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Founding Fathers in Canaan and Egypt

Among the more memorable narratives in the Old Testament are those about Israel's ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, culminating in the splendidly-told story of Joseph. In Genesis, these men are the recipients of promises for their descendants. Later in the Old Testament, from Moses onwards, it is in fulfilment of those promises that the Hebrews are brought out of Egypt, constituted a national community by covenant, and taken into Canaan. Thus, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are the 'founding fathers' of ancient Israel, her natural ancestors going back beyond Moses and the Sinai covenant, in the biblical record.

A Century of Controversy— Founders or Fictions?

During the later 19th century, rationalistic Old Testament scholarship in Germany decided that the Old Testament accounts of Hebrew history did not fit 'history' as it 'should' have happened, according to their preconceived ideas. Therefore, its leading representatives rearranged the Old Testament writings (including imaginary divisions of these) until Old Testament history, religion and literature had been suitably manipulated to fit in with their philosophical preconceptions. Far and away the most accomplished advocate of this ultimately arbitrary method was Julius Wellhausen, brilliantly exemplified in his *Prolegomena to the*

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History of Israel, first published in 1878 (in English, 1885), and in his article in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* then.

According to these theories, the patriarchs were simply shadows, the vague stock of the 15th century BC (in 19th-century dating), from which sprang a few shepherds who made their way from south Palestine to Egypt and back again.¹ He claimed dogmatically that 'here [in Genesis] no historical knowledge about the patriarchs is to be gotten, but only about the period in which the stories about them arose among the Israelite people. This later period was simply to be projected back into hoary antiquity and reflected there like a glorified mirage.'² For Gunkel, the stories of the patriarchs were sagas or legends, in contrast to the history proper; the patriarchal figures he considered to be, not individual humans, but personified tribes and the like.³

¹ So in the Encyclopaedia article, reprinted in J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel*, 1885 (repr. 1957), pp. 429-431.

² Wellhausen, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels*, 6th ed., 1927, p. 316 (transl. by KAK), cf. *Prolegomena to the History ...*, p. 318 f. Cited in part also by T. L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, 1974, p. 7, to whose work it is the ultimate key.

³ See H. Gunkel, *The Legends of Genesis*, 1901 (repr. 1964), pp. 1 ff., 19 ff., where — again — rationalism reigns, uncontrolled by any proper external criteria from the biblical Near East.

From those distant days until now, therefore, German Old Testament scholarship has servilely adhered to the dogmas of Wellhausen and Gunkel, with minimal variation. This can be seen in Eissfeldt's words that the patriarchs 'have thus become representatives of the post-Mosaic people of Israel projected back into the pre-Mosaic age; what they do and endure... reveals indirectly the circumstances of an Israel settled in Canaan.'⁴ Even Wellhausen's 15th-century date is kept, by misapplying the Nuzi data.⁵

Outside Germany, however, such unbelievable devotion to old-fashioned critical dogmas was left far behind during the 1930's onwards. At that time, W. F. Albright of Baltimore pioneered a new school of thought that sought to correlate the narratives of Genesis with the growing mass of inscriptional and archaeological evidence from the ancient biblical world, in particular setting the patriarchs in the first half of the 2nd millennium BC.⁶ The archives from Mari (18th century BC) and Nuzi (15th century BC) were drawn upon to illustrate wide travel, semi-nomadism and West-Semitic personal names, and legal/social usages respectively. The classic modern outline of this view is that of Bright in his well-known history of ancient Israel.⁷

However, this relatively sane and moderate view of the patriarchs has in recent decades been clouded by treatments of very questionable value. C. H. Gordon opted for a 14th-century date on too-limited grounds,⁸ as well as (with others) a highly-coloured view of Abraham as a merchant-prince. Others again made of Abraham a warrior-hero. And latterly, Albright himself advocated a view of Abraham as a 'donkey-caravaneer', a travelling trader rather than a pastoralist.⁹ Speiser meantime had opted for a largely Hurrian (Horite) interpretation of the activities of the patriarchs, using principally the Nuzi archives as his resource.¹⁰

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The founding fathers began to look more like Hurrians than Hebrews!

The view initiated by Albright and elaborated in these very varied ways by him and others held the field up to the beginning of the 1970's. During the current decade, however, and especially since the death of Albright (1971), reaction has—not too surprisingly—set in. Encouraged by old-style 'diehards' in both Germany and America, a small group of younger scholars have written at length to 'debunk' the views of the Albright school concerning the patriarchal age—and in fact, any view other than the negative attitude to early Hebrew tradition in the later 19th century.¹¹ Far from being 'radical' scholars, such writers are in truth

⁴ *The Old Testament, An Introduction*, 1965, p. 42; cf. G. Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 1970, pp. 121-4.

