of revelation rings true.

In his *Biblical Theology*, Geerhardus Vos addressed this issue of special, but unwritten, revelation. He distinguishes it from natural revelation in creation as well as from the moral

offering in the Bible, there is no indication that the narrative is announcing the first occasion of sacrifice. . . . perhaps learned from Adam.”

³⁰ E. J. Young declares that the prophet was one who “believed that he had been the recipient of an objective revelation. . . . that he had received a message which God had given to him”; Edward J. Young, *My Servants the Prophets* (1952; repr., Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), 175. Indeed, Young makes the point even more emphatically when he says, “they actually were the recipients of Divine revelation” (ibid., 176). Pieter Verhoef observes that a “classical definition of a prophecy was given by Micaiah . . . when he responded . . . : ‘As surely as the LORD lives, I can tell him only what the LORD tells me’ (1 Kgs 22:14; cf. 2 Chron 18:13)”; P. A. Verhoef, “Prophecy,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 5 vols., ed. by Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 4:1071–72. He even goes so far as to declare that in the schools of the prophets in Gilgal, Bethel, and Jericho “the subject matter could not have been to teach the prophets how to become a prophet, how to receive the revelation of God, because the content of their messages as prophets could not be learned, but could only be received” (ibid., 4:1073).

³¹ A caveat needs stated at this point with regard to Jude’s reference to Enoch. The fact that Jude cites from *First Enoch* (a pseudepigraphical work), does not require that the content of the citation represents an authentic prophecy from the patriarch Enoch. Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, New American Commentary 37 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2007), 469, declares, “It is better to conclude that Jude quoted the pseudepigraphical *I Enoch* and that he also believed that the portion he quoted represented God’s truth.” I would suggest that Jude’s reference to Enoch not only represented a view current in his day, but a viewpoint based upon a consistent, and probably accurate, tradition that Enoch was a prophet. In any case, Jude uses the citation, because it bolsters his argument by referring to a work with which his readers are very familiar and which they might have taken as authoritative.

³² Morris, *The Genesis Record*, 136–37.

conscience.³³ The content of special revelation exceeds the content of natural revelation, especially in the area of redemption. As Vos indicates, “Nature from within no longer functions normally in sinful man.”³⁴ Not only has fallen man’s capacity for understanding been blunted and blinded, but “the finding of God in nature without has also been made subject to error and distortion.”³⁵ To use Vos’s phraseology, the patriarchal era witnessed “an ever-flowing stream of revelation.”³⁶ As long as that stream of revelation remained available, “there existed no need of providing for the future remembrance of past intercourse.”³⁷ He suggests that much of preredemptive special revelation was “largely symbolical, that is, not expressed in words so much as in tokens.”³⁸ In other words, John Feinberg’s reference to 3:21, as discussed above, might fit within the parameters of Vos’s concept of preredemptive, unwritten, special revelation. Vos identifies four principles which preredemptive tokens express: life, probation, temptation, and death. Although one might associate the symbolism of the animal skins for clothing with the principle of death, it certainly falls short of offering an explanation for the sacrifices brought by Cain and Abel.

Although Vos provides a basis for considering the existence and nature of unwritten revelation, he does not discuss the issue adequately as it relates to the sacrifices in 4:3–5. The clearer option in this particular event appears to be direct revelation that God gave to either Adam or to Abel.

The Name of Yahweh (4:26)

Genesis 4:26, like 3:15 and 5:29, speaks to the theological center of the Book of Genesis. By means of the revelation provided in 3:15, hope exists for the defeat of evil and for “rest from painful labor in the very presence of God.”³⁹ With Exodus 6:2–5 in mind, theologians and commentators often suggest that the name “Yahweh” must have been an insertion into the patriarchal narratives by either Moses or a later editor.⁴⁰ Another way to describe the situation is that the use of “Yahweh,” according to some theologians and commentators, is anachronistic.⁴¹ However, that explanation just does not jibe with the frequency with which the patriarchs speak the name of Yahweh, or with the obvious inclusion of at least one form of the name in personal names prior to Sinai.⁴² The viewpoint rests too heavily upon the flawed documentarian

³³ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (1948; repr., Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954), 28.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁹ James H. Hamilton, Jr., *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 89.

