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The Ancestral Narratives

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ACCORDING TO THE BIBLICAL TRADITION, the people of ancient Israel traced their ancestry back to the three patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The name of the third of these, Jacob, was changed to Israel (Genesis 32:28-29; 35:10), and thus he becomes the eponymous ancestor of the people of Israel. Jacob/Israel, in turn, had twelve sons (Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, etc.), each of whom becomes the eponymous ancestor of one of the twelve Israelite tribes.[1]

Origins

From the vantage point of modern history and historiography, clearly, the entire population of a nation does not spring from the offspring of one man. But such was the biblical tradition, which created an idealized account of the nation's origins, and which no doubt played a major role in the creation of a national consciousness. Since other biblical sources and archaeological evidence show that the people of Israel had diverse origins (see chap. 3), the narrative of the Book of Genesis (along with the rest of the Torah and the Book of Joshua) serves to unify the entirety of the nation. Regardless of whether one could trace one's ancestry back to the patriarchs or not, *all of Israel* was seen to be descended from Jacob/Israel, and, in turn, from Isaac and Abraham.[2]

The major part of the Book of Genesis (esp. chaps. 12–50), accordingly, narrates the story of a family: the three generations of the patriarchs and their primary wives. The key individuals, thus, are the following: Abraham and his primary wife, Sarah; Isaac and his wife Rebekah; Jacob and his two primary wives, Rachel and Leah. Then follows the generation of Jacob's twelve sons and one daughter, with the most prominent figures of Joseph and Judah, and with Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Benjamin, and Dinah also playing key roles. The narrative in the Book of Genesis, accordingly, is mainly a family affair.

At a distance of more than 3,000 years, it is difficult enough to find the people of Israel in the historical documentation (see chaps. 2–3); *a fortiori*, it is well-nigh impossible to find a single family or even more so a single individual within that family in the historical record. As such, any quest to identify the geographical and chronological horizons of the ancestral narratives must rely almost solely on the biblical material itself. Once such has been accorded, we then can seek background material from the wider ancient Near East. But first a word is due about the term "ancestral narratives" used within the title of this chapter, which in the previous editions was called "The Patriarchal Age."

The Term "Ancestral Narratives"

Throughout much of the 20th century, scholars believed that they could pinpoint the actual time period when the patriarchs lived, hence the term "patriarchal age," with emphasis on the second word. The focus typically was on the men alone, hence the emphasis on the first word. Today, scholars are less optimistic about situating the Genesis narratives in a particular historical context dated to a particular epoch, and there is now a recognition of the gender bias in the word "patriarchal." Accordingly, instead of attempting to determine the historical era of the patriarchs, scholars are much more likely to focus on the narratives themselves and what they may teach us about ancient Israel. They are also aware of the prominent role that the female characters play. After all, the story is about a family, and wives and mothers and daughters are central to the character and functioning of any family. Hence "The Ancestral Narratives" instead of "The Patriarchal Age" in the title of this chapter, even if, by necessity, we will use the latter term occasionally.

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Matriarchs in a Patriarchal Society

The name of this chapter in previous editions ("The Patriarchal Age") did not do justice to the central role of women in the stories about Israel's ancestors. Even a random perusal of the Bible will discover women who are the antithesis of what we might expect from a patriarchal society. Biblical female protagonists are not passive, demure, timid, or submissive but rather bold and assertive, in which they differ significantly from the treatment of women in contemporaneous Near Eastern literature.

Why the difference, one might ask. It is because these female figures—although often not Israelites themselves—symbolically represent the newly emergent nation of Israel. That is, Israel was a small and relatively powerless nation, struggling to exist on the margins of more powerful, established empires like Egypt and Assyria. Lacking natural gifts and physical prowess, the Israelites could only survive through daring and determination. And this is how the women in the biblical stories are portrayed—from Yael, who killed the enemy general with a tent peg, to Rahab, whose courage was instrumental in Joshua's entry into Canaan.

Countless other examples are cited in Rendsburg's engaging article (see n. 23), which readers are invited to investigate further in the BAS online library. —ED.

In light of all that is stated here, many scholars view the quest to establish the putative time and place of Abraham and Sarah and the ensuing generations to be a "pursuit of the wind."[3] We understand this scholarly position, but in a book titled *Ancient Israel*, in which the reader may expect to find at least some discussion on the topic, we believe that the quest may be undertaken, even should be undertaken, albeit cautiously and judiciously.

From Where Did Abraham Come?

