

Print Article

The Patriarchal Age: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

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The history of Israel before the Exodus from Egypt is, as the Bible presents it, a family history. The story begins with the departure of Abram, son of Terah, from Ur, his ancestral homeland in southern Mesopotamia. He journeys to Haran, a city in northwestern Mesopotamia, and from there to the land of Canaan (Genesis 11:31–12:5). In Canaan, Abram's son Isaac is born, and Isaac, in turn, becomes the father of Jacob, also called Israel (Genesis 32:29). During a famine, Jacob and his 12 sons, the ancestors of the 12 tribes of Israel, leave Canaan and settle in Egypt, where their descendants become slaves.

This segment of Israel's history, therefore, is the story of the patriarchs: Abram or Abraham (as he is called in Genesis 17:5), Isaac, Jacob (Israel) and the 12 sons of Jacob.

The biblical description of the patriarchal period is concerned largely with private affairs, as one expect in the story of an individual family. There are only a few references to public events, and none of these corresponds to a known event of general history. Genesis 14, for example, describes a war in which the kings of the five Cities of the Plain (Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim and Bela, or Zoar) are arrayed against an alliance of four kings led by Chedorlaomer, king of Elam, a country that lay east of Mesopotamia. Chedorlaomer is said to have ruled over the Cities of the Plain before they rebelled (Genesis 14:4). There is no surviving extrabiblical record of these events, and neither the name of Chedorlaomer nor that of his ally Amraphel, king of Shinar (Babylonia), has been found in Mesopotamian records. Despite numerous attempts, no scholar has succeeded in identifying any of the nine kings involved in the war. The same is true of the other public figures mentioned in the patriarchal history: None can be identified from extrabiblical sources. Thus we know nothing of Melchizedek, king of Salem, apart from what we read in Genesis 14, or of Abimelech, king of Gerar, apart from what is said in Genesis 20 and 26. No external source mentions the Egyptian officer Potiphar (Genesis 39) or Hamor (Genesis 34), who was apparently a ruler of Shechem, or Ephron the Hittite (Genesis 23), a prominent citizen of Hebron. The early kings of Edom listed in Genesis 36:31–39 are known only from the Bible. We might expect to be able to identify the pharaoh of Genesis 12:10–20 or the pharaoh of the Joseph story, but neither ruler is called by name in the Bible.

When Did the Patriarchs Live?

In the absence of references to persons or events of general history, it is very difficult to determine the historical context of the stories in Genesis 12–50. The initial question, then, is a simple one: When did the patriarchs live?

At first glance, an answer to this question seems to be available from chronological indications in the biblical narrative itself. We are told that Abraham was 75 years old when he set out for Canaan (Genesis 12:4) and 100 when Isaac was born (Genesis 21:5). According to Genesis 25:26, Isaac was 60 years old when Jacob was born. Then, if Jacob was 130 when he descended into Egypt, as we read in Genesis 47:9, the full time the patriarchs spent in Canaan before going to Egypt was 215 years. Subsequently, we are told that the period of slavery in Egypt lasted 430 years (Exodus 12:40), and that the time from the Exodus from Egypt to the beginning of the construction of the Temple in the fourth year of Solomon's reign was 480 years (1 Kings 6:1). This brings us close to the period where we have secure chronological information: Scholars agree that Solomon died within a decade or so of 930 B.C.E.^a According to 1 Kings 11:42, he reigned 40 years. It follows that his fourth year, the year work began on the Temple, was about 966 B.C.E. Reckoning backward from this date and using the numbers cited above, we arrive at the following scheme:

2091 B.C.E. Abram's departure for Canaan

1876 B.C.E. The descent of Jacob's family into Egypt

1446 B.C.E. The Exodus from Egypt

966 B.C.E. The beginning of the construction of Solomon's Temple

According to these calculations, the patriarchal period (the time of the sojournings of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in Canaan) lasted from 2091 to 1876 B.C.E., and the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt between 1876 and 1446 B.C.E.

Unfortunately, there are serious problems with this scheme. First, it accepts the impossibly long life spans assigned the patriarchs. Second, it is internally inconsistent. Moses and Aaron were fourth-generation descendants of Jacob's son Levi (1 Chronicles 6:1–3, 1 Chronicles 5:27–29, in Hebrew). The 430-year period assigned the slavery in Egypt is too long for the three generations from Levi to Moses and Aaron, an average of about 143 years a generation. In any event, this is inconsistent with the notice that Joshua, a younger contemporary of Moses and Aaron, was a 12th-generation descendant of Levi's brother Joseph (1 Chronicles 7:20–27). If this were true, the 11 generations from Joseph to Joshua would average about 39 years each.

Third, the dates produced by this chronology for the Exodus and settlement do not correspond well with the evidence of history and archaeology. If the Exodus occurred in about 1446 B.C.E., then by the same chronology the conquest of Canaan must have begun 40 years later, in about 1406 B.C.E. There is, however, no archaeological evidence of a widespread

destruction or change of population at the end of the 15th century. Rather, the changes in material culture that archaeologists associate with the appearance of the Israelites in Canaan may be dated, in general, to the 13th or 12th century B.C.E., and the first clear historical evidence for the presence of Israel in Canaan is the inscription on the so-called Israel Stele of the Egyptian pharaoh Merneptah, dating to about 1207 B.C.E. (see Chapter III, “The Settlement in Canaan: The Period of the Judges”).

The Bible’s own chronological scheme, therefore, does not provide intelligible evidence for the dating of the patriarchal period. This fact, combined with the absence of references to events of general history as noted above, indicates that the patriarchal narratives in Genesis cannot be used as historical resources in any simple or straightforward fashion. They must be interpreted on the basis of an understanding, first, of their distinctive literary history and the purposes for which they were composed, and, second, of the development of the traditions upon which they are based.

Scholars generally agree that the patriarchal narratives, as we now have them, are composite. They contain at least three written strata, or strands, the earliest of which was composed during the time of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah (tenth to sixth century B.C.E.)^b and the latest after the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem (586 B.C.E.). All of these strata were brought together and arranged in approximately their present form at some time in the Second Temple period (after 538 B.C.E.) or, at the earliest, during the Babylonian Exile (586–538 B.C.E.). On the surface, therefore, the biblical patriarchal history reflects the political and religious viewpoint of the Judean monarchy and priesthood. Thus the promise made to Abram in Genesis 12:2 is that his descendants will be, not simply a numerous people, but a great “nation.”

Are the Patriarchs Historical Individuals or Eponyms?



Abraham's journey.

On this level, the men and women who appear in Genesis 12–50 are less accessible as historical individuals than as typological prefigurations of the later Israelites and their neighbors. In many cases they are eponyms, that is, persons from whom the names of the later groups were supposed to be derived. Thus Jacob is also called “Israel” (the name of the nation in later times), and his 12 sons are the eponymous ancestors of the 12 tribes of Israel. The narratives and genealogies characterize the various peoples of the writers’ own times and delineate the relationships among them from an Israelite perspective. Israel’s ancestors are born under auspicious circumstances, for instance, whereas the eponymous ancestors of the Moabites and Ammonites, “Moab” and “Ben-ammi,” are born of incestuous unions of Lot and his daughters (Genesis 19:30–38). Jacob (Israel) outwits his brother Esau, who is also called “Edom” (Genesis 25:30, 36:1), and wins Esau’s birthright and blessing. Ishmael, the eponymous ancestor of the tribes that inhabited the desert region between Judah and Egypt, is the child of the Judahite patriarch Abram and Sarai’s Egyptian maid Hagar (Genesis 16). This kind of material, though of great value in considering the political outlook of later Israel, is very difficult to use in a historical reconstruction of the world of Israel’s ancestors.

If Genesis 12–50 in its present form reflects the time of the biblical writers (that is, the time of the monarchy or later) rather than the time of the patriarchs, is it possible to look behind the present, literary form of the biblical narrative to examine the traditions upon which this material is based? Such a procedure might shed light on the development of the traditions and, ultimately, provide information about the history of the patriarchal age. Modern scholars, therefore, have developed methods for studying the preliterary history of the stories in Genesis.

Searching for the Social Context of the Patriarchs

One such method, which was especially popular in the middle decades of the 20th century, was based largely on archaeology. The scholars associated with this method took a generally positive view of the historical value of Genesis 12–50. They acknowledged that the patriarchal narratives in their present form were composed no earlier than the United Kingdom (tenth century B.C.E.). Nevertheless, they argued that these materials were based on historically reliable traditions deriving from earlier periods. Excavations had provided extensive new data, including a substantial amount of written material. After studying these texts, many scholars were convinced that the biblical patriarchal stories contained authentic details preserved from the time of their origin. It seemed reasonable, therefore, to suppose that there was a historical patriarchal period and to hope that it might be identified.

This point of view is associated most closely with the work of William F. Albright and his students.¹ It was also developed and promoted by other prominent scholars, especially Ephraim A. Speiser.² In brief, the argument of this “school” was as follows: Certain details in the biblical patriarchal stories—including personal names, social customs, legal practices and aspects of lifestyle—correspond to known features of second-millennium culture in Mesopotamia, Syria and Canaan. Many of the same

details, moreover, do not fit into the culture of the Israelite monarchy, the time when the stories were written down. In the judgment of Albright and those who shared his viewpoint, it seemed likely that these details preserved authentic elements of the civilization of the patriarchal period; by studying them and comparing them to surviving second-millennium materials outside the Bible, we should be able to determine the original historical context of the patriarchal traditions. As Albright himself put it,

So many corroborations of detail have been discovered in recent years that most competent scholars have given up the old critical theory according to which the stories of the Patriarchs are mostly retrojections from the time of the Dual Monarchy [late tenth century B.C.E. and later].³

He wrote elsewhere,

As a whole, the picture in Genesis is historical, and there is no reason to doubt the general accuracy of the biographical details and the sketches of personality which make the patriarchs come alive with a vividness unknown to a single extrabiblical character in the whole vast literature of the ancient Near East.⁴

In general, Albright's students did not express this viewpoint quite so strongly. As they acknowledged, archaeology cannot be expected to corroborate biographical details or specific references to private events. Nevertheless, archaeology might be able to shed light on the general historical context of the patriarchal stories. And this is primarily what was claimed by Albright and his students. They argued that the general cultural milieu of the patriarchal stories—as indicated by the details of social, economic and legal customs mentioned in the Bible—could best be identified with an early period and, more particularly, with the early second millennium B.C.E. According to G. Ernest Wright:

We shall probably never be able to prove that Abram really existed, that he did this or that, said thus and so, but what we can prove is that his life and times, as reflected in the stories about him, fit perfectly within the early second millennium, but imperfectly with any later period.⁵

The reconstruction of patriarchal history achieved by Albright, Speiser and others has had far-reaching consequences. It remains widely influential today. Recent research, however, has cast substantial doubt on many of its arguments, and the confidence these arguments inspired in scholars a generation ago has dissipated. To understand why this change has taken place, we must look more closely at their reconstruction and the evidence upon which it was based.

An urban culture flourished in Syria and Canaan during the Early Bronze Age, which spanned much of the third millennium B.C.E. During the last quarter of the third millennium, however, this civilization collapsed and was replaced by a predominantly nonurban, pastoral culture. The factors that produced this change are not fully understood. The third dynasty of the city of Ur held sway in Mesopotamia at the time, and the records of the Ur III rulers complain of chronic trouble with nonurban peoples who were laying claim to lands previously controlled by the city. Scholars long supposed, therefore, that a chief factor in the urban collapse was an invasion—or at least a massive immigration—of nomadic peoples from the desert fringes of the region. These peoples, called *Amurru*—that is, “Westerners” or “Amorites”—in the Mesopotamian sources, gradually gained ascendancy in the settled portions of both Syria-Canaan and Mesopotamia, so that in the early second millennium they took the leadership in reestablishing urban centers.