⁵ E.g., Fohrer, *History of Israelite Religion*, 1973, p. 32 and n. 15, following his *Introduction to the OT*, 1970, pp. 121-122.

⁶ E.g., W. F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, 1940 (cf. 1957 ed., pp. 236 ff.), and *The Biblical Period*, 1949, pp. 1 ff.

⁷ J. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 2nd ed., 1972, pp. 76 ff.

⁸ References given in my *Ancient Orient & OT*, 1966, p. 42 and n. 36.

⁹ In *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 163 (1961), pp. 36 ff., esp. pp. 40 ff.

¹⁰ E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, Anchor Bible, 1964, pp. xxxix ff., 86 ff., and intermittently.

¹¹ The principal works are: T. L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, 1974; J. van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, 1975; earlier, D. B. Redford, *A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph*, *Vetus Testamentum Supplements* 20, 1970.

‘reactionaries’ who seek, in essence, to put the clock back by 100 years. And their highest role in reality is simply that of ‘devil’s advocate’. Thus, their works do perform the useful function of ruthlessly exposing sloppy argumentation by others, false or inadequate parallels, refuting the wilder excrescences of speculation, and emphasising the need to look at all periods (not only the 2nd millennium) in reviewing possible background to the patriarchal narratives. All this is salutary, and all to the good, in clearing the ground towards a more firmly based assessment.

However, these same advocates themselves then fail to match up to this selfsame standard of reviewing the patriarchal data against all periods. Instead, they neglect the 3rd millennium BC entirely, along with whole sections of relevant evidence from the early 2nd millennium, and give exaggerated attention to 1st-millennium materials. In the process, they fail, therefore, to distinguish between features attested at *all* periods (hence useless for dating), features attested in some periods, and features attested in only one period (early or late). In order to prop up the old 19th-century view of the patriarchs as late fictions dreamt up 1000 years after the ‘patriarchal age’, they are driven to produce arguments at times so tortuous and convoluted as to stand almost self-condemned as spurious and far from even remotely proving their case. For example, van Seters artificially excludes all patriarchal personal names from consideration other than Abraham on the excuse that they are tribal,¹² while in point of fact all external correlations show them to be personal! He makes the incredible suggestion that the detail of the patriarchs living in tents ‘is more suggestive of the first millennium than of the second.’¹³ Quite the contrary is the case. In the 20th century BC, the Egyptian Sinuhe who fled home to live in south Syria speaks easily and naturally of living in a tent, and (after single combat) of stripping his enemy’s tent and camp.¹⁴ In the Admonitions of Ipuwer (17th century BC at latest),¹⁵ ‘tents it is that

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are set up for them (displaced Egyptians) like the foreigners (do)’.¹⁶ The foreigners envisaged would be Egypt’s neighbours in Palestine. From the other end of the ancient Near East, the Sumerian ‘Myth of the god Martu’, eponym of the ‘Amorites’ of north Syria, dismisses the ‘stereotype’ Amorite in the words ‘a tent-dweller [buffeted?] by wind and rain... who in his lifetime does not have a house...’,¹⁷ in a text of the early 2nd millennium BC. Later in the 2nd millennium, the Ugaritic epics mention tents (same word as Hebrew *’ohel*), as do Egyptian sources—the West-Semitic word recurs under Merenptah and Ramesses III (13th/12th centuries BC). And so on.¹⁸ In other words, tents (not surprisingly) are to be expected at all periods and are useless for dating. And that camels as a *subordinate* item in the patriarchal

¹² *Abraham in History & Tradition*, p. 39.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 16.

¹⁴ Translations, (e.g.) M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature, a Book of Readings*, I, 1973, pp. 227, 228; Wilson, in Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 20 (in line 110, read ‘tent’ for ‘camp’).

¹⁵ If one adopts the lower date advocated by van Seters, *The Hyksos*, 1966, pp. 103-120 (possible but not proven); otherwise a still earlier date will apply.

¹⁶ *Admonitions*, 10:1-2; cf. Lichtheim, *op. cit.*, p. 158; A. H. Gardiner, *The Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage*, 1909, p. 71; this passage was omitted in Pritchard, *Anc. Near E. Texts*, p. 443.

¹⁷ Translated by S. N. Kramer, *Genava* 8 (1960), p. 281; cited also by G. Buccellati, *The Amorites of the Ur III Period*, 1966, pp. 92, 330.

¹⁸ In 2nd-millennium Ugaritic, for example; C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, 1965, p. 353, No. 106. On tents and early date, cf. D. J. Wiseman, ‘They lived in Tents’, in G. Tuttle (ed.), *Biblical and Near Eastern Studies*, 1977/78, in press.

narratives are anachronistic is flatly contradicted by the available evidence to the contrary.¹⁹ Speculations by T. L. Thompson²⁰ in terms of ‘Maccabean or post-Maccabean’ (!) chronology imposed on the Hebrew text simply beggar belief as a species of cabbalistic gematria. Post-Maccabean is, in effect, the time of Herod and the Romans, the period of the Dead Sea Scrolls, when the text of such books as Genesis was already settled! And so one might continue the exposure of misconceptions, lop-sided presentations and downright special pleading.