Fortunately, the Bible provides sufficient clues for an answer to the question of Abraham's origin. In Genesis 11:28, we learn that the family of Terah (father of Abraham[4]) originates in the city of Ur of the Chaldees (Heb. *'ur kaśdim*). In verse 31, we read, "And Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, the son of his son, and Sarai

his daughter-in-law, the wife of Abram his son; and they went out with them from Ur of the Chaldees to go to the land of Canaan, and they came unto Harran, and they dwelt there." From this passage we learn that a journey from Ur of the Chaldees to Canaan would pass through Harran. Another important clue is offered in Joshua 24:2–3, where we learn that the ancestors of Israel lived "beyond the Euphrates," until God took Abraham from "beyond the Euphrates."[5]

These data points allow us to conclude that Abraham came from the city of Ur in northern Mesopotamia, that is, modern-day Urfa in southern Turkey. Local Jewish, Christian, and Muslim tradition holds that the city is the birthplace of Abraham, and there is no reason to question this belief, since it matches well with the information provided by the Bible.[6] Most likely, this city is the one mentioned as Ura in cuneiform tablets from Ugarit (14th–13th centuries), where it is associated with the Hittite realm.[7]

Many readers will have read elsewhere that Ur of the Chaldees is the great city of Ur in southern Mesopotamia, located at modern Tell el-Muqayyar in southern Iraq. There are several problems with this identification. First, the city flourished during the late third and early second millennium, which is too early for the date of Abraham. Second, Ur was a great metropolis of the Sumerians, of whom there is little or no mention in the Bible. Finally, the geography is all wrong, because the Ur in southern Iraq is not "beyond the Euphrates" but rather on the western banks of the river; and a journey from this Ur to Canaan would not take one via Harran.[8]

Although the identification of the birthplace of Abraham with Ur of Sumer in southern Iraq is standard teaching—present in almost all introductory textbooks of the Bible and the ancient Near East—it is wrong.[9] There is simply nothing to connect Abraham with the city. So how and why was the identification made? Leonard Woolley, who excavated the site during the years 1922–1934, uncovered one of the largest cities of the ancient world, replete with the great ziggurat, tens of thousands of cuneiform tablets, and the world's oldest law code, that of Ur-Nammu, king of Sumer (r. 2047–2030). Woolley simply assumed that Abraham must have come from only as great a city as Ur of Sumer.[10]

How, then, does one explain the latter part of the expression "Ur of the Chaldees"? The Chaldeans were indeed resident in southern

Mesopotamia during the first millennium B.C.E., making the terms Babylonia and Chaldea virtually interchangeable during the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E. (see chs. 5–6). But we know that the Chaldeans were not native to the land, to which they most likely had migrated from the northern reaches of Mesopotamia. The best evidence comes from the Greek historian Xenophon, who mentions the Chaldeans as a warlike people blocking the way to Armenia (*Anabasis* 4.3.4), and as neighbors of the Armenians but at war with them (*Cyropaedia* 3.1.34). Xenophon further mentions the Chaldeans in connection with the Carduchi (i.e., the ancient Kurds) (*Anabasis* 5.5.17). To this day, the name "Chaldeans" lives on within the Christian community of the region.

It is further noteworthy that the names of Terah's father (Nahor) and grandfather (Serug) are the names of cities in the general region of modern Urfa. While the precise location in upper Mesopotamia of Naḫur as known from Akkadian sources remains unknown, Serug—well known from later Syriac sources and called Suruç in modern Turkish—lies 29 miles (46 km) southwest of Urfa. In sum, everything points to a northern Mesopotamian location for Ur of the Chaldees.

The Bible refers to this region generally as Aram Naharaim, meaning "Aram of the Two Rivers" (Genesis 24:10, etc.). The biblical tradition of "A wandering Aramean was my father" (Deuteronomy 26:5)—referencing either Abraham or Jacob in the terse retelling of Israel's history—similarly situates the ancestral origins in northern Mesopotamia.

Nevertheless, there most likely is a connection between the great city of Ur of Sumer in the south and Ur of the Chaldees in the north. While we have no direct evidence to substantiate the claim, presumably northern Ur was established as a colony of the metropolis in the south. This would explain the expression *'ur kaśdim*, "Ur of the Chaldees." The great Ur required no further appellation, but one of its outposts did. In a similar manner, we must specify "London, Ontario" when referring to the New World outpost of the great city of England.

When Did Abraham Live?

Chronology of Abraham's (purported) life is another thorny question. Scholars have proposed a range of about seven centuries in which to

situate the first patriarch: anywhere from c. 2100 to c. 1400, with the more recent date being the one best supported by the evidence.

Genesis 14 tells a story of the war between four invading kings from the north and east and the local five kings of the Dead Sea region (including those of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah). The four invading kings are Amraphel of Shinar, Arioch of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer of Elam, and Tidal of Goiim. One would hope that at least one of these royal figures could be identified in the historical documentation from Mesopotamian sources, but such is not the case. Of the place names, Shinar most likely is the Hebrew version of Sumer; Elam is to the east of the Tigris River, in modern-day Iran; while Ellasar and Goiim are unknown. But we know of no king of Sumer or southern Mesopotamia by the name of Amraphel nor a king of Elam by the name of Chedorlaomer. The name Tidal, which is the Semitic way of writing the Hittite royal name Tudḫalia, was borne by four individual kings, who reigned during the years 1430–1230. Oddly, Tidal in the Bible is not associated with the Hittites but the enigmatic term Goiim (Hebrew *goyim*), which means simply "nations". Moreover, we have no record of any invasion by any of the Tudḫalias as far distant as southern Canaan, in the region of the Dead Sea. So while Genesis 14 may have some potential in the quest to situate Abraham chronologically, in the end, there is nothing within the chapter that allows one to pin down a specific date.