The theory that an invasion or immigration of Amorites was responsible for the radical cultural changes that characterized the transition from the Early to Middle Bronze Age is sometimes called “the Amorite hypothesis.” A corollary of this hypothesis identifies the biblical patriarchs as Amorites. Albright associated Abraham's wanderings with the Amorite movements and dated the Abraham phase of the patriarchal period to the end of the third millennium. He called this period, which he dated to 2100–1900 B.C.E., Middle Bronze I (MB I), since it represented a break from the preceding Early Bronze Age and was characterized by the arrival of the people who would assume cultural leadership later in the Middle Bronze Age.

The succeeding period, which Albright called MB II A, was an age of unwallled villages in Syria and Canaan. The strong XIIIth Dynasty kings of Egypt encouraged the gradual development of a system of city-states in Syria and Canaan. Then, as Egypt began to weaken at the end of this period, the new urban centers entered a period of independence, prosperity and high cultural attainment. Albright identified this period, which he called MB II B, as the time of the patriarch Jacob. This was the Old Babylonian period in Mesopotamia, when Hammurabi and his successors ruled. In Syria it is sometimes called “the age of Mari,” after a city on the Upper Euphrates that attained a position of ascendancy in Syria and western Mesopotamia at the time. The life and history of Mari are recorded in a major cuneiform archive found at the site, called Tell Hariri, on the Syrian side of the modern Syro-Iraqi frontier. Local leadership for the process of reurbanization came from the previously nomadic Amorite population. We know this because the new ruling dynasties in the city-states of Syria and Mesopotamia have characteristically Amorite names. There remained, however, a substantial nomadic population, which was also Amorite. The royal archives of Mari provide ample illustration of the coexistence of the two groups.

Many scholars—including several of Albright's own students—were reluctant to be as precise as Albright in dating the Abraham phase of the patriarchal period to MB I and the Jacob phase to MB II B. They preferred a more general date, contending “simply that the Patriarchal stories are best understood in the setting of the early second millennium.”⁶ This position had the advantage of avoiding one of the problems of the Amorite hypothesis in its original form: Although MB I (to which Albright assigned the Abraham phase) was a strictly nonurban period, the Abraham narratives in the Bible do mention several cities.⁷ Moreover, none of the archaeological sites associated with these biblical cities has yielded any substantial MB I remains.⁸ It seemed better, therefore, to identify the patriarchal age with the subsequent period of reurbanization in MB II and, more particularly, MB II B. Throughout Genesis, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are depicted as living in tents in proximity to

urban centers, a situation that may be compared with the coexistence of nomadic and urban peoples at Mari and other cities in MB II B. Thus it was argued that the patriarchal way of life as depicted in the Genesis narratives was especially compatible with what we know of the civilization of the early second millennium.⁸

In addition to general observations of this kind, two arguments were developed to support the association of the patriarchs with the early second millennium. The first was based on the analysis of the personal names found in Genesis 12–50; the second, on studies of the social customs and legal practices mentioned in the patriarchal narratives.

Let us consider the personal names first. As indicated above, Amorite names form a distinctive group. They may be identified by a number of peculiar linguistic features. Names of this type are common in materials from the first half of the second millennium. Advocates of a similar date for the patriarchal age pointed out that the names in the patriarchal narratives are largely of the same type. A form of the name “Jacob,” for example, occurs several times in early-second-millennium materials, and the name “Abram” is said to be attested for the same period.⁹ No examples of “Isaac” or “Joseph” have survived, but both of these names are of the Amorite type. The argument, therefore, was that the biblical names from the patriarchal period fit well in the historical context of the early second millennium but could not have originated later, that is, at the time of the biblical writers.

Second, Albright, Speiser and others cited numerous parallels between social and legal practices mentioned in extrabiblical texts from the second millennium and social and legal practices referred to in the biblical patriarchal narratives. Cuneiform texts from Nuzi in Upper Mesopotamia were especially important to this part of the discussion.¹⁰ The Nuzi tablets reflect the practices and customs of the Hurrians, a people who flourished in the eastern Tigris region in the middle of the second millennium. Although no one attempted to associate the patriarchs directly with the Hurrian kingdom of Mitanni, it was well known that Hurrian influence was widespread in Syria and even Canaan in this period. Thus, numerous connections between the Hurrians and the Bible were proposed. According to the terms of a Nuzi marriage contract, for example, a barren wife is required to provide a slave woman to her husband to bear his children.¹¹ In Genesis 16:1–4, the barren Sarai sends her maid Hagar to Abram to bear children. The parallel is obvious. At Nuzi, if this union produces a son, the slave woman’s child may not subsequently be expelled; compare Abraham’s unwillingness to send away Hagar and her son, Ishmael, in Genesis 21:10–11. Further, as interpreted by Speiser,

In Hurrian society a wife enjoyed special standing and protection when the law recognized her simultaneously as her husband’s sister, regardless of actual blood ties ... This dual role conferred on the wife a superior position in society.¹²

According to Speiser, this custom lies behind those episodes in Genesis in which Abraham (12:10–20, 20:1–18) and later Isaac (26:6–11) introduce their wives as their sisters.

The story of Sarai and Hagar and the wife-sister episodes are only two of the numerous details of the patriarchal narratives that were interpreted in light of Middle Bronze Age texts (dating to about 2000–1550 B.C.E.). The general argument was that many social and legal customs referred to in Genesis have parallels in middle- or early-second-millennium practice, but that the same customs are without parallel in later times. From this it was concluded that the presence of these references in Genesis was an indication of the early-second-millennium origin of the biblical traditions.

A Scholarly Failure

Despite its attractions, this reconstruction has proved vulnerable to criticism of various kinds.

Doubts about the application of the Amorite hypothesis to the problems of the patriarchal period have led to a serious modification and abandonment of many of the positions cited above. It now seems unlikely that an invasion or immigration of nomads was a primary factor in the collapse of urban civilization in the last part of the third millennium.¹³ The pastoral peoples so prominent in this period were present in earlier times as well, living alongside the established urban centers. Instead, overpopulation, drought, famine or a combination of such problems may have exhausted the resources necessary to the maintenance of an urban way of life. When the cities disappeared, the nomadic encampments remained. Other nomads, originally living on the fringes of the desert, probably took advantage of the new situation to infiltrate previously settled areas; but there was no widespread immigration, and most of the cultural changes detected by archaeology can best be explained as indigenous, not produced by the arrival of outsiders. The period called MB I by Albright, therefore, was really the last, posturban phase of the Early Bronze Age, and an emerging consensus of scholarship now prefers to call it Early Bronze IV (EB IV).¹⁴

If no invasion or widespread migration took place in EB IV, there is no reason to associate Abram’s wanderings with the events of that period, especially in view of the difficulty, already noted, created by the absence in this period of the urban centers mentioned in Genesis 12–25.

On the other hand, the circumstances of what we now call late MB I (Albright’s MB II A) and MB II (MB II B), during which nomads and urban dwellers lived side by side in Syria and Canaan, do provide a suitable context for the patriarchal stories.¹⁵ Also, as we have seen, a modified version of the Amorite hypothesis located the patriarchal period more generally in the early second millennium. Yet it is becoming increasingly clear that this “dimorphic” pattern—of city dwellers and tribal peoples (including both pastoralists and villagers) living contiguously—has been typical of the Middle East from ancient until modern times.¹⁶ This pattern prevailed even in the third millennium; after the interruption of EB IV, it resumed in the Middle Bronze Age, as the archives from Mari show.¹⁷ Although we do not have archival evidence for later periods, as we do for the earlier

period at Mari, there is no reason to doubt that the pattern persisted throughout the Late Bronze Age and beyond. The archaeological evidence and modern anthropological studies seem to confirm this.¹⁸ That this dimorphic lifestyle is a fitting background for the stories about the patriarchs provides no basis for locating them in MB I and II in preference to other periods.

The other criteria urged in favor of an early second-millennium date for the patriarchal age have also been challenged. In almost every specific instance, the proposed parallels between details of the patriarchal stories and information found in surviving second-millennium documents have now been disputed.¹⁹ Many of the parallels are no longer regarded as valid. In several other cases, the phenomena in question have been identified in texts from one or more later periods, thus diminishing the importance of the parallels for dating the patriarchal tradition. More particularly, the Nuzi evidence, which once figured so prominently in the discussion, has been vitiated by the discovery that the information it provides about private life reflects widespread Mesopotamian practices rather than distinctively Hurrian customs that might be assumed to have penetrated into Canaan.²⁰

We can no longer argue, for example, that the patriarchal names fit best into the early second millennium. Names similar or identical to the names found in Genesis are attested from a number of different periods. The identification of the name "Abram" or "Abraham" in Middle Bronze materials is uncertain or dubious, whereas forms of this name ("Abram," "Abiram") occur several times in texts from the Late Bronze Age (1550–1200 B.C.E.) and later.²¹ Moreover, names with the same structure are exceedingly common, attested in almost all periods.²² Similarly, the name type to which "Isaac," "Jacob" and "Joseph" belong is widely distributed across the history of the ancient Near East. It is especially well known from Middle Bronze sources and, in fact, is the most characteristic type of Amorite name.²³ But there is no reason to believe that its use diminished significantly after the Middle Bronze Age;²⁴ in the Late Bronze Age, it is well attested in Ugaritic and Amarna Canaanite names;²⁵ and in the Iron Age it occurs in Hebrew inscriptions as well as in the Bible.²⁶ While it is true that the name "Jacob" is very common in the Middle Bronze Age, it is also found in Late Bronze sources,²⁷ and related names occur in both Elephantine (fifth century B.C.E.) and Palmyrene (first century B.C.E. through third century C.E.) Aramaic.²⁸

Similar difficulties arise with the proposition that the legal practices and social customs referred to in the stories in Genesis support a Middle Bronze date for the patriarchs. Reexamination of the second-millennium parallels proposed by Albright, Speiser and others has shown that many cannot be restricted to a single, early period. The Nuzi parallel to Genesis 16:1–4, for example, in which the barren Sarai provides her husband with her bondwoman, is not unique: The responsibility of a barren wife to provide a slave woman to her husband to bear children is cited in Old Babylonian, Old Assyrian and Nuzi texts (all from the Middle Bronze Age), but also in a 12th-century Egyptian document and a marriage contract from Nimrud, dated 648 B.C.E.²⁹ As for the biblical "wife-sister motif," it now seems doubtful that relevant parallel material is to be found in the Nuzi archives. In the contracts cited by Speiser, the adopting "brother" is usually not the future husband of the adopted woman.³⁰ Although in one instance a "brother" does subsequently marry his "sister," this is a special case requiring a document of marriage to replace the earlier document of adoption. In the biblical stories, moreover, the designation of the wives of the patriarchs as sisters is a trick to protect the patriarchs from men who might lust after their wives, not a legal procedure intended to confer status. Speiser recognized this, suggesting that the "original" meaning was lost; but Speiser's assumption is highly questionable in view of the inapplicability or at least ambiguity of the Nuzi parallels.³¹

The Search for the History of Tradition

A second and very different attempt to trace the preliterary history of the patriarchal stories—undertaken at about the same time that Albright and the others were investigating the archaeological materials—is associated with the names of Martin Noth and his teacher Albrecht Alt. These two scholars sought to penetrate to an early stage in the patriarchal tradition through a critical analysis of the biblical literature itself.

On the basis of his study of the biblical materials pertaining to the premonarchical period, Noth was convinced that the larger entity of Israel had been formed by an amalgamation of various clans and tribes, a process that took place gradually during the period of settlement in Canaan.³² From Noth's viewpoint, therefore, it seemed impossible that all of these clans and tribes could have known all of the traditions about the presettlement period—about the patriarchs, the captivity in Egypt and the Exodus, the wanderings in the wilderness, the revelation at Sinai and the conquest of Canaan. Instead, individual elements of these traditions must have been passed down within individual tribes or clans. As these groups were absorbed into the larger association of Israel, the various elements of tradition were combined and incorporated into a common heritage.