Towards a Solution

From this welter of controversy, what—if anything—emerges? If we open the pages of Genesis, etc., what sort of patriarchs do we actually find? And of what use is the supposed ancient Near Eastern evidence? The answer to the first question depends on those to the latter two questions, to which we must briefly turn.

1. *The Patriarchs and Narratives themselves*

In Genesis 11:27 to 50:26, we have a series of narratives, punctuated by occasional genealogies and poems. An ordinary man, Terah, has three sons and a grandson in Ur. After the death of one son, the family moves off northwestwards to Har(r)an in Upper Mesopotamia, staying there until Terah’s death. Leaving one branch of the family there, one son (Abraham) and his nephew travels west and south into Canaan, visiting Egypt briefly, then spending the rest of his days moving around Canaan, as a pastoralist,²¹ and head of a growing clan of retainers.²² Abraham desired offspring; his God gave him a covenant and promises. The adopted servant (Eliezer) and servant-girl’s son (Ishmael) in due time made way for a true son (Isaac), whose marriage to a girl

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from the Haran branch of the family was arranged before Abraham’s death. External events hardly touch the essentially ‘family’ narrative—the defeat of four eastern kings and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (14;19) alone feature, because of Lot’s involvement. Isaac (Genesis 26 ff.) followed quietly in his father’s pastoral way of life, also growing occasional crops (Gen. 26:12, 14). Of his twin sons, Jacob took the lead, seeking refuge from Esau’s wrath by living with the Haran branch of the family, marrying two of their girls. Later, he returned to Canaan and reconciliation soon before his father’s death (Gen. 27-35). Then, in Gen. 37-50, we have essentially the story of Joseph (Jacob’s eleventh son), magnificently told: a youngster sold into Egyptian bondage by jealous brothers, his godfearing integrity leading him to high position in Egypt, so that he is in due time enabled to sustain his family who come also to reside in the Egyptian east Delta.

Throughout these narratives, several features are apparent to any reader. They deal almost exclusively with ordinary human beings, men and women, who are born, marry, have children, tend sheep, goats, cattle, and grow a crop or two, who love, quarrel, die and are

¹⁹ Sufficient references in my *Anc. Orient & OT*, pp. 79-80; dismissal of such evidence by van Seters, *Abraham*, p. 17, is simply special pleading for apologetic purposes (i.e., to support an artificially-late date).

²⁰ *Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, 1974, pp. 14-15.

²¹ Cf. Abraham’s wealth in livestock (besides precious metal), Gen. 12:6; 13:2, 5 ff.; 24:35.

²² Note Gen. 12:5 (‘the people that they had gotten in Haran’); 13:7-8 (Abraham’s herdsmen); 14:14 (muster of 318 armed retainers); 17:23, 27 (all the men of the household, born or bought); 23:6; 24:35, 59.

buried. They worship their God, building simple altars, and have dreams and visions. There is nothing here that is not within the range of known human experience. The narratives in Genesis are the only record available that mentions the patriarchs; like a myriad other private individuals in antiquity, they are not so far attested in any other ancient document. This has two consequences. First, this is our sole record—any attempt to amend it only substitutes guesswork (inherently of no authority) for the one definite record that we do have. Second, as this is the only record, a modern observer is initially free to take any of several conceivable views of the nature of these narratives. They could be pure fiction, precursor of the modern novel. They might be, quite in contrast, straight, factual narratives of historical people who actually lived precisely as described, from start to finish. Or, they might be something in between: e.g. narratives about people once real, about whom either (i) selected features were remembered or (ii) various stories clustered in the course of time. Various other possibilities have been canvassed.

Is there anything further in the narratives to guide us? At first sight, some might consider certain limited special features as giving a lead. First, the patriarchs speak with God and he with them. Second, the patriarchs tend to live rather long (Abraham: 175 years; Isaac: 180 years; Jacob: 147 years), even marrying later than many people do (e.g. Isaac marrying at 40; Gen. 25:20).

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Third, other ‘remarkable’ points are few,²³ and in the Joseph narrative, nil; no ‘miracles’ disturb its even flow, for example. That real people can speak to deity—prayer!—proves nothing against their reality. Neither does deity speaking to man—as the Hebrew prophets later claimed, for example—witness Ramesses II at the Battle of Qadesh, who had Amun’s reply to his prayer.²⁴ Thus, intercourse with deity has no bearing on historicity of the humans involved. Only very rarely are deity and humans shown confronted in these narratives: Hagar (Gen. 16:7-13), Abraham (Gen. 18-19), when humans appear as God’s spokesmen, or a voice comes from heaven (Gen. 22:11, 15).²⁵ Likewise, concerning the long lifespans: far ‘worse’ than Abraham, Isaac or Jacob was Enmebaragisi king of Kish with 900 years’ reign in the Sumerian King List—but who was indubitably historical nonetheless (cf. chapter 2 above). The transmission of numbers being a special issue on its own, these long spans have no direct bearing on the historicity or otherwise of the patriarchs.