In similar fashion, we have no knowledge of any of the local kings mentioned in the Book of Genesis. This includes the five defending kings in Genesis 14; Melchizedek king of Salem (also Genesis 14); Abimelech king of Gerar (Genesis 20 and 26); Hamor king of Shechem (Genesis 34); and the long list of Edomite kings (Genesis 36). And while two pharaohs are mentioned in Genesis—one contemporary with Abraham (Genesis 12) and one with Joseph (Genesis 39–50)—only the title "pharaoh" or the phrase "king of Egypt" is used, with no name given in either instance.[11] One potential clue is the phrase "land of Ra'ameses" (Genesis 47:11) as the designation for the eastern Delta, a term which could have arisen only with the reigns of the first two pharaohs bearing that name: Ramesses I (r. 1301–1300) and Ramesses II (r. 1290–1224)—unless the reference is an anachronism.

Years vs. Genealogies

In reaching back to as early as 2100 B.C.E., or even 1800, scholars have relied too heavily on the years provided in the Bible. The ages of the patriarchs presented in the Bible are clearly exaggerated and apparently evoke some sort of numerical symbolism:[12]

Abraham:	$175 = 5^2 \times 7$ (Genesis 25:7)
Isaac:	$180 = 6^2 \times 5$ (Genesis 35:28)
Jacob:	$147 = 7^2 \times 3$ (Genesis 47:28)

Although the significance of these numbers eludes us, they presumably meant something to the author and to at least the informed portion of his reading audience. To be sure, these figures and others like them (e.g., Abraham was 100 years old at the birth of Isaac [Genesis 21:5]) behoove the modern reader not to rely on them as a chronological guide.

A much better guide is the approximate span of time that can be calculated based on the genealogies in the Bible.[13] Note, for example, the following lineage in Exodus 6:16–20: Abraham – Isaac – Jacob – Levi – Kohath – Amram – Moses. The date and nature of the Exodus are still debated, but almost all scholars agree that c. 1200 offers the most likely background of the biblical account. Accepting 1200 and estimating 30 years per generation,[14] we can calculate back in the following manner (using 1230 for Moses, since he already was older at the time of the Exodus):

1230: Moses
1260: Amram
1290: Kohath
1320: Levi
1350: Jacob
1380: Isaac
1410: Abraham

Dating Abraham to c. 1400 places "the patriarchal age" in the Late Bronze Age (c. 1550–c. 1150).[15]

A Possible Middle Bronze Age Setting

Those who date "the patriarchal age" to the Middle Bronze Age (c. 2000–c. 1550), rely on the years expressed in the Bible, not on the genealogies. Their approach must postulate that many generations have been omitted from the biblical account and/or have been telescoped

in the genealogies. Both ancient Near Eastern documentation and modern Bedouin cultural parallels, however, inform us that the genealogies are a much more accurate guide to a relative chronology than the time spans calculated by given years. For example, Nabonidus king of Babylon (r. 556–539) asserts that Naram-Sin, king of Akkad (r. c. 2254–c. 2218), ruled 3200 years before his time,[16] when we know that the distance separating the two rulers is c. 1,700 years. On the contemporary side, one may observe very accurate genealogical reckoning among the Bedouin, reaching back seven or even ten generations.[17]

Those who look to the Middle Bronze Age for the background of the Genesis narrative and/or Israel's origins often point to cultural and linguistic parallels forthcoming from Mari, a major city on the Euphrates in eastern Syria that flourished between c. 1850 and 1750.[18] One Mari text refers to the burial of precious metal belonging to the gods, which may remind us of Jacob burying jewelry near Shechem (Genesis 35:4). And the Akkadian word *merḫu(m)*, "high official, royal agent," attested in the Mari documents, is cognate to Hebrew *mereʿ*, which describes the position held by Ahuzzath, adviser to Abimelech king of Gerar (Genesis 26:26). In general, one observes the coexistence of urbanites (at Mari itself) and pastoralists (on the steppe land), a setting which calls to mind the patriarchs with their flocks near urban centers.[19]

While these and other parallels are intriguing, dating "the patriarchal age" to the Middle Bronze Age still faces the difficulty of the internal biblical data, especially the genealogical information. A reasonable way to resolve the issue is to assume that the social patterns, cultural markers, and linguistic items reflected in the Mari documents persisted in the general region of northern Mesopotamia (and elsewhere) into the Late Bronze Age (and perhaps later still).

The Late Bronze Age Setting

While placing Abraham in northern Mesopotamia (the general region of modern-day south-central Turkey) in c. 1400 B.C.E., we cannot make claims about a historical personage *per se*, for there is no extra-biblical documentation for said person, his wife, and others in his circle. Instead, we should understand Abraham as a figure—perhaps historical, perhaps legendary—representing for the Israelites the

beginnings of their religious, cultural, and national identity.[20] And if not Abraham, then certainly Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel, in his role as eponymous ancestor. Furthermore, the ancestral narratives are not historical documents but rather literary creations told in the most vivid manner.[21]

We are not at a dead end, though. Once we have properly understood the geographical and chronological setting of the Genesis narratives, we are in a position to say more about the social, legal, and cultural norms reflected therein. Two Late Bronze Age sites are particularly helpful: Ugarit and Nuzi. Ugarit flourished in northern coastal Syria (reflecting the world of greater Canaan) between 1400 and 1200. The most relevant material from the site are two literary works: the Epic of Kirta and the Epic of Aqhat (the former a legendary king, the latter the son of the legendary king Dan'el), with significant parallels to the Genesis narratives.[22] Nuzi, in modern-day northern Iraq (reflecting Hurrian culture), has yielded approximately 6,000 cuneiform tablets with documentary texts dated to the 14th century B.C.E. The documents detail the legal, social, and economic life of the city, thus providing parallels to customs reflected in the Book of Genesis.