Drawing on the form-critical method devised by Hermann Gunkel,³³ Noth tried to reconstruct the history of discrete units of tradition from their origin within a particular tribe or clan to their integration into the larger story.³⁴ This method has been described as the "history of traditions."

A major clue to the origin of a particular element of a tradition is its connection with a region, place or other geographical feature. The narratives about the individual patriarchs have certain clear geographical connections. Abraham is generally associated with southern Canaan, and his principal residence is at the "oaks of Mamre" near Hebron (Genesis 13:18, 14:13, 18:1). Isaac dwells at the oases of Beersheba (Genesis 26:32–33) and Beer-lahai-roi (Genesis 24:62, 25:11). Jacob is most closely identified with Shechem (Genesis 33:18–19) and Bethel (Genesis 28:18–19, 35:1–8), though he also has important associations with the region of Gilead, east of the Jordan River (Genesis 31:43–50, 32:2–3, 32:30, 33:17). It therefore seemed likely to Noth that the traditions about Abraham came from the Judean hills, those about Isaac from southwestern

Judah and the Negev and those about Jacob from the central Ephraimite hills. Noting that the immediate ancestor of the Israelites, Jacob (whose name is also Israel), is linked with the heartland of the country, Noth concluded that the Jacob tradition was the oldest component of the patriarchal lore. As Israel expanded southward, absorbing Judah and the northern Negev, Abraham and Isaac entered the tradition and then were linked by genealogy with Jacob. The priority eventually assigned to Abraham (the first patriarch) is an indication of the southern development of the tradition as it has come down to us.

When did this blending of patriarchal traditions take place? That is, when were the stories about Abraham and Isaac combined with those about Jacob? It is obvious that this development was completed during the time when the stories were being transmitted orally, that is, before the composition of the so-called J source,^d the earliest of the literary strands in Genesis, in which Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are represented as members of the same family. The dates biblical scholars assign to J differ widely, however, ranging from the tenth to the sixth century B.C.E. A better clue to the date when the northern and southern patriarchal traditions were combined, therefore, is the priority that was assigned the southern patriarchs when the combination took place. The fact that a southern patriarch (Abraham) was regarded as the eldest suggests that the combination occurred at a time when Judah was in ascendancy over Israel. Such a political situation cannot have existed, however, before the establishment of the Davidic monarchy. Indeed, it is unlikely that Judah was incorporated into Israel before the reign of David.³⁵ And even if Judah was a part of Israel when David came to the throne, it had not been so for long, since the earliest tribal list makes no mention of the southern tribes (cf. Judges 5:14–18).

It is not likely, therefore, that patriarchal figures from the newly incorporated regions of Hebron and Beersheba, in the south, would have been accorded priority over the old Israelite patriarch Jacob before the radical realignment of power that took place when David the Judahite became king of Israel. The combination of traditions preserved in the patriarchal stories cannot have been complete before the end of the 11th century B.C.E. We must not forget, however, that this combination was one of the last phases of a lengthy and complex development that must have gone on for centuries. Noth believed that the development of the tradition was coeval with the development of Israel itself. That is, the process that shaped the patriarchal tradition was concurrent with the long series of clan and tribal alliances by which Israel grew from the earliest group that bore the name to a larger tribal association and, finally, to a kingdom.

Although Noth believed that the history of traditions allows us to trace the preliterate development of the traditions about the patriarchs, it provides only very indirect information about the patriarchs themselves. Noth did not deny that the patriarchs may have actually lived, but he believed that even if they did, they were now inaccessible as historical figures. Because the patriarchal traditions as we know them are products of the settlement period, he argued, they may not be relied upon to preserve authentic historical information about the patriarchal period itself.³⁶

Another Scholarly Failure

Noth assumed that the patriarchal tradition grew from small, originally independent literary units into its present complex pattern. In this assumption he followed Gunkel, who believed that folk literature evolved from short, simple units into extended, discursive complexes. Thus, for Noth, a story with a complex structure was necessarily late, whereas a simple narrative unit was likely to be early. Subsequent improvement in our understanding of oral literatures, however, has exposed the error of this view.³⁷ We now know that in the preliterate, oral stage of transmission, long stories with complex structures were routine in most traditional literatures. Homer, for example, was almost certainly an oral poet; the Ugaritic^e myths and epics, if they are not actual transcriptions of oral performances, stand very close to the stage of oral composition. Both the Homeric and Ugaritic literatures are characterized by extended narratives with complex structures.

Recent analysis of the patriarchal tradition itself shows that Noth's account of its evolution from isolated units to interconnected patterns requires revision. As we noted at the outset of our discussion, the story of the biblical patriarchs is a family story. The traditional complex that underlies the narratives of Genesis expresses, among other things, an elaborate account of kinship relationships that existed (or were believed to exist) between the ancestors of Israel and their neighbors. Modern anthropological research has shown that kinship patterns are very often the central factors in the social structure and self-definition of a community. In other words, the final constellation of stories is not just a magpie's nest of individual brief stories contributed by various clans and tribes, but has its own coherence as a complex genealogical narrative through which Israel defined herself and her relationships with her neighbors.³⁸

Did this genealogical pattern influence the evolution of the stories in Israelite oral traditions? To be sure, these stories are not mere "etiologies" of ethnic relationships, as some have maintained. The conflicts and personal relationships in the stories are so closely tied to the genealogical relationships that the two aspects—genealogy and story—were very likely intertwined in the oral traditions. Analogies from Arabic, Greek and other traditional literatures show this is to be expected in stories about a culture's ancestors. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that the genealogical structure of the stories is a feature not only of the final literary form, but also of the preliterate development of the stories.

If there is such an organizational structure inherent in the genealogical framework of the stories (though genealogies, too, are changeable over time), and if the length or complexity of a story has no intrinsic bearing on its date of origins, then the chief pillars of Noth's history-of-traditions method fall to the ground. This is not to say that all of Noth's conclusions are invalid, but a more adequate method would be needed to substantiate any of them.³⁹

A Kernel of History

In contrast to the confident scholars of an earlier generation, today's historians of ancient Israel approach the prehistory of

Israel with extreme caution. Most remain convinced that the stories about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob contain a kernel of authentic history. Recognizing the complexity of the oral and literary development of the narratives in Genesis 12–50, however, they are reluctant to designate individual features as historically authentic. The best hope for success probably lies in the selective application of the methods used in the past (archaeology, philology and tradition history), supplemented or modified according to the results of more recent research, including studies using the methods of sociology and anthropology.

In this effort, we must always be aware that the patriarchal narratives are ideology, not history. They were cast into literary form in the first millennium B.C.E. by authors with varying political, theological and literary motivations. They cannot be approached as historiography in anything like the modern sense. If we tried to do so, we would not only arrive at a spurious prehistory of Israel but would also overlook the authentic information the patriarchal narratives provide.

It does not follow from this that Genesis 12–50 has no value for the reconstruction of the prehistory of Israel. It is safe to assume that the Israelites, like almost all other peoples, had traditions about their own past, and it seems likely that the biblical writers were drawing upon and interpreting these traditions.

Is it possible to separate the older from the more recent traditions in the current form of the literary compositions? We saw that Noth's approach was flawed, but, by heeding a principle stressed by Hermann Gunkel, we may be able to gain some reliable insights into the history of tradition.

In one of his early works, Gunkel formulated a still-viable rule for identifying old traditions:

Certain features, which once had a clear meaning in their earlier context, have been so transmitted in their newer setting as to have lost their meaningful context. Such ancient features, fragments of an earlier whole, are thus left without context in their newer setting and so appear hardly intelligible in the thought-world of the narrator. Such features betray to the investigator the existence of an earlier narrative.⁴⁰

A feature in a narrative that is anomalous in its present literary context, but which is intelligible in an earlier context, may be a relic of an earlier stage of the tradition. This principle is clearly illustrated by such anomalous stories in Genesis as the account of the sexual escapades of the Sons of God and the daughters of men in Genesis 6:1–4, where the brevity and obscurity of the story points to a fuller context in the preliterate oral tradition, perhaps even in pre-Israelite Canaanite tradition where the Sons of God (literally Sons or Children of El, the high god of the Canaanite pantheon) are prominent figures.⁴¹

By such means we are able to probe the preliterate traditions of the stories and discern aspects of their history that might otherwise be unnoticed. But to detect features that belong to an earlier historical context, we must first determine the historical context of the final form of the stories.

The Patriarchal History as Self-Understanding

The story of the patriarchs in its final form reflects the self-understanding of the community at the end of the period of settlement, about 1000 B.C.E. (A few details suggest that the stories were first written down some generations later, perhaps in the ninth or eighth century B.C.E.)⁴² Israel is represented as a 12-tribe entity with the southern tribes, and notably Judah, in full membership, something that probably did not occur until David's time. This scheme reflects considerable southern development: The eldest patriarch (Abraham) is especially associated with Hebron, the traditional capital of the Judean hill country in the southern part of the country; the second patriarch (Isaac) is at home even farther south, in the northern Negev. The patriarchal stories are not likely to have existed in this form before the institution of the Davidic monarchy in about 1000 B.C.E.⁴³ The priority of Abraham as the eldest patriarch suggests the intertribal relationship that existed during the reigns of David and Solomon and, in any case, reflects a Judahite point of view.

To a limited extent, the evolution of the tradition can be reconstructed from biblical and extrabiblical evidence. The 12 sons of Israel who appear in the current form of the stories about Jacob and Joseph reflect the tribal roster as it stood at the end of the process. A somewhat different list is preserved in Judges 5:14–18, part of an ancient poem describing the victory of the Israelite tribes over a Canaanite foe: Here there is no mention of the southern tribes, Judah and Simeon, suggesting that southern Canaan had not yet been incorporated into Israel. Moreover, Manasseh and Gad are also missing in this old poem, while two tribes are cited that do not appear in the later list, namely, Machir (Judges 5:14) and Gilead (Judges 5:17).⁴⁴ This list in Judges 5 provides us with a glimpse of the tribal association as it stood about the middle of the 12th century, say 1150 B.C.E.⁴⁵ Moreover, we know that a group named Israel already existed, at least in rudimentary form, by about 1207 B.C.E., when the Egyptian king Merneptah boasted, on an inscribed stele, of having defeated a people named "Israel."⁴⁶

It follows that tribal Israel existed in the central hills before 1150 B.C.E. and probably as early as 1207 B.C.E. Though this community may have been newly formed, it already had a sense of ethnic identity: Its members were Israelite or "Hebrew" and not something else.⁴⁷ This identity found expression in and, at the same time, derived its authority from the ancestral tradition preserved in the patriarchal narratives of the Bible.

The insistence upon ethnic separateness is one of the most conspicuous features of this tradition. The stories uniformly assert that the ancestors of Israel were foreigners, not natives of Canaan. They came from "beyond the River," that is, beyond the Euphrates (cf. Joshua 24:2–3), in the region we call Mesopotamia (modern Iraq and eastern Syria). Whatever the ultimate origin of the term "Hebrews," this was the meaning it came to have in the tradition: The *'Ibrîm*, "Hebrews," were those who came from *'euber*, "beyond," the Euphrates.

As explained in Chapter III, "The Settlement in Canaan: The Period of the Judges," the early Israelites were probably of diverse origin, and many or most seem to have been indigenous to Canaan. The strong insistence in the patriarchal

narratives that the ancestors of Israel were not Canaanites is a reflection of the process of ethnic boundary-marking by which the early Israelite community was defined and by which its identity was subsequently maintained. This kind of boundary-marking is well known to modern students of the social phenomenon of ethnicity.⁴⁸ In this case, it probably derives from the early conflict between the hill-dwelling people from whom Israel emerged and the population of the cities of the plains and valleys controlled by Egypt in the Late Bronze Age. Through the tradition of Mesopotamian origin, as well as through the biblical genealogical materials, the Israelites acknowledge ethnic solidarity with the peoples of the East, the Transjordanians and the Arameans, but deny any link with the peoples of the Egypto-Canaanite West.