2. *Literary Background*

In fact, one may go still further. We possess neither proof nor disproof, at first hand, of the historical existence of the patriarchs or of the narrations about them. But these same narratives can be compared with other ancient Near Eastern narrative works of several categories.²⁶

²³ activity (loss of Sodom and Gomorrah) is not unknown; the firepot and torch perhaps came in vision (Gen. 15:17) in Abraham’s sleep, cf. Gen. 15:1, 12.

²⁴ ‘Poem’, lines 122 ff., Ramesses quotes Amun’s reply to him; translated, Sir A. H. Gardiner *The Kadesh Inscriptions of Ramesses II*, 1960, p. 10; omitted in Pritchard, *Anc. Near E. Texts*, pp. 255-6.

²⁵ It is of interest to note that ‘the Lord appeared’ to people usually in dreams, as in Gen. 28:12, 16 (cf. 35:7), or 31:11.

²⁶ Leaving aside works of pure mythology exclusively concerned with the gods, in which humans do not appear.

In Egypt, we may distinguish between three categories of narratives (besides royal inscriptions and myths). *First*, ‘autobiographies’ and autobiographical narratives. The former are attested in the third, second and first millennia BC alike, from tombs, stelae and statues of officials. They are commonly expressed in the first person, often with an introduction in the third person; they are unquestionably historical.²⁷ Autobiographical narratives include Sinuhe (c. 1930 BC) and Wenamun (c. 1075 BC), known from papyri and recopied as literature. Wenamun is generally accepted as historical, and Sinuhe is most probably based on the tomb-text of a historical person. These too are in the first person, and share a vivid style with some of the autobiographies. Providential events do occur, and dealings with deity,²⁸ but no ‘miracles’. *Second*, historical legends. In the second and first millennia, these are stories about known historical personalities—kings, princes, officials—but written at later periods, often long afterwards. Thus, the Tales of the Magicians (Papyrus Westcar), c. 1600 BC, tells of supposed magicians at the courts of known kings of a thousand years before; historical characters such as the sons of Kheops (builder of the Great Pyramid) appear. The acts of the

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are imaginary, and involve marvels: causing the severed heads and bodies of decapitated animals to rejoin spontaneously, etc.²⁹ *Third*, purely fictional stories. Such include adventures and fantasies like the Shipwrecked Sailor (c. 1800 BC) with a magic island, great talking serpent, etc.; or the Foredoomed Prince (thirteenth century BC) in which a king’s only son (under three fates from angry fairy godmothers) seeks his fortune incognito in distant Syria, rescuing a princess from a tower, etc.; or the Tale of the Two Brothers (thirteenth century BC) with the younger brother transforming himself from human form into a bull, then into two perseas trees, ultimately to reappear as the king’s son. These usually³⁰ have no named heroes or personalities, and none but the vaguest locales in Egypt or abroad.³¹

In Syria-Palestine, despite much more limited material (so far), the situation is similar. *First*, ‘autobiographies’.³² The best known example is that of king Idrimi of Alalakh (early fifteenth century BC), telling of his life as a fugitive and how he regained his father’s throne, all in the

²⁷ Good random examples of such are those of Uni (Lichtheim, *Anc. Egyptian Literature*, I, 1973, pp. 18-22; extract only, in Pritchard, *op. cit.*, 227-8), Harkhuf (Lichtheim, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-27; omitted in Pritchard); Sebekkhu (Wilson in Pritchard, *Anc. Near E. Texts*, p. 230) and Ikhnofret (Wilson in Pritchard, *op. cit.*, pp. 329-330; Lichtheim, *op. cit.*, pp. 123-5); Amenemhab (Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt*, II, 1906, pp. 227-234 (§§ 574-592), and pp. 318-9 (§§ 807-9), and Bakenkhons (Breasted, *op. cit.*, 111, pp. 234-7 (§§ 561-8). These range in date from 2300 BC, via 1850 BC, to 1450 and c. 1225 BC.

²⁸ Sinuhe, cf. Lichtheim, *Anc. Eg. Literature*, I, 1973, pp. 222-233; Wilson in Pritchard, *Anc. Near E. Texts*, pp. 18-22. Wenamun, cf. Lichtheim, II, 1976, pp. 224-230, and Wilson in Pritchard, pp. 25-29. Providential is the ecstatic youth in Wenamun (Lichtheim, II, p. 225; Wilson/Pritchard, p. 26); as for deity, Sinuhe praises Montu for success in combat, and prays for return home (Lichtheim, I, pp. 228; 228-9; Wilson/Pritchard, p. 20 (Montu), but omitting the prayer-section).