Ugaritic Parallels

The Patriarchal narratives of the Book of Genesis are dominated by two literary motifs: the childless hero with a barren woman; and the younger son. The first motif occurs with Abraham and Sarah (much of chaps. 15–21), Isaac and Rebekah (25:21), and Rachel (29:31; 30:22). Later in the Bible, the barren woman motif occurs with the wife of Manoah (Judges 13) and with Hannah (1 Samuel 1). The younger son motif appears in Genesis through setting aside primogeniture in each successive generation, so that the younger Isaac supersedes the firstborn Ishmael, Jacob supersedes Esau, Joseph supersedes his brothers, Perez supersedes Zerah, and Ephraim supersedes Manasseh. This motif is perhaps foreshadowed with God's favoring Abel over his elder brother Cain (Genesis 4) and is further reflected in the Book of Exodus, where Moses becomes the leader of the Israelites, with the firstborn Aaron holding second position (see Exodus 7:7). The motif surfaces yet again in the case of David, whose last-born status is explicitly noted (1 Samuel 16:1–13), and then once more in the next

generation, with Solomon (1 Kings 1–2).

These two motifs are part of the epic tradition of ancient Canaan, as can be observed in Ugaritic literature. The theme of the childless hero dominates the Epic of Aqhat, with the key couplet repeated throughout, with reference to Danʾel: "Who has no son like his brothers, and (no) offspring like his kinsmen" (*CAT* 1.17 I 18–19; with parallels at I 42–43, II 14–15).

At the opening of the Epic of Kirta, the hero loses all of his children, while his wife, Ḥuray, has departed (was taken from Kirta). The hero's desire, accordingly, is for new offspring (*CAT* 1.14 II 4–5) and for his wife to be restored to him (*CAT* 1.14 III 38–40). As the story continues, we learn of the return of Ḥuray to Kirta and the subsequent birth of seven sons and an eighth child, a daughter (*CAT* 1.15 II–III 25). Strikingly, either the god El or the hero Kirta (more likely the former) declares "the youngest of them I make to be firstborn" (*CAT* 1.15 III 16).

If all of this sounds familiar, it is because—as we have just seen—the same motifs occur in Genesis. The childless heroes Danʾel and Kirta find their echoes in Abraham and Isaac. And the raising of the youngest to firstborn status resonates in the stories of Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Perez, and Ephraim. Interestingly, while Ugaritic lore focuses on the male childless heroes, the Bible stories highlight the female protagonists. In all five biblical cases, the stories are crafted with the reader's attention drawn to the barren woman: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, the wife of Manoah, and Hannah. This shift in focus bespeaks Israel's desire to identify with the lowly. Israel saw itself not as a heroic male or a firstborn son but rather as a barren woman and/or as a younger or youngest son without an inherited birthright. Israel is not Egypt or Assyria or Babylonia—nations of old with abundant water, natural resources, political clout, military might, and more—but rather a new nation, a younger nation, which flourishes only through a combination of pluck and divine intervention, as Yahweh guides and protects her.[23]

We observed above that a portion of the Kirta Epic is devoted to the hero's need to recover his wife, Ḥuray, for she had been taken into the foreign palace of King Pebel of Udum (*CAT* 1.14 III 38–40, VI 22–25). This motif resonates in the Book of Genesis: Abraham

needs to reclaim Sarah from two foreign palaces, that of the Pharaoh (Genesis 12) and that of Abimelech king of Gerar (Genesis 20); while Isaac must do the same with Rebekah, as she, too, is taken by Abimelech king of Gerar (Genesis 26). The Dinah episode (Genesis 34) provides a variation on this theme: Dinah is the daughter rather than the wife of the hero, but the need to rescue her from a foreign palace animates the story.

In the two cases of Sarah and Rebekah, no military action was necessary, unlike in the Dinah episode. This latter story parallels Kirta's need to amass an army and to march on Udum in order to reclaim his wife. Unfortunately, this part of the text did not survive, but it appears that in the end King Pebel acquiesced to Kirta's demand for the return of his wife Ḥuray. To broaden our horizon further still, all these tales share the major theme of the *Iliad*, where Helene of Troy, the abducted wife of King Menelaos of Sparta, is reclaimed through what is known as the Trojan War.[24]

Nuzi Parallels

As we have seen, the Ugaritic texts are important for the literary parallels to the ancestral narratives. By contrast, the importance of the Nuzi documents lies in their portrayal of the legal, social, and economic life of the Late Bronze Age. Although we have many law collections from the ancient Near East (most famously, Hammurabi's Code),[25] the Nuzi documents—ranging from marriage contracts to court records to real estate transactions—constitute the single most important window into "real life" responses to "real life" conditions.[26]

One legal text among the Nuzi documents is particularly relevant to two different aspects of the Genesis narrative.[27] The tablet informs us that a man named Shurihil adopts a younger man named Shennima as his son and rightful heir, and that Shennima must serve Shurihil for all the days of his life—unless, however, Shurihil fathers a natural-born son, who then would become chief heir, with Shennima reduced to secondary position. In a case such as this, presumably Shennima came from a less well-to-do family, so that his servitude to Shurihil was a form of investment: he would serve the many years and eventually would inherit from Shurihil.