The basic genealogical structure of the patriarchal tradition, therefore, emerged at the end of the Late Bronze Age, contemporary with the early formation of Israel. This conclusion, however, pertains only to the patriarchal tradition, not to the patriarchs themselves. We must now attempt to discover the extent to which the tradition was based on historical people and events.

This is a difficult task. As we have seen, the structure of the tradition came into existence at the same time as the community itself. A careful investigation of this structure and its purposes might help us understand the circumstances under which the community first coalesced in central Canaan, but this structure cannot be expected to shed light on an earlier period.

If we accept the genealogical self-understanding of the stories as stemming from the period of Israel's emergence as a nation (c. 1200–1000 B.C.E.), then, following the principle enunciated by Gunkel, we may ask whether any features that are anomalous in their current setting might be more intelligible in an earlier cultural or historical context. This is the most reliable procedure for detecting traces of the preliterary history of the tradition.

Personal Names and Geographical References Provide Clues

In the patriarchal narratives, the personal names and geographical references provide the best clues for tracing historical memories. Two bodies of evidence provide the strongest indications for the roots of the tradition in pre- and early Israelite times, perhaps reaching back to the mid-second millennium B.C.E. These are (1) the divine elements in the patriarchal names^f and (2) the location of the patriarchal homeland in the Middle Euphrates region of Syro-Mesopotamia.⁴⁹

In his groundbreaking essay of 1929, "The God of the Fathers," Albrecht Alt observed that the name Yahweh does not appear as part of patriarchal and tribal names. This indicates that the origins of the patriarchal tradition lie in early or pre-Israelite traditions. Two of the literary sources of the Pentateuch, E (the Elohist source) and P (the Priestly Code), explicitly date the revelation of the name Yahweh to the time of Moses (E in Exodus 3, and P in Exodus 6). As Alt observed:

The well-known restriction of the name of Yahweh to the period from Moses on, in the Elohist and Priestly treatment of the sagas, can hardly be explained as simply the result of later theories about Israel's prehistory without any basis in the tradition, although there is no doubt that it was quite consciously seized on by the authors of these narratives in order to mark off different eras in the past ... The names of the tribes and their forefathers do not give a single reliable indication of [Yahweh's] existence.⁵⁰

By these arguments, Alt traces the origin of the pattern of divine names to early Israelite tradition, prior to the time of the Pentateuchal writers.

These arguments can be made even stronger, however. If we consider the position of the J source in this pattern, we find a systematic anomaly. After the creation story, J consistently refers to the Israelite deity as "Yahweh." (Alt plausibly explains the J [Yahwist] source's departure from this pattern as a function of J's universalistic theology reflected in the creation story.) But the personal names in the patriarchal narratives in J (as elsewhere) retain the divine element *-el* (as in the names Ishmael, Israel and Bethuel) rather than the divine element based on Yahweh. Not until the era of Moses do personal names contain the divine element derived from Yahweh (as in Joshua [*Yehoshua*] and Jochebed [*Yochebed*], Moses' mother). How then are we to explain the absence of Yahweh as a divine element and the presence instead of *-el* in the patriarchal names? As noted, E and P explicitly state that the name Yahweh was not known to the patriarchs. We would therefore not be surprised to find *-el* names in the patriarchal narratives in E and P. But these *-el* names also show up in J despite J's overt use of only the name Yahweh to designate the Israelite God from the beginning of his patriarchal narrative. This is a clear indication that on one level J is drawing on the same traditions as E and P, even though J is trying on another level to reject that tradition. Despite J's use of the name Yahweh to designate the Israelite God, the personal names in J nevertheless preserve a tradition that the patriarchal God was not Yahweh, but El. Although J would have it otherwise, the God of the (patriarchal) fathers is El, as revealed by the divine element in the names in J's patriarchal narratives. According to Gunkel's principle, "Such features betray to the investigator the existence of an earlier narrative." Here we detect a clear trace of the history of the tradition in which the patriarchs worshiped El.

Is there an earlier historical or cultural context within which this preservation of an El tradition is intelligible? Canaanite religious texts from ancient Ugarit, dated to about 1400 B.C.E., tell us that the high god of the Canaanite pantheon was indeed named El.⁵¹ Moreover, Frank Moore Cross has demonstrated that several of the titles of the deity named El in the patriarchal narratives (such as El-Shaddai, God of the [Sacred] Mountain) have close parallels in the titles and descriptions of Canaanite El.⁵² We may conclude that the use of divine names in the patriarchal narratives preserves an early tradition of the patriarchal worship of the god El. This tradition, understood by the biblical writers as describing pre-Mosaic times, finds its intelligible context in the culture of Canaan in the second millennium B.C.E. and in Israel (note the name El in *Isra-el*) of the premonarchic period.⁵³ In other words, the presence of El and the absence of Yahweh in the patriarchal names preserve memories of pre- and early Israelite times of the second millennium B.C.E.

A second body of evidence, the geographical references to the patriarchal homeland in the region of Haran, corroborates the evidence of personal names and points us to the mid-second millennium B.C.E. The Amorite hypothesis advanced by Albright and others has been justly criticized and generally abandoned (see above). But amid the wreckage of this hypothesis, some features remain that require us to consider an early date. The region of Haran in the Middle Euphrates region of Syro-Mesopotamia was the home of the Arameans, not the Amorites, from the 12th century B.C.E. onwards. If the region of Haran is where the patriarchs go to live with—and marry—their kin (Genesis 24 and 29), then for Iron Age Israelites this designates the patriarchs as Aramean. Hence the prayer in Deuteronomy 26:5: “My father was a wandering (or perishing) Aramean,” referring to the patriarchal homeland. The problem with this tradition is that it clashes with the cultural context of the first millennium B.C.E.; from the time of David, the Arameans were enemies of Israel. No group would trace its ancestral homeland to the home of its enemies unless the tradition was so well established that it had no choice but to do so.

Following Gunkel's principle, we should look for a historical context within which this anomalous tradition is intelligible. For this we must look to the period prior to the 12th century B.C.E., back when the region of Haran was the homeland of a rural people we call the Amorites.⁵⁴ The Amorites of this period were pastoralists and agriculturalists living in a tribal society. They spoke an early Northwest Semitic dialect (or dialects). What we know of their lifestyle and religion is comparable to the picture of the patriarchs in Genesis.⁵⁵ The divine name El is found commonly in Amorite personal names, and in Akkadian texts this god is referred to as “El Amurru,” El of the Amorites.⁵⁶ Thus the tradition of the patriarchal homeland in the region of Haran is intelligible in the context of Amorite culture in the Middle and Late Bronze Ages, but its Aramean context would be exceedingly strange in the Iron Age (the time when the narrative was written). The first-millennium identification of the patriarchs with the hated Arameans makes sense only as a revision (according to the then-current ethnic map) of a much older tradition.⁵⁷

Neither of these arguments constitutes definitive proof that the patriarchal traditions stem from Canaanite or Amorite culture of the mid- to late second millennium B.C.E. But our application of Gunkel's principle suggests that this derivation is plausible. These traces of the history of the patriarchal traditions point to earlier oral narratives in Israel and pre-Israelite Canaan that told of the ancestors' migration from the Amorite homeland in Syro-Mesopotamia to Canaan, and their devotion to the ancestral god El.

This historical reconstruction has several intriguing implications. It indicates that some early Israelites traced their ancestry to Syro-Mesopotamia and felt an ethnic kinship to that region. It also means that a strong substratum of El-worship merged with or transformed itself into the worship of Yahweh. El was worshiped in the Amorite region of Syro-Mesopotamia as well as in the Canaanite region farther west. The spread of El-worship was probably a contributing factor in the formation of a common Israelite identity among the diverse groups in the hill country during Iron Age I (1200–1000 B.C.E.). The equivalence between El and Yahweh was perhaps made by another group, the Moses-group who recounted their momentous escape from Egypt via Midian (see Chapter II, “Israel in Egypt: The Egyptian Sojourn and the Exodus”). The merging of El and Yahweh in the religion of Israel corresponds to the merging of different groups in early Israel—some with stories of Syro-Mesopotamian origins, and some with memories of slavery in Egypt and Yahweh's revelation at Mt. Sinai. Somehow—and the details elude us—these different groups coalesced into a single ethnic identity, and the stories coalesced into the complex epic traditions that join together Syro-Mesopotamia, Egypt and Sinai, with all paths leading to the Promised Land.

Are the Patriarchs Genealogical Fictions?

The invention of ancestors is a common way of establishing the kinship bonds that are necessary for the cohesion of a community. The practice is known among modern Bedouin, and it is well attested in antiquity. The “Amorite” dynasties of Hammurabi of Babylon and Shamshi-Adad I of Assyria shared a common tradition about their tribal origins, and many of the names of their early ancestors are also known as names of West Semitic tribes.⁵⁸

Similar fictitious heroes are frequently encountered in biblical genealogies, and often their origins can be traced. Jerahmeel, for example, was the name of a non-Israelite tribe living somewhere in the Negev in the time of David (1 Samuel 27:10, 30:29). In the course of time, however, the Jerahmeelites were incorporated into Judah, and the new relationship was expressed genealogically by the identification of Jerahmeel as a great-grandson of Judah in a line collateral to that of David (1 Chronicles 2:9, 25–27).

There is no question that the patriarchal genealogies contain the names of many individuals who originated as fictitious eponyms.⁹ Moab and Ben-ammi, the sons of Lot and ancestors of the Moabites and Ammonites (Genesis 19:37–38), are obvious examples, as is Shechem son of Hamor, the prince of the city of Shechem (Genesis 34:2). Sometimes these figures play prominent roles in the story, as in the case of Ishmael, the ancestor of the Ishmaelites (cf. Genesis 16:10–12, 17:20, 25:12–16). The Edomite genealogy recorded in Genesis 36 contains a mixture of personal and tribal or clan names. Esau's (Edom's) eldest son, for example, bears the name “Eliphaz,” which has the form of a personal name. Eliphaz was probably a hero of the past rather than an eponym (cf. Job 2:11), but his sons' names (Genesis 36:11–12) include eponyms of well-known tribes or places, including Teman, the home of the Eliphaz of the Book of Job. This, then, is what we expect from the early genealogies: a few names of traditional heroes sprinkled among a preponderance of eponymic names derived from clans, tribes, places or regions.

Abraham

Abraham seems to belong in the former category. His name (in contrast to those of Isaac, Jacob, Israel and Joseph) appears only as a personal name in the Bible, never as a tribal or local designation. Thus it seems fairly certain that he was not an

eponymous ancestor. He may have been a historical individual before he became a figure of tradition and legend. If so, however, it seems impossible to determine the period in which he lived. "Abram," at least in the form "Abiram," is a very common type of name, known in all periods. It is especially well attested in the Late Bronze Age (1550–1200 B.C.E.),⁵⁹ though this may be no more than a coincidence. The variants "Abram" and "Abraham" arose in different languages and dialects.⁶⁰

Nor can we determine whether any of the biblical stories told about Abraham has a historical basis. The claim that Abraham came to Canaan from Mesopotamia is not historically implausible. Such a journey could have taken place in more than one historical period. As we have seen, however, the insistence that the Israelites were not Canaanite in origin was so pervasive that the belief that the first patriarch came from a foreign land could have arisen as part of the ethnic boundary-marking that characterized the development of the tradition. Still, the connections between the family of Abraham and the city of Haran in northern Mesopotamia (Eski Harran or "Old Haran" in modern Turkey) are very precise in our earliest narrative source (J, or the Yahwist). Terah, Nahor and Serug—Abraham's father, grandfather and great-grandfather (Genesis 11:22–26)—seem to be the eponymous ancestors of towns in the basin of the Balikh River, near Haran. All three names appear in Assyrian texts from the first half of the first millennium B.C.E. as the names of towns or ruined towns in the region of Haran, namely, Til-(sha)-Turakhi (the ruin of Turakh), Til-Nakhiri (the ruin of Nakhir) and Sarugi. Earlier, in the second millennium B.C.E., Til-Nakhiri had been an important administrative center, called Nakhuru. The patriarchal connection with this region may be rooted in historical memories of Amorite culture of the second millennium B.C.E.