²⁹ Papyrus Westcar, cf. Lichtheim, *Anc. Eg. Literature*, I, 1973, pp. 215-222 (animals, p. 219); entirely omitted from Pritchard. Still later, the Demotic tales of Setne-Khamuas celebrate Prince Khaemwaset, famous fourth son of Ramesses II, a thousand years after his death (13th century BC) in fanciful fashion (F. L1. Griffith, *Stories of the High Priests of Memphis*, 1900).

³⁰ The names Anup and Bata are divine names in the Tale of the Two Brothers; Shipwrecked Sailor and Foredoomed Prince have no specific proper names. Sailor, cf. Lichtheim, *Anc. Eg. Lit.*, I, pp. 211-215; omitted from Pritchard. Prince, Lichtheim, II, pp. 200-203; omitted from Pritchard. Two Brothers, Lichtheim, II, pp. 203-211; heavily abbreviated in Pritchard, pp. 23-25.

³¹ Egypt and Naharin (Prince); Egypt and Syria, ‘Cedar Valley’ (Two Brothers), etc.

³² Leaving aside here, most royal inscriptions (hieroglyphic texts of princes of Byblos, 2nd millennium BC; Phoenician and Aramaic texts, 1st millennium BC).

first person.³³ *Second*, quasi-historical legends. Here, the West-Semitic literary tablets from Ugarit (fourteenth/thirteenth centuries BC) offer us two works probably of this type. First and foremost is the Legend of King Keret, portrayed as ruler of a realm in the Habur region of Upper Mesopotamia who (after losing first wife and offspring) seeks a new wife with the god El's encouragement. By her, he raises a new brood, falls ill, and is cured by a winged emissary from El. The locations are probably real, and 'the assembly of Ditanu' probably links up with historical tradition in Mesopotamia.³⁴ Apart from El's ministering angel, there are no 'marvels'. However, the whole text is set in a distinctive epic style, high-flown poetry rich in standing clichés. It is clearly a legendary poetic epic whose chief character was quite possibly a historical king of centuries before. Secondly, there is the Legend of Danel and Aqhat. Danel is king of Harnam in the Lebanese Bega-region who, also, needs and is granted a son, Aqhat. This text, however, in similar poetic epic style, is pure legend and mythology, as Danel, Aqhat and the various Canaanite gods mingle freely in the action. If there ever was such a king, his name, location and perhaps son are the sole conceivable 'historical' elements; the main thread of the epic lies elsewhere.³⁵ Danel in fact is closer to Egypt's third class of narrative—purely fictional tales—and is perhaps best so classified.

In Mesopotamia, we find largely comparable literary groups. *First*, as historical texts of kings preponderate, few 'non-royals' have left biographical-type narratives. However, at a period of relative weakness in Assyrian central government, the high official

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Shamshi-ilu (eighth century BC) left monumental texts on his own account at Til Barsip, for example.³⁶ Two other officials show similar independence.³⁷ *Second*, historical legends. These occur in both the Sumerian and Akkadian literatures. In Sumerian (early second millennium BC), we possess a series of epic tales of early kings who lived in the early third millennium BC (nine hundred years earlier)—of Enmerkar and Lugalbanda (four works), and above all about Gilgamesh of Uruk (five separate legends). These three kings were all, originally, very early Sumerian city-state rulers whose fame became (literally!) legendary. Enmerkar and Lugalbanda are shown in negotiation and conflict with the distant land of Aratta (in Iran?). Gilgamesh fights with Agga king of Kish; goes on an expedition to the cedar-forests in the (Syrian) mountains; is involved with the goddess Inanna, etc. All these stories are set out in a high-flown, poetic style, and sometimes involve deities directly. In Akkadian (Babylonian) literature, the materials on Gilgamesh are woven into a single Epic of Gilgamesh, whose hero seeks immortal life after the loss of his friend. The great kings Sargon and Naram-Sin of Akkad (c. 2300 BC) were celebrated in legends of five hundred or more years later. These reflect in colourful form the imperial wars and battles of these known historical kings. In The King of Battle Legend, for example, Sargon marches to Anatolia to aid the merchants there, his route being encumbered by blocks of lapis-lazuli and gold as well

³³ Royal, but narrates the king's fortunes as a displaced fugitive in very graphic, 'non-royal' circumstances. S. Smith, *The Statue of Idrimi*, 1949; Oppenheim in Pritchard, *Anc. Near E. Texts*, 3rd ed., pp. 557-8, or *Supplement*, pp. 121-2.