Although the Bible does not provide us with the legal underpinnings

of the relationship between Abraham and his servant Eliezer, we reconstruct a situation parallel to the one that underlies the Nuzi document. We know from Genesis 15:2–3 that Eliezer is both chief servant to Abraham and his heir. And while the biblical account does not refer to adoption (here or elsewhere), this remains the best possible explanation of the legal relationship between the two individuals. Without a natural-born son, one must assume that Abraham had adopted Eliezer as his son, for how else could he refer to him as his heir? As the story continues, however, God informs Abraham that it is not Eliezer who will inherit, but rather a biological son to be born (v. 4). This follows the legal custom attested at Nuzi, whereby a natural-born son outranks the adopted son.[28]

The second half of the same cuneiform tablet provides information about the marriage of Shennima to a woman named Kelim-ninu. The contract includes the following stipulation: "If Kelim-ninu bears (children), Shennima shall not take another wife. But if Kelim-ninu does not bear, Kelim-ninu shall take a Lullu-woman as wife for Shennima."[29] The final clause is meant to assure that Shennima can father an heir, if his wife is unable to bear a child. Note that it is the responsibility of the wife to supply her husband with a second wife, here called a "Lullu-woman," meaning a servant woman.[30]

The scenario envisioned in this marriage contract is played out in the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. When Sarah is unable to conceive, she takes the first step and presents Hagar to Abraham (Genesis 16:1–2)—apparently because it was her legal responsibility to do so, as in the Nuzi document. As the story unfolds, Hagar indeed bears a child, Ishmael (16:15), though in the ensuing chapters the focus returns to Sarah, with the promise by God to Abraham that Sarah also will bear a child (17–18).

In sum, a single Nuzi document provides information relevant to the two solutions of childlessness: a man either may adopt a son or may take a second wife. Both avenues are realized in the Abraham story, with Eliezer serving as Abraham's adopted son (Genesis 15:2–3), and with Hagar serving as Abraham's second wife (Genesis 16:3).

LEARN MORE

Who Wrote Down the Stories of the Patriarchs and When?

The patriarchal characters and stories in Genesis are some of the most compelling in the entire Bible, yet are among the most difficult to identify historically or archaeologically. But even though no material or textual evidence of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or Joseph has ever been found, many early-20th century archaeologists, led by William F. Albright, the pioneer of American "biblical archaeology," were convinced that material and textual discoveries proved that the patriarchs were best understood and had in fact lived during the first half of the second millennium B.C.E. Yet, as historian and textual scholar Maynard Maidman makes clear in his insightful *BAR* article "Abraham, Isaac & Jacob Meet Newton, Darwin & Wellhausen" (May/June 2006), the Albrightian formulation of the patriarchal period had been undone by a kind of "archaeology" of the biblical text undertaken by German biblical scholar Julius Wellhausen over a half-century earlier.

Wellhausen's so-called "documentary hypothesis," brilliantly summarized and defended by biblical scholar Richard Elliot Friedman in his *Bible Review* article "Taking the Biblical Text Apart" (Fall 2005), proposed that the patriarchal stories in Genesis (along with the rest of the books of the Torah, or the Five Books of Moses) consisted basically of four separate textual strands, or schools of authors, who wrote at different times and in different contexts during the Israelite monarchy of the first half of the first millennium B.C.E. (i.e., the Iron Age), or shortly thereafter. These four authorial strands, which may also include much earlier traditions, are identified by scholars as the J (or Jahwist) source, the E (or Elohist) source, the P (or Priestly) source, and the D (or Deuteronomist) source, all of which give their own spin to the patriarchal narratives. As such, the written stories of the patriarchs—wherever and whenever the oral traditions of Israel's ancestors originated—reflect primarily the Iron Age Israelite context, in which they were first compiled and edited. —HERSHEL SHANKS

Because the Nuzi archive is unique in providing documentation about family law in "real life" situations, one cannot know whether the legal system reflected there was operative also in earlier and/or later times and whether it was common amongst other peoples or only the Hurrians of northern Mesopotamia.[31] Regardless, it is rather

striking that the ancestral narratives include episodes that come to life against the backdrop of legal practices from the Hurrian realm of the 14th century B.C.E.[32]

Does all of this mean that Abraham and Sarah are to be dated to this time period? Northern Mesopotamia in c. 1400 does, indeed, provide the best historical and geographical context for the ancestral narratives. Yet all we can do is to understand Abraham as a figure—perhaps historical, perhaps legendary—who represented for the Israelites the beginnings of their religious, cultural, and national identity.