⁴⁰ See Keil, “Genesis,” 1:108–9, “The use of this name is significant. Although it cannot be supposed that Eve herself knew and uttered this name, since it was not till a later period that it was made known to man, and it really belongs to the Hebrew, which was not formed till after the division of tongues, yet it expresses the feeling of Eve on receiving this proof of the gracious help of God.” Cf. Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 111–14.

⁴¹ James McKeown, *Genesis, Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 44–45. Cf. Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997), 21, “The enigmatic claim, made here with an atypical and vague passive form of the verb, is contradicted by the report in Exodus that only with Moses was the name YHWH revealed to man.”

⁴² Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 40, who claims that no divine element based on “Yahweh” (e.g., *-yah* or *yeho-/yo-*) occurs in the Hebrew Bible until the birth of Moses. However, he ignores the names Abijah (1 Chron 2:16; cp. Gen

hypothesis for the composition of Genesis. Responding to the documentarians, Keil insists that “Yahweh” has to be the author’s crafting of Eve’s statement in 4:1, but he expressly denies that any distinction or variation in divine names requires the existence of different authors or documents.⁴³

What alternatives to the documentarian view have biblical scholars proposed? Rabbis Abraham Ibn Ezra (b. 1092 in Spain) and Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno (b. ca. 1475 in Italy) both understood by the statement in 4:26 that the righteous began to *teach* the name of the Lord (Yahweh).⁴⁴ However, this interpretation extrapolates an unlikely meaning from the phrase “call upon the name of Yahweh,” which the writer uses elsewhere of worship and prayer (e.g., 12:8; 26:25; Ps 116:4, 13, 17). In yet another view of the meaning of this biblical phrase, Allen Ross argues that the phrase refers to “proclamation more than praying” (cf. Gen. 12:8; Exod. 34:6; Lev. 1:1).⁴⁵ In response to this view, Westermann declares that there is “no certain proof” to support it.⁴⁶

Collins presents a common answer to the seeming conflict between Genesis 4:26 and Exodus 6:2–5 by assuming that the former text “says nothing about the precise name used.”⁴⁷ The biblical author, who comes from a much later era, merely identifies the “origin of regular divine worship”⁴⁸ as having occurred at this point in time. Similarly, Leupold advances the suggestion that mankind knew what this deity stood for: faithfulness, unchangeableness, and mercy—characteristics of the one later known as Yahweh.⁴⁹

Explanations more consistent with the overall usage of the phraseology in patriarchal times include Merrill’s suggestion that “God never invoked his name *Yahweh* when making covenant promises”⁵⁰ until the time of Moses. Another would be John Oswalt’s conclusion that in the time of Moses the “name” of Yahweh revealed His real nature. The patriarchs knew His name, but

did not know his character and person extensively.

But now Yahweh was going to change all that. He was going to show them an

38:29–30; 46:12), Ahijah (1 Chron 2:25), and Azariah (1 Chron 2:8) occurring as much as 400 years before Moses. One must keep in mind that those names occur only in the genealogy of Judah, because it is the only tribal line of interest to the Chronicler’s focus on the Davidic dynasty and Davidic covenant. Many more names might have existed with the theophoric element of *-yah* or *-iyah* in other tribal lines.

⁴³ Keil, “Genesis,” 1:144. See Duane Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis: The Sources and Authorship of the First Book of the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), who thoroughly analyzes the text of Genesis and the documentary hypothesis and concludes that traditional Mosaic authorship still provides the best scenario for the composition of Genesis. He describes the issue of 4:26 as it relates to the criterion of divine names in the documentarian view and responds to it in detail (*ibid.*, 18–22). For yet another good evangelical response to the normal documentarian or higher critical view concerning the use of the title Yahweh, see Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26, 293–94* (“Excursus: The Revelation of the Divine Name”).

⁴⁴ H. Freedman, “Genesis,” in *The Soncino Chumash: The Five Books of Moses with Haphtaroth*, 2nd, ed., ed. by A. Cohen, Soncino Books of the Bible (1983; repr., London: Soncino Press, 1993), 21.

⁴⁵ Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 169. He also believes that Yahweh was used from earliest times.

⁴⁶ Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 341.

⁴⁷ Collins, *Genesis 1–4*, 208. However, Collins does not yield to a documentarian treatment of the text, since he insists that 4:1 still demonstrates that the name of Yahweh was already known and used by Eve (*ibid.*).

⁴⁸ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1987), 116.

⁴⁹ Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, 227–28.