³⁴ See J. C. de Moor in *Zeitschrift für alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 88 (1976), pp. 324, 335 f., and K. A. Kitchen, 'The King List of Ugarit', in *Ugarit-Forschungen* 9 (1977/78), in press.

³⁵ As pointed out by the French scholars A. Caquot, M. Szymer, A. Herdner, *Textes Ougaritiques*, I, 1974, pp. 409 ff., esp. p. 413-5.

³⁶ References collected in W. Schramm, *Einleitung in die Assyrischen Königsinschriften*, II, 1973, pp. 120-122. Translated, Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria*, I, 1926, pp. 295-6 (§§ 823-7).

³⁷ Namely Bel-harran-beli-usur and Shamash-resha-usur, cf. Schramm, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 122-3, for references.

as by forest and thorn-thickets!³⁸ One of the five legends about Naram-Sin has demonic hordes invading his empire from the north-west.³⁹ The historical king of Assyria, Tukulti-Ninurta I (thirteenth century BC), was also commemorated by an epic composition, in this case composed in his reign.⁴⁰ *Third*, purely fictional tales, without historical content. Such are the Three Ox-Drivers of Adab and the Old Man and Young Girl (both Sumerian)⁴¹ and the Poor Man of Nippur and At the Cleaner's (both Akkadian).⁴² Specific detail of people and places is often minimal, and such stories are entertaining and generalized.

In Hittite Anatolia, further material is to be found. *First*, historical texts. These are almost all royal—the Deeds of Anittas from the dawn of Hittite history, the 'Annals' of Hattusil I, and the fuller records of the Empire kings. *Second*, historical legends. Here, the Hittites copied and translated Mesopotamian works about Gilgamesh and Sargon of Akkad, besides their own stories of (e.g.) King Anum-Khirbe and the City of Zalpa, and the Siege of Urshu. Here too, historical people and elements are set in later literary works. *Third*, stories of general, fictional type—stories of Appu, Keshshi and others.⁴³

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In summary, the ancient biblical world had a considerable (if unevenly preserved) wealth of narratives varying from strictly historical/(auto)-biographical through historico-legendary (stories of former historical persons) to pure fiction, even fantasy. Where then, as West-Semitic narrations, do the patriarchal narratives stand in this wider literary context? First of all, as noted already, they are entirely concerned with a purely human family whose lifestyle is firmly tied to the everyday realities of herding livestock (pasture, wells), yearning for children, arranging suitable marriages, and so on. We never read (for example) of animals divided up that magically rejoin and live again, or of a patriarch's path barred by blocks of lapis or gold. Rather, bearing strictly real, human names, the patriarchs move in well-defined, specific locations—Ur, Haran, Damascus, Shechem, Egypt, Shur, Hebron/Mature, the Negeb, Gerar, etc.—and not in some vague, never-never land. By their names and characters, the patriarchs are a group of distinguishable individuals, neither ghosts nor stereotypes. Only two features seem other than purely mortal and 'secular', and neither is pertinent to deciding the question of historicity. As noticed above, long lifespans are no more contrahistorical than the 900 years of an Enmebaragisi in Sumer. And the relations with deity are comparable in form with those attested of known historical people (e.g. Ramesses II), with the rarest exceptions. Thus, even on a severely 'rationalistic' view, the scope for supposedly non-historical embellishments is very limited.

Secondly, therefore, on content and type, the patriarchal narratives of Genesis 11-50 can be seen to be wholly different from the third class of ancient Near-Eastern narratives, the vague fictions and fantasies of (e.g.) the Shipwrecked Sailor or the Tale of the Two Brothers. One

³⁸ Cf. Gadd in *Cambridge Ancient History*, 3rd ed., I/2, 1971, pp. 426-7.

³⁹ Gadd, *op. cit.*, pp. 442-3; cf. Grayson and Sollberger, *Revue d'Assyriologie* 70 (1976), pp. 103-128 (in French).

⁴⁰ Cf. J. M. Munn-Rankin, in *Cambr. Anc. History*, 3rd ed., II/2, 1975, p. 286 f. and n. 5.

⁴¹ The former, summarized (in French) by J. J. A. van Dijk, *Sagesse Sumeroakkadienne*, 1953, pp. 11-12; the latter, translated by B. Alster, *Studies in Sumerian Proverbs*, 1975, pp. 90 f., 92 ff.

⁴² Translated, respectively, by O. R. Gurney, *Anatolian Studies* 6 (1956), pp. 145 ff. and by C. J. Gadd, *Iraq* 25 (1963), pp. 181 ff.