When Were the Ancestral Narratives Written?

Notwithstanding all that has been said so far, the ancestral narratives remain first and foremost literature. It is apposite to ask, accordingly, when might these stories have coalesced into the form presented in the Book of Genesis? As is often the case regarding the earlier biblical material, there is no consensus. From a linguistic standpoint, there can be no doubt that the ancestral narratives date to the time of the monarchy (c. 1000–586), during the heyday of Standard Biblical Hebrew, that is, before the Exile (586–538) and the subsequent rise of Late Biblical Hebrew during the Persian period (fifth–fourth centuries). The only question is: are we able to determine a time for the creation of the ancestral narratives that is more specific than the four-century time span noted above (c. 1000–586)? Our answer is yes, with an eye to the tenth century B.C.E.

It was during this period that the twelve tribes coalesced into a single United Monarchy under David and Solomon (see chap. 4). The new polity required a national narrative to unite the tribes and thus were born the ancestral narratives. This will explain why many of the literary themes and motifs in Genesis reappear in the Book of Samuel and why they reflect the reality of the tenth century.

For the former observation, note that both Rachel and Michal use *teraphim* to deceive their fathers in order to protect their husbands (Genesis 31; 1 Samuel 19); that a female character named Tamar is abused by a male lead, only to be vindicated at a sheep-shearing festival (Genesis 38; 2 Samuel 13); that the wife of Judah is called *bat šuaʿ*, "daughter of Shua" (Genesis 38:12), while the most famous of David's wives is Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11–12), called *bat šuaʿ* in 1 Chronicles 3:5;

and, finally, that both Reuben and Absalom sleep with their fathers' concubine(s) (Genesis 35:22; 2 Samuel 16:22). These parallels are too close and too many to be coincidental.[33]

As for the reflections of the tenth century, note that God promises Abraham, "and kings will come-forth from you" (Genesis 17:6), and then again, regarding Sarah, "kings of peoples will be from her" (Genesis 17:16), in which we may see reflections of the new reality of monarchy in the tenth century. More specifically, monarchy is associated with Judah: "And the staff shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler from between his legs, until tribute comes to him, and his is the obedience of peoples" (Genesis 49:10), reflecting the tribal affiliation of David and Solomon. Note also that the boundaries of the land of Canaan promised to Abraham in Genesis 15:18 ("this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates River") accord with the description of Solomon's realm (1 Kings 5:1). Finally, it is significant that Abraham's tithing to Melchizedek king of Salem (= Jerusalem) and priest to El Elyon (Genesis 14:20) adumbrates the centrality of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 6–8). Once again, the parallels cannot be coincidental, but must bear greater significance.[34]

One may conclude that the ancestral narratives were the product of the tenth century B.C.E.[35] As such, we may liken the Book of Genesis to other literary productions which refract the past through the present and the present through the past. Shakespeare's *Histories*, for example, describe the lives of earlier monarchs while reflecting attitudes and conditions during the reign of Elizabeth I; Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* narrates the Salem witch trials of the 1690s but simultaneously signals the McCarthyism of the 1950s. In the same way, the ancestral narratives likely contain both a kernel of history and epic or legendary elements interleaved by the brilliant literati responsible for the canonical version.

The further back one goes in the history of ancient Israel, the harder it becomes to reconstruct that history. Notwithstanding that underlying reality, this chapter has attempted to present a plausible scenario for the background of Abraham and his circle and for the stories told about them.

Notes

1. The Ancestral Narratives

1 With two tweaks, though: First, Levi is not a proper tribe, but rather is distinguished for sacerdotal service. Second, Joseph subdivides into two tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh, based on the names of his two sons.

2 The listing of the three patriarchs as "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" occurs 20 times in the Bible, mostly in the Torah (Genesis 50:24 through Deuteronomy 34:4), with two additional passages in 2 Kings 13:23 and Jeremiah 33:26. See also Psalm 105:9–10. The listing of the three patriarchs as "Abraham, Isaac, and Israel" occurs in Exodus 32:13; 1 Kings 18:36; 1 Chronicles 29:18; and 2 Chronicles 30:6.

3 To quote the phrase used seven times in the Book of Qohelet (or Ecclesiastes): 1:14; 2:11; 2:17; 2:26; 4:4; 4:6; 6:9.

4 At this point in the narrative, the first patriarch is still called Abram. His name is changed to Abraham in Genesis 17:5 (see also Nehemiah 9:7). To avoid confusion, we use the latter name throughout this chapter, unless quoting a biblical passage in which the former name occurs.

5 The Hebrew word *'eber*, "beyond," may serve as the source of the word *'ibri*, "Hebrew," which thus would mean (in the plural) "those who came from beyond" (the River Euphrates), though various other etymologies have been proposed. The origins of the names of peoples and countries often are lost in the mists of time, as in the cases of France, España (Spain), Sverige (Sweden), etc. Even when we know the source, sometimes the connection is very tenuous: America—simply because the cartographer Martin Waldseemüller produced a world map, in 1507, on which he named the new continent using the Latin feminine form of Amerigo Vespucci's first name; Canada—from the St. Lawrence Iroquoian word *kanata*, "settlement," first recorded in a European language by Jacques Cartier in 1545; California—used by Spanish explorers due to the appearance of the name in a popular 16th-century novel for a distant island (which in turn probably is based on the word *caliph*).