Abraham is represented as the founder of religious sites in the regions of Shechem (Genesis 12:7), Bethel/Ai (Genesis 12:8, cf. 13:4), Hebron (Genesis 13:18), Mount Moriah (Genesis 22:2) and Beersheba (Genesis 21:33). As Benjamin Mazar has noted, all these sites lie within the boundaries of early Israelite settlement in Iron Age I (1200–1000 B.C.E.).⁶¹ These stories present Abraham as the founder of major cultic sites both in Manasseh-Ephraim and in Judah, the dominant tribes of the north and south. Here we see Abraham functioning as the founder of a common social and religious identity, uniting northern and southern tribes.^h

The earliest reference to Abraham may be the name of a town in the Negev listed in a victory inscription of Pharaoh Shishak I (biblical Sheshonk). The campaign occurred in about 925 B.C.E. during the reign of Rehoboam (1 Kings 14:25–26; 2 Chronicles 12:2–12). A place-name in the Negev section of the inscription is *pa' hla-q-ru-a 'i-bi-ra-ma*, which is best read "the fortification of Abram" or, more simply, "Fort Abram."⁶² The location and chronological context of this site make it plausible that the Abram after whom the site was named was the Abram of biblical tradition. Although we cannot be certain of this identification, the place name probably indicates the presence and importance of the Abram/Abraham tradition in the tenth century B.C.E.

Isaac



Hershel Shanks

Beersheba well. According to Genesis 26:18–25, "Isaac dug again the wells of water that had been dug in the days of his father Abraham; for the Philistines had stopped them up after the death of Abraham ... [Isaac] went up to Beersheba ... [and] Isaac's servants dug a well." Dated by the excavator to the 13th century B.C.E., this 100-foot-deep shaft at Beersheba may be the well the author of this passage had in mind.

The biblical Isaac has clear geographical associations with the northern Negev, and particularly the oases of Beersheba and Beer-lahai-roi (Genesis 24:62, 25:11, 26:32–33). The archaeological record indicates that this area was not settled before the end of the Late Bronze Age. Expansion into the Negev from the north began no earlier than the latter part of the 13th century B.C.E. Archaeological excavations at Beersheba have shown that a deep well associated with the sanctuary was dug at about this time.⁶³ Apparently, this is the well mentioned in Genesis 21:25 and 26:25. The settlement of the Negev spread southward and was complete by the 11th century.⁶⁴ This shows that the attachment of the patriarchal tradition to the Beersheba region cannot have preceded the 12th century and, in fact, may have occurred later as a part of the southern development of the tradition in the time of David and Solomon.

As we have noted, "Isaac" is structurally suitable as a personal, tribal or geographical name. We might expect the meaning of the name to indicate which of these possibilities is most likely. Though it is unattested outside the Bible, we assume that "Isaac" is a shortened form of a name like "Isaac-El," which may mean "May [the god] El smile," that is, "May El look favorably upon."⁶⁵ If this is correct,ⁱ the name then seems equally acceptable as the designation of an individual, group or place. In referring to the northern kingdom in the eighth century, moreover, Amos twice uses the name Isaac as parallel to Israel (Amos 7:9, 16). This usage must reflect a recollection of the name Isaac as a designation for the northern tribal region.⁶⁶ In this light, it is intriguing to note that J depicts Isaac as the founder of the religious site at Beersheba (Genesis 26:23, 25), a southern shrine to which northerners made pilgrimage (Amos 5:5, 8:14).

Jacob

According to Genesis, the events of Jacob's birth and childhood take place at Beersheba, Isaac's home; but after returning from Haran, Jacob lives in the region of Shechem in the central hill country. He is the founder of the religious site of Bethel (Genesis 28:10–22, 35:1–15), and like Abraham he builds an altar at Shechem (Genesis 33:18–20). Both sites are in the north. It is not surprising that Jacob dwells in the central hill country, since at this point Jacob *is* Israel. The historical association of Israel with the central hills was strong, as its persistence during the time of David and beyond shows. In contrast to Abraham and Isaac, therefore, Jacob was never thought of in close association with the southern part of the country.

It is generally agreed that the biblical name "Jacob" is a shortened form of "Jacob-El" or something very similar. An early form of "Jacob," constructed with "El" or another divine name, was a common West Semitic personal name of the Middle Bronze Age and the Hyksos period, when Egypt was ruled by Asiatic princes (c. 1675–1552 B.C.E.).⁶⁷ It is also attested at Ugarit (in Syria) in the Late Bronze Age, but it does not appear again (outside of the biblical patriarchal narratives) until the Persian period. "Jacob-El," however, was also a Late Bronze Age place-name. It occurs in lists of enemies conquered by Thutmosis III (c. 1479–1425 B.C.E.) and other kings of Egypt.⁶⁸ Most of the identifiable names in these documents refer to cities, though some designate districts and even tribal groups. Because of the loose organization of the lists, the precise location of Jacob-El cannot be determined. It is clear, however, that it was in central Canaan,⁶⁹ most probably in the general vicinity of Rehob and Beth-Shean, both of which lay north of Shechem.⁷⁰ In view of the proximity of both time and place, therefore, it does not seem reckless to conclude that the Jacob-El conquered by Thutmosis had something to do with the biblical Jacob tradition.

We must ask, then, which had priority, the patriarch Jacob or the place Jacob-El. The name probably means "Let El protect,"ⁱ and this seems equally suitable as the name of a person or a place. It is possible that there was an early hero called Jacob-El who gave his name to the town or district mentioned in the Egyptian lists.⁷¹

Archaeologist Aharon Kempinski suggested, on the basis of a scarab of Jacob-Har found in a tomb at Shiqmona, Israel, dating to the 18th century B.C.E., that the later Hyksos king of Egypt named Jacob-Har may be the descendant of a local Palestinian king of the same name. This local ruler may be the Jacob for whom the place was named.⁷² Although this argument is speculative, it offers an intriguing possibility for the origin of the Jacob tradition in the central hills of Palestine in the second millennium B.C.E.

In the Bible, Jacob has two names. According to the earliest written account, Jacob was given the name Israel after wrestling with a divine being on the bank of the Jabbok River (Genesis 32:28–29).^k In the latter part of Genesis, the two names Jacob and Israel are used more or less interchangeably. Modern biblical scholars have explained this in a variety of ways. Noth concluded that Israel, the collective name of the tribes, was assigned to the patriarch Jacob at a fairly late point in the development of the tradition.⁷³ On the other hand, the elaborate genealogical structure of the tradition was itself an early feature; the purpose of this structure was to give a social definition to Israel. Jacob, the eponym of the people or district of Jacob-El, was the key figure in the genealogical scheme. It is very likely, then, that he was identified as Israel, the eponym of the newly emerging community, when the kinship tradition was devised at the time of the formation of the tribal alliance.

This is not to suggest that the name "Israel" was invented at this time. Several scholars have attempted to identify a distinctive group of traditions around a patriarch Israel, whom they would distinguish from Jacob,⁷⁴ and it is possible that there was some kind of early tribal group in the central hills called Israel.⁷⁵ In fact, however, our sources give us no hint of the use of the name in Canaan before the time of Merneptah (c. 1207 B.C.E.), which, as we have seen, must have been very close to the time of the formation of the community itself. Since we know that the population of the hill country was growing steadily at this time,⁷⁶ we must also consider the possibility that the name "Israel" was brought into the region by one of the arriving peoples.

Finally, Jacob's relationship with Esau may predate the identification of the two brothers with Israel and Edom in the genealogical structure. As Gunkel noted, Esau's name and personality have little to do with Edom, which had a reputation for wisdom in biblical tradition.⁷⁷ Gunkel associated the conflict of the two brothers with a cultural memory of the ascent of herders over hunters in Palestinian history, which Noth localized to the history of Gilead.⁷⁸ It is doubtful, however, that a socioeconomic history of the region can be derived from the rivalry between the two brothers. The relationship is more adequately characterized as a conflict between civilization and nature. Note the consistent series of contrasts between Jacob and Esau in Genesis 25 and 27: man of the tents (civilized habitat) vs. man of the steppe (wild habitat); cooking (characteristic of human culture) vs. hunting (common to humans and predatory animals); cunning intelligence vs. stupidity;

smooth skin vs. hairy skin; domestic animals (as meal and disguise) vs. wild game; and, finally, the culmination in blessing and political dominance vs. curse and subjection. (Compare the way Gilgamesh and Enkidu are contrasted in the Mesopotamian Gilgamesh epic.)⁷⁹ The fraternal relationship, therefore, falls into the category of ethnic boundary-making, as one's own ancestor is identified with civilization in contrast to another's ancestor, who is wild and uncivilized (compare the characterization of Ishmael, as opposed to Isaac, in Genesis 16:12 and 21:20, and the parentage of Ammon and Moab in Genesis 19). In other words, the relationship between Jacob and Esau is best comprehended as an expression of cultural and ethnic self-definition. This feature may predate the identification of the two with Israel and Edom, but it continues to function in this identification.

Joseph

Turning finally to the sons of Israel, we begin by recalling that the name "Joseph" belongs in the category of "Isaac," "Jacob" and "Israel," as noted earlier. We assume that it is a shorter form of "Joseph-EI," which means "May EI increase," and this too seems equally suitable as a personal, tribal or geographical designation.¹ Thus it is possible that Joseph was a hero of the past or the fictitious eponym of a group or district. The latter possibility is suggested by the use of "the house of Joseph" as a collective designation for the northern tribes in the literature of the early monarchy (2 Samuel 19:21) and elsewhere. A strong case can be made, however, that this expression was coined after the unification of Judah and Israel as a term parallel to "the house of Judah."⁸⁰ References to a tribe of Joseph, moreover, are rare and appear only in late materials (Numbers 13:11, 36:5). It thus seems more likely that "Joseph" was a personal name belonging to a local hero of the past.⁸¹ During the period of the formation of the Israelite community, Joseph was identified as a son of Jacob and the father of the tribal eponyms Ephraim and Manasseh.

The special prominence of Joseph in the biblical narrative must be, at least in part, a reflection of the eminence of "the house of Joseph" at the end of the settlement period (about 1000 B.C.E.) and the continuing historical importance of the Manasseh-Ephraim region. Scholars believe that the long story about Joseph and his family in Genesis 37 and 39–47 originated independently of the other patriarchal narratives. This story depicts Joseph as preeminent among his brothers and as the favorite of his father, Jacob (Israel). The story was probably passed down orally among the inhabitants of the region around Shechem and Dothan (cf. Genesis 37:12 and 37:17), in the heart of the traditional territory of Ephraim and Manasseh, the two "half-tribes" of Joseph's sons. In an early form, this story may have eulogized Joseph, the tribal patriarch, as a man who went to Egypt as a slave and rose to a position of authority in the Egyptian court.