⁴³ All references for Hittite literature are in E. Laroche, *Catalogue des textes hittites*, 1971, and 1st supplement, *Revue Hittite et Asianique* 30 (1972/74), pp. 94-133.

need only read these and the Genesis narratives to see the striking differences. The latter, again, are also visibly different from the second class of ancient Near-Eastern narratives, the 'historical legends'. As remarked above, no 'animal magic' (cf. Tales of the Magicians), or gold and lapis outcrops or demonic hordes (Sargon, Naram-Sin.) And stylistically, the Genesis narratives are expressed in straightforward prose—not the stilted epic poetry of such as Keret and Danel at Ugarit. In both content and literary mould, the patriarchal narratives are visibly more 'realistic' and seemingly 'historical' than anything in most of the historical legends of the ancient Near East. How, then, do the patriarchal narratives compare with our first class of ancient Near-Eastern narratives (autobiographical, etc.)? The patriarchal narratives are neither royal inscriptions (formal texts for or by kings) nor autobiographical, first-person, accounts as

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transmitted to us. But they do share the straightforward narrative form of known autobiographical works. They are in the third person and set in the past; Genesis (50:26) ends with Joseph put in a coffin in Egypt. On type, therefore, our extant patriarchal narratives come between the first and second classes of ancient Near-Eastern narrative. In sober content and mode of expression, they are clearly closest to the first category, without being identical with it (not first person). They share their third person narrative form with occasional texts of the first category⁴⁴ and all texts of the second group—but entirely lack the fantasy-embellishments of the second group.

Hence, purely on literary type and content—as measured against the self-existent criteria of the biblical world—the patriarchal narratives stand closest to historically-founded narratives, sharing with 'legendary' narratives almost nothing but their 'posthumous' form. This by itself does not, of course, prove that the patriarchs are, or were, historical people. But these facts (based on external, tangible comparison) do favour understanding the patriarchs as having been historical persons within historically-based traditions, and equally clearly go against any arbitrary assumption that they 'must' have been simply a myth or legend.⁴⁵ In the latter case, we would have been entitled to expect a different type of narrative, more clearly of categories two or three. If the patriarchal narratives are not historical or quasi-historical, then they must be specimens of a type of imaginative, 'realistic-fiction' novel not otherwise known to have been invented until several millennia later, in fact approaching modern times. That, in itself, would be more than passing strange.

An entirely separate issue from all of the foregoing is that of date. If the patriarchs indeed existed historically, the entire biblical tradition is unanimous in placing them long before the monarchy, and well before Moses, whose God was the God of the long-dead 'fathers', Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and in fact some four centuries before the exodus on more than one statement. As any exodus from Egypt leading to settlement in Canaan must pre-date the

⁴⁴ Cf. (e.g.) the 'foundation-inscription' of Iahdun-Lim, king of Mari (c. 1800 BC), entirely in the 3rd person; Oppenheim, in Pritchard, *Anc. Near E. Texts*, 3rd ed., pp. 556-7, or *Supplement*, pp. 120-1.

⁴⁵ These external criteria give the lie completely to the fairy-tale nonsense enunciated by Gunkel (*Die Sagen der Genesis*, 1901; in English, *The Legends of Genesis*, 1901, repr. 1964), which takes no serious account whatsoever of the ancient Near-Eastern literary background.

fifth year of the pharaoh Merenptah, at c. 1220/1209 BC at the latest,⁴⁶ four centuries before the late thirteenth century BC gives the seventeenth century BC as the latest possible date (on explicit biblical data) for the patriarchs on entry to Egypt, and they may obviously go back rather earlier. A quite separate issue from this is that of the date of the narratives about the patriarchs. The ‘minimalist’ view promulgated late last century would be that—at most—vague traditions of distant founding fathers were much later woven into a whole cycle of ‘patriarchal stories’ during the Hebrew

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monarchy (c. 1000-600 BC), stories that reflect only the late period in which they were concocted.⁴⁷ However, this minimalist view is subject to various difficulties, including: (i) it fails entirely to account for firm correlations between features in the patriarchal narratives and relatively early phenomena (early second millennium), (ii) it entails acceptance of a ‘modern novel’ view of the narratives already seen to be almost incredible (cf. just above), (iii) the narratives do not take the proper, ancient Near-Eastern legendary forms that they should if the minimalist view were true. Therefore, the late date and fictional nature of the narratives favoured by this antiquated view do not fit the facts available today—the date of the narratives should most probably be earlier, and their nature be something stronger than fiction, nearer to historical. If the patriarchs really had been early-second-millennium ancestors of thirteenth-century Israel, then it is conceivable that traditions of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their family-group were handed down among the Hebrews in Egypt (in both oral and written forms). The first formal one-document composition about them might have been produced in the thirteenth century BC, or at the very latest by the united monarchy (c. 1000 BC). In that case, the narratives should preserve traces of early-second-millennium date plus possibly traces of the time of final composition (thirteenth century BC or later) and of any subsequent minor editing.