6 This was commonly accepted in 19th-century biblical scholarship; see, for example, George Bush, *Notes Critical and Practical on the Book of Genesis* (New York: Gould, Newman & Saxton, 1839), 189, whose author is distantly related to the presidential family of the same name. For a lively discourse on the scholar's life, see Shalom Goldman, *God's Sacred Tongue: Hebrew and the American Imagination* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2004), 199–207, 314–15.

7 See Cyrus H. Gordon, "Abraham and the Merchants of Ura," *JNES* 17 (1958), 28–31; and Gordon, "Where Is Abraham's Ur?" *BAR,* June 1977, 20–21, 52.

8 The location of Harran in southern Turkey, just north of the Syrian border, is accepted by all. The city name is retained until the present day.

9 Even the Vatican erred when Pope John Paul II visited Ur in southern Iraq, believing it to be the birthplace of Abraham. See Hershel Shanks, "Abraham's Ur—Is the Pope Going to the Wrong Place?" *BAR,* March/April 2000, 62–63.

10 However, the identification was made earlier, beginning with Henry C. Rawlinson, "Biblical Geography," *The Athenaeum*, no. 1799 (April 19, 1862), 529–31.

11 The same is true also with any attempt to date the Slavery and the Exodus in the Book of Exodus 1–2; 3–15; see further ch. 2.

12 Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken, 1966), 83–84.

13 See Gary A. Rendsburg, "The Internal Consistency and Historical Reliability of the Biblical Genealogies," *VT* 40 (1990), 185–206; and Rendsburg, "The Date of the Exodus and the Conquest/Settlement: The Case for the 1100s," *VT* 42 (1992), 510–27.

14 Based on the research of David P. Henige, *The Chronology of Oral Tradition: The Quest for a Chimera* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 121–44, much of which is summarized in Henige, "Generation-counting and Late

New Kingdom Chronology," *JEA* 67 (1981), 182–84.

15 Other biblical lineages cohere with this overall picture; see Rendsburg, "The Internal Consistency" (see n. 13), 186–89 (esp. the summary chart and family trees on 189).

16 Nabonidus, Sippar Cylinder Inscription, col. 2, line 58, for which see Paul-Alain Beaulieu, "The Sippar Cylinder of Nabonidus," in *COS 2*: 312.

17 On reflections of modern Bedouin culture in the Bible, see Clinton Bailey, "How Desert Culture Helps Us Understand the Bible," *BR*, August 1991, 14–21, 38; and Bailey, *Bedouin Culture in the Bible* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2018), with genealogies discussed on 169–72.

18 See Jack M. Sasson, "About 'Mari and the Bible'," *RA* 92 (1998), 97–123; Daniel E. Fleming, "Mari and the Possibilities of Biblical Memory," *RA* 92 (1998), 41–78; and Abraham Malamat, *Mari and the Bible*, Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East, 12 (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

19 See Genesis 33:18–19, where Jacob purchases land from the local people of Shechem on which he pitched his tent (and presumably pastured his flocks).

20 King Arthur is similarly a historical figure for some and a purely legendary character for others. For the Welsh, he serves as a "symbol of national renewal and linguistic revival" (Geraint Evans, "Modernist Arthur: The Welsh Revival," in H. Fulton, ed., *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture, 58 [Chichester: Blackwell, 2012], 447).

21 See Gary A. Rendsburg, *How the Bible Is Written* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2019), 568–92, for a literary analysis of the story of Jacob and Rachel meeting at the well and of their subsequent marriage as narrated in Genesis 29.

22 For detailed analyses of these two epics, with comparisons to the biblical material, see Simon B. Parker, *The Pre-Biblical Narrative Tradition*, SBL Resources for Biblical Study, 24 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

23 See Gary A. Rendsburg, "Unlikely Heroes: Women as Israel," *BR*, February 2003, 16, 18–21, 23, 52–53.

24 These interconnections and many others were posited more than 60 years ago by Cyrus H. Gordon, in his path-breaking article "Homer and Bible: The Origin and Character of East Mediterranean Literature," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 26 (1955), 43–108; reprinted by Ventnor Publishers in 1967. See also Gordon, *The Common Background of Greek and Hebrew Civilizations* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1965).

25 See Martha T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, Writings from the Ancient World, 6 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995).

26 For general introduction and a sampling of documents, see Maynard P. Maidman, *Nuzi Texts and Their Uses as Historical Evidence*, Writings from the Ancient World, 18 (Atlanta: SBL, 2010).

27 The official designation of this text is HSS V 67 = Edward Chiera, *Texts of Varied Contents*, Harvard Semitic Studies, 5 = Excavations at Nuzi, 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1931), text no. 67 (plates lxi–lxiii). For a complete transcription and translation, see E.A. Speiser, "New Kirkuk Documents Relating to Family Law," Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research 10 (1928–1929), 31–33. See also Theophile J. Meek, "Mesopotamian Legal Documents," in *ANET*, 220.