Many scholars believe that the events described in the story of Joseph have an ultimate basis in historical fact. It has often been supposed, especially by those scholars who believe that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob lived in the Middle Bronze Age (about 2000–1550 B.C.E.), that Joseph lived during the so-called Hyksos period (c. 1675–1552), when Egypt was ruled by two dynasties of Asiatic princes. The scholars who hold this view argue that since Joseph was himself an Asiatic, he would have been most likely to find a favorable reception from an Asiatic king of Egypt. Moreover, the capital of Egypt during the Hyksos period was located in the eastern Delta, which is generally agreed to have been the site of the biblical "land of Goshen," where the family of Joseph settled (Genesis 45:10, 46:28–29, 47:1).⁸²

But even if the general outline of the Joseph story is based on the life of a historical individual, it is unlikely that much of the information found in Genesis 37 and 39–47 is historically factual. The biblical Joseph story has more in common with a historical romance than a work of history. Its carefully planned story line is fashioned from narrative motifs that were widespread in the literature and folklore of the ancient Near East. The episode of Potiphar's wife, who accuses Joseph of attempted rape after she fails to seduce him (Genesis 39:6b–20), has numerous parallels in the literature of the ancient world,⁸³ including the popular "Tale of Two Brothers" of XIXth-Dynasty Egypt (13th century B.C.E.).⁸⁴ The motifs of dreams and dream interpretation are found in literature, folklore and myth throughout antiquity.⁸⁵ The convention of the seven lean years is known from Egyptian, Akkadian and Canaanite literature.⁸⁶

Further, the author of the biblical Joseph story displays only a limited knowledge of the life and culture of Egypt.⁸⁷ Recalling the hot wind that blows across the Transjordanian plateau into Israel, he writes of the east wind scorching pharaoh's grain (Genesis 41:23, 27), but in Egypt it is the south wind that blights crops.⁸⁸ The titles and offices the author assigns to various Egyptian officials have closer parallels in Syria and Canaan than in Egypt.⁸⁹

There are a number of authentic Egyptian details in the Joseph story, but these details correspond to the Egyptian way of life in the author's own day, not in the Hyksos period. The king of Egypt is called "Pharaoh," an Egyptian phrase meaning "great house," which was not used as a title for the king before the reign of Thutmose III (c. 1479–1425 B.C.E.). In Genesis 47:11, the area in which the family of Joseph settles is called "the region of Rameses," a designation that could not have been used earlier than the reign of Ramesses II (c. 1279–1213 B.C.E.).^m

Some of the personal names in the story are Egyptian. Joseph's wife is called Asenath (Genesis 41:45), which could correspond to one of several Egyptian names from the second and first millennia B.C.E.⁹⁰ The name of Asenath's father is Potiphara (Genesis 41:45), and this name has been found on an Egyptian stele dating to the XXIst Dynasty (c. 1069–945 B.C.E.) or later.⁹¹ The name of Joseph's Egyptian master, Potiphar (Genesis 37:36), is probably a shorter form of the name Potiphara. Joseph's own Egyptian name, Zaphenath-paneah (Genesis 41:45), has no exact parallel in extant Egyptian records, but names with a similar structure are attested from the XXIst Dynasty and later.⁹²

It is unlikely, therefore, that the Joseph story as we know it in the Bible was composed before the establishment of the United

Kingdom (that is, before about 1000 B.C.E.). Many of the elements of the plot and most of the narrative details are fictional. It does not follow from this, however, that the tradition upon which the story is based is unhistorical. We cannot exclude the possibility that there was a historical Joseph who went to Egypt as a slave and rose to a position of power there.

Egyptian records from the Middle Kingdom to the Roman period cite numerous individuals of Syrian, Canaanite and nomadic origin who rose to high positions in the Egyptian government.⁹³ An especially interesting parallel to the story of Joseph is that of an Asiatic named Irsu, who seized power in Egypt during a period of hardship (probably famine) at the end of the 19th Dynasty (c. 1200 B.C.E.).⁹⁴ Many Egyptologists believe that Irsu was another name for Bay, the powerful chancellor who ruled Egypt during the minority of the last king of the XIXth Dynasty and who may have come from Palestine.⁹⁵

Clearly, then, the biblical description of Joseph's career is historically plausible in its general outline. We might surmise that Joseph was the leader of a group of people from the vicinity of Shechem and Dothan who migrated to Egypt seeking pasturage during a time of drought in Canaan. Such groups are amply attested to in Egyptian records. In a text from the reign of Merneptah (c. 1212–1202 B.C.E.), for example, a frontier official reports:

[We] have finished letting the Bedouin tribes of Edom pass the Fortress [of] Mer-ne-Ptah ... which is (in) Tjeku[□] ... to the pools of Per-Atum[□] ... which are (in) Tjeku, to keep them alive and to keep their cattle alive.⁹⁶

Alternatively, the people of the central hills may have preserved memories of Hyksos kings of local origin (perhaps even from the line of a local king named Jacob) and combined these memories with the tradition of the Exodus of slaves from Egypt. By this means the patriarchal stories may have been joined with those of the Exodus, yielding a coherent epic tradition, uniting all the tribes. Of course these are mere speculations about the history of the Joseph tradition. We have few clues from the narrative itself.

Jacob's Other Sons

The names of most of the other sons of Jacob (Israel) do not have the form of personal names. Several are geographical names. "Asher" was a name by which the Egyptians knew the coastal region north of Carmel in the Late Bronze Age.⁹⁷ "Judah," "Ephraim"[□] and "Naphtali" seem first to have been the names of ranges of hills (cf. Joshua 20:7); the people who inhabited the hill country of Judah were called *beûnê yeûhûdâ*, "the children of Judah," or "Judahites"; and so on.⁹⁸ The name "Benjamin" probably arose from the location of the tribe's territory; it lay to the south of the other (northern) tribes, so that the people were called *beûnê yaûmîn* "the children of the south," or "Benjaminites."⁹⁹

On the other hand, the names of a few of the sons of Jacob (Israel) do take the form of personal names. "Simeon" and "Manasseh," for example, are most easily understood in this way,¹⁰⁰ and the corresponding tribes may have been named after tribal heroes or even patriarchs. In the genealogical structure, the 12 sons of Israel are eponyms of the 12 tribes of Israel, created in the course of the evolution of the Israelite tradition during the period of settlement. The process of community formation, which began in about 1200 B.C.E., at the end of the Late Bronze Age, presupposes the existence of the tribes with established names. The origin of the various tribal names—whether derived from geographical associations, ancestral traditions or something else—was already in the remote past. When the tribes were joined together into the larger entity of Israel, their kinship was expressed in terms of brotherhood; and a group of 12 sons, the eponyms of the 12 tribes, was assigned to the patriarch Jacob (Israel).

It follows from all this that the setting of the prehistory of the Israelite community was the central hill country, between the valley of Aijalon and the Beth-Shean corridor, in the Late Bronze Age. This region was very sparsely populated before 1200 B.C.E.,¹⁰¹ suggesting that the people among whom the Israelite tradition germinated were pastoralists, as the patriarchal stories would lead us to expect. They venerated a local hero called Abram or Abraham, who was probably already regarded as a patriarchal figure; that is, he was identified as the ancestor of one or more of the groups in the region. Jacob and Isaac may also have been revered as ancestors in local tribal lore.

These proto-Israelites were hill people and shepherds, and they must have seen themselves as distinct from the peoples of the cities, which, in this period, were situated on the coastal plain and in the major valleys.¹⁰² This was the period of Egypt in Canaan, but the remoteness of the highlands from the population centers and the major trading routes sheltered Israel's forerunners from the full influence of Egypt. These circumstances were favorable to the creation of a national community larger than the city-states of the Bronze Age,¹⁰³ a development that needed only an increase in population to make it possible. This requirement was fulfilled at the end of the Late Bronze Age when new peoples penetrated into the forests of the Ephraimite plateau and the saddle of Benjamin to the south. At this time a larger tribal alliance was formed, and the old relationships were formalized genealogically. Abraham was identified as the father of Isaac and Isaac of Jacob. Jacob became the father of a large group of sons, eponyms of the various groups and districts that made up the new alliance. A core group of this alliance (to which the Merneptah Stele refers) bore the collective name "Israel." Thus the eponym Israel had an equal claim to the status of tribal father, and he was identified with Jacob.

Footnotes:

a. B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) and C.E. (Common Era) are the alternative designations for B.C. and A.D. often used in scholarly literature.

b. This is the earliest period in Israel's history when written historiography could be expected to develop. See Chapter IV, "The United Monarchy: Saul, David and Solomon," by André Lemaire on the period of the United Kingdom.

- c. These include the various cities of the Jordan Valley (Genesis 14:2), the Philistine city of Gerar (Genesis 20:1), the fortified city of Hebron (Genesis 23:2), etc.
- d. According to the documentary hypothesis, the Pentateuch is an amalgam of at least four strands or sources: the J source (the Yahwist); the E source (the Elohist); the P source (Priestly material) and the D source (Deuteronomistic material). J and E were combined before the introduction of D and P. Many scholars now doubt that E had an independent existence apart from J.
- e. Ugarit was the name of a city on the northern coast of Syria that flourished in the 14th and 13th centuries B.C.E. A large cuneiform archive has been found at the site, modern Ras Shamra.
- f. Personal and tribal names often incorporated elements of divine names, called theophoric elements, as in *Yeho-shua* (which includes a divine element based on Yahweh) and *Isra-el*.
- g. To repeat, an eponym is a person, real or imaginary, from whom the name of a later group is derived or is supposed to be derived.
- h. Amos's references to Beersheba (in the south) as a pilgrimage shrine for northerners (Amos 5:5, 8:14) is consistent with the connection between Abraham and Beersheba in the E source, and must derive from some prior northern religious association with Beersheba. (On the affinities between E and Amos, see recently Karel van der Toorn, *Family Religion*, pp. 261–264.) In the J source, Abraham's southerly home is Hebron, not Beersheba (which is founded by Isaac in J), an address that points to Hebron's importance in Judah in the Davidic period (2 Samuel 5:1–5, 15:7–10).
- i. Our uncertainty about this meaning arises from the fact that the verbal element does not have quite this sense elsewhere; it ordinarily means “laugh, laugh at, sport, jest.”
- j. The verb is known with this meaning in Ethiopic and Old South Arabic but not in biblical Hebrew.
- k. According to the later account in Genesis 35:6–10, the renaming took place at Bethel.
- l. That is, it might be a wish for another child (cf. Genesis 30:24) or for the increased fertility or prosperity of a tribe or town.
- m. It is possible, however, that “in the region of Rameses” in Genesis 47:11 is a scribe's gloss, intended to harmonize the account of the Israelites' entry into Egypt with the statement in Exodus 1:11 that locates the Israelites in “Pithom and Raamses.”
- n. “Tjeku” is the Egyptian name for the land called Goshen in the Bible.
- o. Per-Atum is biblical Pithom (Exodus 1:11). Ephraim and Manasseh were sons of Joseph and grandsons of Jacob (Israel). According to Genesis 48:5, however, they were adopted by their grandfather.
- p. Ephraim and Manasseh were sons of Joseph and grandsons of Jacob (Israel). According to Genesis 48:5, however, they were adopted by their grandfather.

Endnotes:

1. The viewpoint is illustrated very well by the second chapter of William F. Albright's *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), titled “The Patriarchal Background of Israel's Faith.” Its fullest expression is perhaps the discussion in John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 3rd ed., 1981), pp. 67–102.
2. See especially Ephraim A. Speiser, *Genesis*, Anchor Bible 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964).
3. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 2nd ed., 1957), p. 241.
4. Albright, *The Biblical Period from Abraham to Ezra* (New York: Torchbooks/Harper & Row, 1963), p. 5.
5. G. Ernest Wright, *Biblical Archaeology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, rev. ed., 1962), p. 40.
6. Wright, *Biblical Archaeology*, p. 50, note 5.
7. See William G. Dever, “Palestine in the Second Millennium BCE: The Archaeological Picture,” in *Israelite and Judaeon History*, ed. John M. Hayes and J. Maxwell Miller (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), pp. 70–120, especially pp. 99–101.
8. The most forceful and complete statement of this position is probably that of Roland de Vaux (*The Early History of Israel*, trans. David Smith [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978], pp. 161–287).
9. Cf. John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 40–42, and Thomas L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, ZAW supp. 133 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1974), pp. 22–36.
10. Speiser, *Genesis*, passim; Cyrus H. Gordon, “Biblical Customs and the Nuzu Tablets,” *Biblical Archaeologist Reader 2*, ed. E. F. Campbell and David Noel Freedman (Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1964), pp. 21–33.
11. Speiser, *Genesis*, pp. 120–121; Gordon, “Biblical Customs”, pp. 22–23.
12. Speiser, *Genesis*, p. xi; for Speiser's full discussion, see “The Wife-Sister Motif in the Patriarchal Narratives,” in *Biblical and Other Studies*, ed. A. Altmann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 15–28; also in *Oriental and Biblical Studies*, ed. Jacob J. Finkelstein and M. Greenberg (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania, 1967), pp. 62–82.
13. See especially the studies of Dever, “The Beginning of the Middle Bronze Age in Syria-Palestine,” in *Magnalia Dei; The Mighty Acts of God—Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Memory of G. Ernest Wright*, ed. Frank M. Cross et al. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), pp. 3–38; “The ‘Middle Bronze I’ Period in Syria and Palestine,” in *Near Eastern Archaeology in the Twentieth Century: Essays in Honor of Nelson Glueck*, ed. J. A. Sanders (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), pp. 132–163; “New Vistas in the EB IV (‘MB I’) Horizon in Syria and Palestine,” *BASOR* 237 (1980), pp. 35–64.