⁵⁰ Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion*, 85. Cf. Bruce K. Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 364–69.

independence of, and control over, nature that would leave no doubt in their minds that he was not just a deity, but The Deity. He was going to show them a level of constancy they never imagined to exist in deity. He was going to show them a level of caring and commitment to his people they had only dared to hope existed in deity. He was going to show them an intimacy of relating that had never occurred to them to think of as possible with deity. And who was going to show them these things? Yahweh!⁵¹

How would the people in the days of Seth have known “Yahweh” as the name of God? The first time it occurs in the mouth of a human being is when Eve declares, “I have gotten a manchild with *the help of the LORD*” (4:1, NAU). Then there is the statement in verse 26. In 5:29, Lamech also identifies God by the name Yahweh. Noah, likewise, refers to God as Yahweh in 9:26. Other such references appear at 10:9; 12:8; 13:4; 14:22; and 15:2. It is not until 15:7 that God Himself identifies Himself as Yahweh: “And He said to him, ‘I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it.’” Due to such explicit uses of the title Yahweh, Sarna concludes that the knowledge Yahweh as a divine name must be pre-Abrahamic.⁵² It would seem necessary, therefore, for God to have revealed Himself by this name to someone at some time and place unspecified in the biblical text—in other words, yet another example of unwritten revelation.

Covenant (6:18)

In his *Theology of the Old Testament*, Walther Eichrodt echoes the view of documentarians when he explains references to covenant in the patriarchal narratives as “a remarkable retrojection of the covenant concept into the earliest period of the national life.”⁵³ Thus, the editors or compilers of the Elohist and Yahwist strata in the Pentateuch tie the patriarchs into Israel’s awareness of her special status before the Lord. Eichrodt finds links in the patriarchal narratives to Israel’s concept of God which finds its source in the covenant at Sinai.⁵⁴ As a result, he interprets the patriarchal narratives as a commentary on the patriarchs from the viewpoint of the later author who seeks to counter a particularist view of Israel’s special standing by demonstrating that the God of Israel also reigns as the God of all the world.⁵⁵ Yet another reason to transpose the Sinai covenant to the Abrahamic covenant rests, according to Eichrodt, in the employment of the story of Abraham to teach that the Israelite can only realize true covenant obedience through faith.⁵⁶

This first reference to “covenant” (בְּרִית) includes a first person singular pronominal suffix (בְּרִיתִי), “My covenant.” Merrill suggests that such a reference implies that it was a covenant previously known to the Lord and “thus to be recalled and reimplemented. If this reading of the ‘My’ is correct, the only possible candidate for a prior covenant is the creation

⁵¹ John N. Oswalt, “Exodus,” in *Genesis, Exodus*, Allen Ross and John N. Oswalt, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary 1 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2008), 328. Cf. Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (1967; repr., Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 78, “a mere name, not yet revealing any of God’s characteristics as other terms did.”

⁵² Sarna, *Genesis*, 40.

⁵³ Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2 vols., trans. by J. A. Baker, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 1:49.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:50.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:288–89.

mandate of Genesis 1:26–28.⁵⁷ Potentially, Genesis 9:1 then confirms such an interpretation by its repetition of the creation mandate, “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” Although Wenham agrees that the covenant already exists, he insists that it is established with Noah and he bases that upon how he interprets וְהִקְמֹתִי אֶת־בְּרִיתִי אִתְּךָ (“I shall confirm my covenant with you”).⁵⁸ As for Merrill’s conclusion that the possessive pronoun (“My”) indicates prior existence, John Hartley suggests that the pronoun merely states that God entered the covenant unilaterally.⁵⁹

Three texts define this covenant with Noah: 6:17–22; 8:20–22; and 9:8–17.⁶⁰ As Irvin Busenitz posits, “In terms of recipients, it is the widest of all the covenants.”⁶¹ He argues that the covenant stands independent of any earlier covenant, since Scripture mentions none earlier. When it comes to any possible historical source for the type of covenant, Mathews associates the character of this covenant with the older royal grant or divine charter, rather than with the vassal treaties of the second millennium B.C.⁶² Thus, nothing requires that the reference to covenant in 6:18 be an intrusion from the Mosaic era or later. Either the writer borrowed the concept from contemporary royal grants and/or divine charters, or God Himself provided the concept by direct revelation.