28 Though there may be a difference in the two systems: in the Nuzi legal custom, the adopted son is reduced to second position, so that he still would inherit something; while Genesis 15:4 implies that Eliezer would inherit naught.

29 See Jonathan Paradise, "Marriage Contracts of Free Persons at Nuzi," *JCOS Online* 39 (1987), 28–29.

30 All things being equal, if a couple was unable to produce a child, the ancients assumed that the problem lay with the woman; hence her responsibility to act in order to ensure the continuation of the family lineage. The term "Lullu" derives from the term "Lullubi," a mountainous area to the east of Nuzi, in the general vicinity of modern-day northeastern Iraq / northwestern Iran. Appar-

ently, women from this region were used as servants, hence the origin of the term.

31 For some potential parallels, see John Van Seters, "The Problem of Childlessness in Near Eastern Law and the Patriarchs of Israel," *JBL* 87.4 (1968), 401–408, though to my mind the Nuzi document HSS V 67 remains the most informative vis-à-vis Genesis 15–16.

32 For a general survey, see Barry L. Eichler, "Nuzi and the Bible: A Retrospective," in H. Behrens, D. Loding, and M.T. Roth, eds., *Dumu-e2-dub-ba-a: Studies in Honor of Åke W. Sjöberg* (Philadelphia: Samuel Noah Kramer Fund, University Museum, 1989), 107–19. See also M.J. Selman, "Comparative Customs and the Patriarchal Age," in A.R. Millard and D.J. Wiseman, eds., *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980 / Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 91–139. As both authors note, in the early years of Nuzi studies (1920s and 1930s), major scholars of the documents, such as E. A. Speiser and Cyrus H. Gordon, were wont to see numerous parallels with the Genesis narratives. Scholars are less inclined to do so today, but the relevance of HSS V 67 to the Book of Genesis has stood the test of time.

33 For further discussion, see Edward L. Greenstein, "The Formation of the Biblical Narrative Corpus," *AJS Review* 15.2 (1990), 151–78, esp. 165–67.

34 For a more developed statement, see Rendsburg, *How the Bible Is Written* (see n. 21), 443–67.

35 The approach taken here views the ancestral narratives as a unified literary construct. Most scholars subdivide the Book of Genesis into three separate sources: Yahwist (J), Elohist (E), and Priestly (P), of varying dates, though J is typically dated to the tenth century B.C.E. (see the Learn More box).

2. Egypt and the Exodus

1 Much of what we present herein is based on our earlier treatments: Manfred Bietak, "On the Historicity of the Exodus: What Egyptology Today Can Contribute to Assessing the Sojourn in Egypt," in Thomas E. Levy, Thomas Schneider, and William H.C. Propp, eds., *Israel's Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective: Text, Archaeology, Culture, and Geoscience* (Cham: Springer, 2015), 17–36; and Gary A. Rendsburg, "The Early History of Israel," in Gordon D. Young, Mark W. Chavalas, and Richard E. Averbeck, eds., *Crossing Boundaries and Linking Horizons: Studies in Honor of Michael C. Astour on His 80th Birthday* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1997), 433–53.

2 See in general Donald B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992). This book contains much valuable information on the interconnections between Egypt and Canaan, but the present authors part company with Redford on issues relating to the Exodus and associated topics discussed in the present chapter. See also Thomas Schneider, "Foreigners in Egypt: Archaeological Evidence and Cultural Context," in Willeke Wendrich, ed., *Egyptian Archaeology*, Blackwell Studies in Global Archaeology (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 143–63; and Anna-Latifa Mourad, *The Rise of the Hyksos: Egypt and the Levant from the Middle Kingdom to the Early Second Intermediate Period* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2015).

3 Percy E. Newberry, *Beni Hasan*, Part I, Archaeological Survey of Egypt 1 (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1893), 69, pl. XXX. See more recently: Susan Cohen, "Interpretative Uses and Abuses of the Beni Hasan Tomb Painting," *JNES* 74 (2015), 19–38, esp. 36; Janice Kamrin, *The Cosmos of Khnumhotep II at Beni Hasan* (London: Kegan Paul, 1999 / London: Routledge, 2016), 93–96; and Mourad, *Rise of the Hyksos* (see n. 2), 86–90.

4 See also the meaning "lineage, ancestor(s)," etc., in Ugaritic, Safaitic, etc. For the Egyptian evidence, see Adolf Erman, *Wörterbuch der Aegyptischen Sprache*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1926), 167. For a discussion on the problematics of this term, see Thomas Schneider, *Ausländer in Ägypten während des Mittleren Reiches und der Hyksoszeit*, Teil 2: *Die Ausländische Bevölkerung*, Ägypten und Altes Testament 42 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003), 5–7; and Mourad, *Rise of the Hyksos* (see n. 2), 14 nn. 14–15.

5 See the classic treatment by J. M. A. Janssen, "On the Ideal Lifetime of the Egyptians,"

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ON THE COVER: A section of the original wall surrounding the City of David.

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