14. Many scholars also now believe that Albright's dates for this period were about a century too low. Our dating and periodization of the Middle Bronze Age, in contrast to the scheme developed by Albright, are shown in the following chart. In general we follow William G. Dever:

Date	Archaeological Period	Albright's Scheme	Albright's Date
2250–2000	EB IV	MB I	2100–1900
2000–1800	MB I	MB II A	1900–1750
1800–1630	MB II	MB II B	1700–1600
1630–1550	MB III	MB II C	1600–1550

15. See the cautious conclusions of Dever ("Palestine in the Second Millennium," pp. 117–120).

16. This has been shown in several studies by M. B. Rowton, including the following: "Autonomy and Nomadism in Western Asia," *Orientalia* 42 (1973), pp. 247–258; "Urban Autonomy in a Nomadic Environment," *JNES* 32 (1973), pp. 201–215; "Dimorphic Structure and the Problem of the 'Apirû-'Ibrim," *JNES* 35 (1976), pp. 13–20.

17. See J. T. Luke, *Pastoralism and Politics in the Mari Period: A Re-Examination of the Character and Political Significance of the Major West Semitic Tribal Groups on the Middle Euphrates, c. 1828–1753 B.C.* (Ph.D. dissertation, Univ. of Michigan [Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1965]); V. H. Matthews, *Pastoral Nomadism in the Mari Kingdom ca. 1830–1760 B.C.*, ASOR Dissertation Series (Cambridge, MA: ASOR, 1978).

18. See the literature cited in Dever, "Palestine in the Second Millennium," pp. 102–111.

19. The two studies that were most effective in calling attention to the problems with the early-second-millennium hypothesis were Thomas L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, ZAW supp. 133 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1974), and John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1975). See also Nahum Sarna, "Abraham in History," **BAR** 03:04, December 1977, pp. 5–9.

20. Cf. Barry L. Eichler, "Nuzi and the Bible: A Retrospective," in H. Behrens, D. Loding, and M. Roth, eds., *DUMU-E2-DUB-BA-A: Studies in Honor of Åke W. Sjöberg* (Philadelphia: University Museum, 1989), pp. 107–19.

21. Cf. Van Seters, *Abraham in History*, pp. 40–42, and especially Thompson, *Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, pp. 22–36, for complete citation of the extrabiblical materials. In the Bible, "Abiram" is the name of a Reubenite who participated in the revolt against Moses in the wilderness (Numbers 16:1) and of the firstborn son of Hiel the Bethelite, who founded Israelite Jericho in the ninth century B.C.E. (1 Kings 16:34).

22. Compare the name "Ahiram" and its shortened form "Hiram." In the Bible it is mentioned as the name of a son of Benjamin, a clan of Benjaminites (Numbers 26:38); the Phoenician king contemporary with David and Solomon (2 Samuel 5:11; 1 Kings 5); and the craftsman who supervised the building of Solomon's Temple (1 Kings 7:13). It appears in Phoenician inscriptions as the name of a tenth-century B.C.E. king of Byblos and an eighth-century B.C.E. king of Tyre. See also Thompson, *Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, pp. 29–31, and Van Seters, *Abraham in History*, p. 41.

23. Cf. Herbert B. Huffmon, *Amorite Personal Names in the Mari Texts* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), pp. 63–86.

24. Pace Kenneth Kitchen in his review of *Ancient Israel*, ed. Hershel Shanks, *Themelios* 15:1 (October, 1989), p. 25. Kitchen's statistical analysis of name-types is dependent on random archaeological finds and cannot claim any kind of scientific consistency. Cf. William G. Dever's criticisms of Kitchen's use of such archaeological data: "Is This Man a Biblical Archaeologist?" **BAR** 22:04, July/August 1996, p. 63.

25. Cf. Frauke Gröndahl, *Die Personennamen der Texte aus Ugarit*, Studia Pohl 1 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1967), pp. 41–42.

26. For a sample of the inscriptional evidence, see Jeffrey H. Tigay, *You Shall Have No Other Gods: Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Inscriptions*, Harvard Semitic Studies 31 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), pp. 52–56, 85. For biblical names, see Martin Noth, *Die israelitischen Personennamen im Rahmen der gemeinsemitischen Namengebung*, Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament, III/10 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1928; reprint Hildesheim: Olms, 1966), pp. 27–28.

27. As a place name in Palestine, "Jacob-'el," to be discussed below, and as a personal name at Ugarit, *ia-qub-ba'l* = *ya'qub-ba'l*, "Jacob-Baal." Cf. Gröndahl, *Personennamen*, p. 41.

28. Martin Noth, *Die israelitischen Personennamen*, pp. 45–46. See further, Thompson, *Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, pp. 43–50.

29. Van Seters, *Abraham in History*, pp. 68–71; cf. Thompson, *Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, pp. 252–269.

30. Van Seters, *Abraham in History*, pp. 71–76.

31. Cf. Thompson, *Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, pp. 243–248.

32. Noth, *The History of Israel*, trans. P. R. Ackroyd (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), pp. 53–84.

33. According to Hermann Gunkel, the critical time in the formation of the patriarchal traditions was the preliterary, oral stage,

when the individual units of tradition were expressed in particular genres or forms (*Gattungen*). Thus the history of the traditions can best be studied through the identification of these units by reference to the forms in which they are preserved (form criticism) and the investigation of the manner in which these units were combined into larger narratives. See *The Legends of Genesis: The Biblical Saga and History* [1901], trans. W. R. Carruth (New York: Schocken, 1964).

34. Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* [1948], trans. B. W. Anderson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972).

35. This is, of course, the biblical tradition, but there are many reasons to doubt it. In working through the materials for his commentaries for *I Samuel* and *II Samuel*, Anchor Bible 8–9 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980, 1984), P. Kyle McCarter, Jr. came to the conclusion previously reached by others that it was David who combined Judah with Israel for the first time. See, for example, James W. Flanagan, "Judah in All Israel," in *No Famine in the Land: Studies in Honor of John L. McKenzie*, ed. Flanagan and A. W. Robinson (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975), pp. 101–116.

36. Noth, *History of Israel*, p. 123. Other proponents of the history of traditions method have not been as negative as Noth. According to de Vaux (*Early History*, p. 180), whose work represents the best attempt to exploit both tradition-historical and archaeological methods, "It is true that the patriarchal tradition was only given its definitive form in the perspective of 'all Israel' after the conquest and settlement in the Promised Land ... However complicated this development may have been, and however obscure it may still be, we should not be justified in concluding that the traditions have no historical value at all, since without evidence it would be wrong to claim that the Israelites had no knowledge at all of their own origins."

37. Cf. the comments by Frank M. Cross in "The Epic Tradition of Early Israel: Epic Narrative and the Reconstruction of Early Israelite Institutions," in *The Poet and the Historian: Essays in Literary and Historical Biblical Criticism*, ed. Richard E. Friedman, Harvard Semitic Studies (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), pp. 13–40, especially pp. 24–25.

38. On the importance of kinship relations in the stories, see Robert A. Oden, "Jacob as Father, Husband, and Nephew: Kinship Studies and the Patriarchal Narratives," *JBL* 102 (1983), pp. 189–205, with the valuable corrections of Naomi Steinberg, "Alliance or Descent? The Function of Marriage in Genesis," *JSOT* 51 (1991), pp. 45–55. On the functions of biblical genealogies generally, see Robert Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World*, Yale Near Eastern Researches 7 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977).

39. For more extensive criticisms of Noth's history of traditions method, see Robert Polzin, "Martin Noth's *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*," *BASOR* 221 (1976), pp. 113–120; on his form-critical presuppositions, see Rolf Knierim, "Old Testament Form Criticism Reconsidered," *Interpretation* 27 (1973), pp. 435–468; and Sean M. Warner, "Primitive Saga Men," *VT* 29 (1979), pp. 325–335.

40. Gunkel, "The Influence of Babylonian Mythology upon the Biblical Creation Story," *Creation in the Old Testament* (ed. B. W. Anderson; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984; German original, *Schöpfung und Chaos*, 1895), p. 26.

41. See Ronald S. Hendel, "When the Sons of God Cavorted with the Daughters of Men," in *Understanding the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. Hershel Shanks (New York: Random House, 1992), pp. 167–177; first published in *BR* 03:02, Summer 1987, pp. 8–13.

42. Some references in the J source to Mesopotamian matters indicate a historical context in the Neo-Assyrian period. These include the designation of southern Mesopotamia as Chaldean (Genesis 11:28, cf. Genesis 22:22), and the reference to Nineveh as a major Assyrian city (Genesis 10:11–12). These references indicate a historical context in the mid- to late eighth century B.C.E. Corresponding to these notices is the cultural identification of the Tigris River with Assyria (Genesis 2:14).

43. Cf. Terry J. Prewitt, "Kinship Structures and the Genesis Genealogies," *JNES* 40 (1981), pp. 97–98.

44. This refers to a time before Machir had been replaced by Manasseh and reduced to the status of a Manassite clan (cf. de Vaux, *Early History*, pp. 651–652) and before Gilead had been replaced by Gad south of the Jabbok and the name Gilead had been generalized to include all of Transjordan (pp. 571–572, 574–576).

45. On the complex problems involved in the dating of the battle described in Judges 5, see Chapter III of this volume, "The Settlement in Canaan: The Period of the Judges," and de Vaux, *Early History*, pp. 789–796.

46. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 3rd ed., 1969) (*ANET*), pp. 376–378.

47. The emphasis in recent research on the sociological conditions out of which the community emerged has begun to lead to excellent results. It has created a tendency, however, to overlook the importance of the emergence of an ethnic identity. A valuable balance to this tendency is provided by Baruch Halpern in *The Emergence of Israel in Canaan*, SBL Monograph Series 29 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), especially pp. 90, 100.

48. For an overview of this subject, see the introduction to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, ed. Frederick Barth (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969).

49. See Hendel, "Finding Historical Memories in the Patriarchal Narratives," *BAR* 21:04, July/August 1995, pp. 52–59, 70–72.

50. Albrecht Alt, "The God of the Fathers" [1929], *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion*, trans. R. A. Wilson (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), p. 7.

51. See Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 13–43.

52. Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, pp. 44–75.