Clean and Unclean Animals (7:2)

Umberto Cassuto asks, “how is it possible to speak of animals that are clean and not clean at a time when the Torah laws distinguishing between these categories had not yet been formulated?”⁶³ He answers that the concept must have existed prior to the Torah among the Gentile nations and must have involved primarily sacrifices. Thus, placing clean animals on the ark both preserves them and provides for sacrifice.⁶⁴ In his commenting upon this issue, Keil not only denies any documentarian evidence here, but attributes the concept of clean and unclean to “a long established custom . . . from a certain innate feeling of the human mind, when undisturbed by unnatural and ungodly influences, which detects types of sin and corruption in many animals, and instinctively recoils from them.”⁶⁵ In other words, such concepts did not arise in the much later Mosaic period. John Walton rightly maintains that these distinctions must refer to sacrifice, rather than to food, because the post-Flood instruction concerning food in 9:2–3 makes no such distinctions.⁶⁶

Genesis 1–11 as a whole seems to focus on the existence of fundamental basic religious elements or institutions in the primeval era, including Sabbath, sacrifice, and the distinction of clean and unclean.⁶⁷ While Mathews basically agrees with Keil and Cassuto, that these distinctions did not originate with Mosaic law, he muddies the waters a bit by saying that the

⁵⁷ Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion*, 239.

⁵⁸ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 175.

⁵⁹ John E. Hartley, *Genesis*, New International Biblical Commentary: Old Testament Series (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), 102.

⁶⁰ Especially in chapter 9; Kidner, *Genesis*, 89.

⁶¹ Irvin A. Busenitz, “Introduction to the Biblical Covenants; The Noahic Covenant and the Priestly Covenant,” *Master’s Seminary Journal* 10, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 184.

⁶² Mathews, *Genesis 1–11*:26, 368.

⁶³ U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 2 vols., trans. by Israel Abrahams (1964; repr., Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1992), 2:75.

⁶⁴ Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion*, 230.

⁶⁵ Keil, “Genesis,” 1:144. Leupold merely echoes Keil (*Exposition of Genesis*, 289).

⁶⁶ John H. Walton, *Genesis*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 313.

⁶⁷ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 177.

distinction “reflects the practice of the Mosaic economy” and “the greater number of ‘clean’ animals for sacrifice and population would be expected in the light of the Mosaic instruction.”⁶⁸

A somewhat different explanation arises in Morris’ discussion of the issue. He suggests that the clean animals might have consisted of those suitable for domestication and that, absent any specific instruction, God left the determination of clean and unclean to Noah’s own judgment.⁶⁹

Unwritten revelation, however, forms the basis for Bruce Waltke’s approach to this issue: “Noah may have known of the distinction between pure and impure through his walks with God.”⁷⁰ As in the previous three texts, unwritten special revelation provides the simplest and most direct explanation.

Conclusion

It seems to me that commentators and theologians have tended to ignore the option of unwritten special revelation for these four issues in Genesis 1–11. Some prefer the more convoluted and questionable documentarian approach with its hypothetical authors, editors, and compilers. Others wish to attribute the knowledge of sacrifice to the human conscience, a form of natural or general revelation. Yet others prefer some unwritten revelation in the form of symbolism or token events (e.g., the animal skin clothing of 3:21). However, all of these approaches seem to ignore a key text like Luke 11:50–51 with its identification of Abel as a prophet. The proponents of other views also appear to ignore the fact that Jude labels Enoch as a prophet and even cites the revelation that he had received.

Granted, written special revelation possesses a character and role very distinct from any potential unrecorded or unwritten special revelation. However, the God Who is, is a God Who speaks. He always has—even before written revelation. God has not supplied the contents of His unwritten revelation, because we do not need that unwritten revelation to know Him, to know His will, or to be obedient to Him. In the primeval period and on into the patriarchal era, God’s people depended upon His unwritten revelation for understanding His will. Clues to the existence of that revelation appear in texts like Genesis 4:3–5, 26; 6:18; and 7:2. Commentators and theologians need to discuss this option in their treatments of these texts and others like them, rather than ignoring the potential of unwritten revelation. We need to take a new look at an old solution and revisit the reasons for its neglect. If we can admit that God has spoken to many individuals at many times, then why would we dare to limit Him to speaking only those words contained in written revelation? What theological necessity requires that we muzzle God in the primeval and patriarchal eras, reducing His revelatory speech to only that which is recorded?

⁶⁸ Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 371; cf. 372.

⁶⁹ Morris, *The Genesis Record*, 190–91.

⁷⁰ Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001),