53. According to the distribution of personal names in the Bible, El predominates as a divine element during the premonarchic period, with Yahweh becoming popular in the early monarchic period and thereafter. For the statistics and some implications, see recently Karel van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria and Israel: Continuity and Change in the Forms of Religious Life*, Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East 7 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), pp. 237–238.
54. Hendel, "Finding Historical Memories", pp. 59, 70–71; Giorgio Buccellati, "From Khana to Laqê: The End of Syro-Mesopotamia", in Ö. Tunca, ed., *De la Babylonie à la Syrie, en passant par Mari* (Liège, 1990), pp. 229–253.
55. See the careful comments of Abraham Malamat, *Mari and the Early Israelite Experience* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), pp. 27–30.
56. Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, p. 57.
57. Arguments that the Aramaic connection stems from the mid-first millennium B.C.E. are exceedingly weak; cf. Van Seters (*Abraham*, p. 34), who suggests that the Assyrian deportation of Israelites to the Middle Euphrates region after 722 B.C.E. and the resurgence of the trade route through Haran in the Neo-Babylonian period may have been factors in the formation of an ethnic identification with Arameans in this period.
58. Jacob J. Finkelstein, "The Genealogy of the Hammurapi Dynasty," *JCS* 20 (1966), pp. 95–118, especially pp. 97–98.
59. Cf. Van Seters, *Abraham in History*, pp. 40–42, and Thompson, *Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, pp. 22–36.
60. As pointed out first by Hugo Gressmann ("Sage und Geschichte in den Patriarchenerzählungen," *ZAW* 30 [1910], pp. 1–34, especially p. 2 and note 4), the best parallels to the longer form of the name "Abraham" occur in Aramaic. See also de Vaux (*Early History*, pp. 197–198 and notes 73 and 74), who cites evidence for a similar phenomenon in Ugaritic and Phoenician; his examples, however, are not precisely parallel.
61. Benjamin Mazar, "The Historical Background of the Book of Genesis," in *The Early Biblical Period*, ed. S. Ahituv and B. A. Levine (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1986), p. 59; originally published in *JNES* 28 (1969), p. 81.
62. Hendel, "Finding Historical Memories," pp. 55, 58–59. The importance of this place-name was pointed out by James H. Breasted, "The Earliest Occurrence of the Name of Abram," *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature* (1904), p. 36.
63. Yohanan Aharoni, *The Archaeology of the Land of Israel*, trans. Anson F. Rainey (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), p. 168.
64. Aharoni, *Archaeology of the Land of Israel*, pp. 162–173.
65. Cf. Noth, *Die israelitischen Personennamen*, p. 210.
66. It is possible that the transferral of the Isaac tradition to Beersheba was partly the result of the historical movement of people from the northern hills into the Negev. Note, for example, the prominent role played by Simeon and Levi, the patriarchs of the tribes of southwestern Judah and the northern Negev, in the story of the rape of Dinah at Shechem (Genesis 34). Cf. Noth, *History of Israel*, pp. 71 and 76, note 1. Contrast de Vaux, *Early History*, pp. 532–533.
67. See Thompson, *Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, pp. 45–48.
68. For the citations, see J. Simons, *Handbook for the Study of Egyptian Topographical Lists Relating to Western Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 1937), xxxiv, lists 1a and 1b/102 (Thutmose III), 23/9 (Rameses II) and 27/104 (Rameses III), and most recently, Shmuel Ahituv, *Canaanite Toponyms in Ancient Egyptian Documents* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984), p. 200. Cf. *ANET*, p. 242.
69. Cf. Shmuel Yeivin ("The Short List of the Towns in Palestine and Syria Captured by Thutmose III During His First Campaign," *Eretz Israel* 3 [Jerusalem: IES, 1954], pp. 32–38, especially p. 36), who proposes an identification with Tel Melat, west of Gezer, which is often associated with the biblical city of Gibbethon.
70. Both of these cities are mentioned in the same part of the Thutmose list, as are a number of nearby places east of the Jordan in the Yarmuk region. See H. Wolfgang Helck, *Die Beziehungen Ägyptens zu Vorderasien im 3. und 2. Jahrtausend v. Chr.*, Ägyptologische Abhandlungen 5 (Weisbaden, W. Ger.: Otto Harrassowitz, 1962), p. 128.
71. This was taken for granted by Albright ("A Third Revision of the Early Chronology of Western Asia," *BASOR* 88 [1942], pp. 28–36, especially p. 36, note 39).
72. Aharon Kempinski, "Jacob in History," *BAR* 14:01, January/February 1988, pp. 42–47; idem, "Some Observations on the Hyksos (XVth) Dynasty and Its Canaanite Origins," in Sarah Israelit-Groll, ed., *Pharaonic Egypt: The Bible and Christianity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1985), pp. 129–137; cf. Halpern, ("The Exodus from Egypt: Myth or Reality?" in Hershel Shanks, ed., *The Rise of Ancient Israel* [Washington, DC: **Biblical Archaeology Society**, 1992], p. 110, note 20), who notes the possibility that the 18th-century Jacob-Har may have been a local ruler in pre-Hyksos Egypt, and that the Shiqmona seal was a sign of trade or other local relations with his dynasty.
73. Noth, *History of Israel*, p. 71, note 2.
74. See, for example, Victor Maag, "Der Hirte Israel," *Schweizerische Theologische Umschau* 28 (1958), pp. 2–28; Horst Seebass, *Der Erzvater Israel*, *ZAW* supp. 98 (Berlin: A. Topelmann, 1966), pp. 1–5, 25–34.
75. Cf. Siegfried Herrmann, *A History of Israel in Old Testament Times*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), p. 51. Recent proponents of this idea in one form or another include Albert de Pury ("Genèse xxxiv et l'histoire," *RB* 76 [1969], pp. 5–49, especially pp. 39–48) and André Lemaire ("Asriel, rsûl Israel et l'origine de la confédération israelite," *VT* 23 [1973], pp. 239–243); and see P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., "The Origins of Israelite Religion," in Hershel Shanks, ed., *The Rise of Ancient*

Israel, pp. 132–136.

76. Cf. Israel Finkelstein, "Shiloh Yields Some, But Not All, of Its Secrets," *BAR* 12:01, January/February 1986, pp. 22–41, especially p. 35, and the demographic statistics cited by Lawrence E. Stager, in "The Archaeology of the Family in Ancient Israel," *BASOR* 260 (1985), pp. 1–36, especially p. 3.

77. Gunkel, *Legends of Genesis, the Biblical Saga and History* (New York: Schocken, 1964), pp. 23–24. Cf. Jeremiah 49:7, Obadiah 1:8, and Job.

78. Noth, *History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, pp. 97–98.

79. Hendel, *The Epic of the Patriarch: The Jacob Cycle and the Narrative Traditions of Canaan and Israel*, Harvard Semitic Monographs 42 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), pp. 111–131.

80. Cf. de Vaux, *Early History*, pp. 642–643.

81. Noth, *Die israelitischen Personennamen*, p. 212; de Vaux, *Early History*, p. 313.

82. See recently, Halpern, "Exodus from Egypt", pp. 92–99.

83. Theodor H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (New York: Torchbooks/Harper & Row, 1975), vol. 1, pp. 217–218; Thompson and Irvin, "The Joseph and Moses Narratives," in Hayes and Miller, *Israelite and Judaeon History*, pp. 185–188.

84. *ANET*, pp. 23–25.

85. Thompson and Irvin, "The Joseph and Moses Narratives", pp. 188–190.

86. Seven years of famine are described in an Egyptian text of the Ptolemaic period (perhaps the end of the second century B.C.E.), which claims to derive from King Djoser of the Third Dynasty (c. 2650 B.C.E.); see *ANET*, pp. 31–32. Tablet VI of the Akkadian Gilgamesh epic speaks of "seven years of husks"; see *ANET*, p. 85. The autobiographical inscription of Idrimi, king of the Syrian city of Alalakh in the 16th century B.C.E., refers to two unfavorable periods, each lasting seven years; see *ANET*, pp. 557–558. There is a prediction of seven to eight years of drought in the Ugaritic myth of Āqht; see *ANET*, p. 153.

87. See Donald B. Redford, *A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph*, VT supp. 20 (Leiden: Brill, 1970).

88. Cf. *ANET*, p. 445 and note 10.

89. See de Vaux, *Early History*, pp. 301–302.

90. Herrman Ranke, *Die Ägyptischen Personennamen*, 3 vols. (Glückstadt, W. Ger.: J. J. Augustin, 1935), vol. 1, p. 14, names 13–17, and p. 15, name 3. See also Alan R. Schulman, "On the Egyptian Name of Joseph: A New Approach," *Studien zur altÄgyptischen Kultur* 2 (1975), pp. 238–239; Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992), p. 424; and Kitchen, "Genesis 12–50 in the Near Eastern World," in R. S. Hess, P. E. Satterthwaite, and G. J. Wenham, eds., *He Swore an Oath: Biblical Themes from Genesis 12–50* (Cambridge: Tyndale House, 1993), pp. 84–85.

91. H. Hamada, "Stela of Putiphar," *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte* 39 (1939), pp. 273–276 and plate 39.

92. Ranke, *Die Ägyptischen Personennamen*, pp. 409–412 and Schulman, "Egyptian Name", pp. 239–242; cf. the imaginative proposal of Kitchen, "Genesis 12–50", pp. 80–84.

93. Helck, *Die Beziehungen Ägyptens*, pp. 77–81, 342–369; Jozef M. A. Janssen, "Fonctionnaires sémites au service de l'Égypte," *Chronique d'Égypte* 26 (1951), pp. 50–62; Albright, "Northwest-Semitic Names in a List of Egyptian Slaves from the Eighteenth Century B.C.," *JAOS* 74 (1954), pp. 222–233; Georges Posener, "Les asiatiques en Égypte sous les XII and XIII dynasties," *Syria* 34 (1957), pp. 145–163.

94. *ANET*, p. 260.

95. See Alan H. Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs: An Introduction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), p. 282.

96. *ANET*, p. 259 (trans. John A. Wilson). The text is a model letter from a scribal school.

97. See Gardiner, *Ancient Egyptian Onomastica*, 3 vols. (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1947), pp. 191–193, no. 265. In the present state of our knowledge, we cannot be sure that the equation of the toponym in the Egyptian texts with the name of the Israelite tribe is linguistically valid. Albright associated the name of an Asiatic female slave in 18th-century B.C.E. Egypt with the tribal name ("Northwest Semitic Names", p. 229–231 and note 51). The sibilant of the slave name (sû=*sû) is different from that of the geographical term (sœ=*t_ or *sœ_ in the Egyptian texts. It seems to follow that the geographical term can have had nothing to do with the Israelite tribe (cf. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and the Old Testament* [Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1966], pp. 70–71 and note 53). But it is not certain that Albright's association of the slave and tribal names is correct. The sibilant in the tribal name "Asher" remains unidentified. Thus, despite Kitchen's objections, Shmuel Yeivin is justified in maintaining the possibility of a connection between the Egyptian toponym and the biblical tribal name ("The Israelite Settlement in Galilee and the Wars with Jabin of Hazor," in *Mélanges bibliques rédigés en l'honneur de André Robert*, Travaux de l'Institut Catholique de Paris 4 [Paris: Bloud and Gay, 1957], pp. 95–104, especially pp. 98–99).

98. See Noth, *The Old Testament World*, trans. V.I. Gruhn (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), pp. 55–58. Cf. Noth, *History of Israel*, pp. 56, 60, 67 and note 1, and the comments by de Vaux, *Early History*, p. 665.

99. Noth, *Old Testament World*, p. 72; in *History of Israel*, pp. 62–63.

100. On "Manasseh," cf. Noth, *Die israelitischen Personennamen*, p. 222.

101. This is confirmed by the survey of Ephraim currently underway (Israel Finkelstein, "Shiloh Yields Some, But Not All, of Its Secrets," *BAR* 12:01, January/February 1986, pp. 22–41, especially p. 35). Cf. the demographic statistics cited by Lawrence E. Stager, in "The Archaeology of the Family in Ancient Israel," *BASOR* 260 (1985), pp. 1–36, especially p. 3.

102. The importance of the contrast between the mountains and the plains to the history of this period was first stressed by Albrecht Alt. See "The Settlement of the Israelites in Palestine," in *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1968), pp. 173–221, especially pp. 188–204.

103. Buccellati, *Cities and Nations of Ancient Syria*, Studi Semitici 26 (Rome: Ist. (Institute) di Studi del Vicino Oriente, 1967).

Reference for this article:

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The patriarchs of the Bible, when narrowly defined, are Abraham, his son Isaac, and Isaac's son Jacob, also named Israel, the ancestor of the Israelites. These three figures are referred to collectively as the patriarchs, and the period in which they lived is known as the patriarchal age. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam hold that the patriarchs, along with their primary wives, known as the matriarchs (Sarah, Rebekah and Leah) are entombed at the Cave of the Patriarchs, a site held holy by the three