Before we turn to the question of possible correlations between features of the patriarchal narratives and in the ancient Near East, one other question must be considered—that of the transmission of traditions across several centuries. Could traditions about the patriarchs be reliably transmitted during, say, the 430 years from Jacob and Joseph’s time to Moses’s day? Or even till later? In the light of currently available knowledge, the answer in principle must be ‘yes’. Thus, the discoveries at Ebla (chapter 3, above) have shown that the Assyrian King List of c. 1000 BC and after was perfectly correct in accurately retaining the name and the function of Tudiya as its earliest-known king of Assyria, who reigned about 2300 BC. This is a case of reliable transmission across thirteen centuries and more—three times as long as the four centuries of Genesis-Exodus, and half as long again as the spurious figure of eight centuries that worried T. L. Thompson.⁴⁸ The Assyrian King List tradition belonged to a West-Semitic family (that of ShamshiAdad I), as do the patriarchal traditions; and its original form spanned a period of five centuries (c. 2300-1800 BC). Moreover, this early Assyrian tradition had a close relative and part-parallel: the less well transmitted list of ancestors of the great-grandson of Hammurabi of Babylon, which ultimately went back seven cen-

⁴⁶ Depending on whether the accession of Ramesses II occurred in 1290 or 1279 BC (1304 is now excluded). The ‘Israel Stela’ of Merenptah (tacitly supported by other texts of his) sets Israel in Canaan by his 5th year; therefore any members of that group who had come from Egypt must have left Egypt well before that date.

⁴⁷ The classic view of 100 years ago, promoted in even more extreme form by T. L. Thompson, J. van Seters, etc.

⁴⁸ In his *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, 1974, p. 8.

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turies to Tudiya. Furthermore, not all the ancestors in the twin lines of Shamshi-Adad and Hammurabi had actually been kings of Assyria or Babylon, but had been nothing more than minor family chiefs—in effect, private people. Thus, quite apart from any theories about the Hebrew patriarchs, the phenomenon of several centuries’ transmission of family memory is securely attested in the West Semitic world of the early second millennium BC.

Further north, in Anatolia, the Hittite archives of the fourteenth/thirteenth centuries BC preserved copies of an ‘Annalistic Report’ by a king Anittas of Kussara, who had supposedly reigned in an epoch (nineteenth/eighteenth century BC) before the founding of the Old-Hittite kingdom proper. The historical reality of Anittas was subsequently proven by archaeological discovery of tablets of his contemporaries naming him, and of a spear-head inscribed ‘Palace of Anittas’. Even though the surviving copies are from about five centuries later, the authenticity of Anittas’s ‘Report’ has been demonstrated on both linguistic and historical grounds: a case of reliable transmission across that span.⁴⁹

Returning to Syria and West-Semitic tradition, we may glance at the King List of Ugarit. A ritual tablet from shortly before 1200 BC once contained a list of up to thirty-six consecutive kings of Ugarit, stretching back through over six centuries to the founder Yaqaru in the nineteenth century BC—royal ancestors of one of the last kings of Ugarit; another document may cite five protohistoric rulers back to 2000 BC or more.⁵⁰ Thus, the princes of a quite modest-sized city-state could retain records reaching back six, perhaps seven or eight centuries, BC. The reality of Yaqaru at least is essentially proven by his ‘dynastic seal’—of a type from about the nineteenth century BC—used by later kings of Ugarit.

Finally, in Egypt, not only royal, but also private family records and memories could reach far back. Thus, a celebrated private lawsuit concluded about Year 20 of Ramesses II (c. 1270/1260 BC) was fought for a century earlier by rival wings of one family, to gain control over a tract of land originally given to their ancestor Neshi some three hundred years before Ramesses II’s time.⁵¹ Only in recent years has Neshi himself turned up as a proven historical character, serving the pharaohs Kamose and Ahmose who expelled the Hyksos from Egypt, thus demonstrating the reliability of that family tradition. This family was of no great or exalted standing by Ramesses II’s day, but zealously guarded its own traditions and knew how to consult official records to cite in law courts.

Thus, in all the principal cultural areas of the ancient biblical world, it was possible for the ancients to transmit family or other traditions across a span of several centuries; this is a matter of

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observed fact, not merely of speculation, as the foregoing examples should indicate.

⁴⁹ References for Anittas, cf. my *Ancient Orient & OT*, p. 46 and n. 53; and in *Tyndale Bulletin* 17 (1966), p. 78 and nn. 48, 52-53; also now, E. Neu, *Der Anitta-Text*, 1974 (*Studien zu den Boghazköy-Texten*, 18).

⁵⁰ Cf. Kitchen, ‘The King List of Ugarit’, *Ugarit-Forschungen* 9 (1977/78), in press.

⁵¹ The famous legal text of the official Mose, now republished by G. A. Gaballa, *The Memphite Tomb Chapel of Mose*, 1977.

3. Cultural Backgrounds

An ancient tradition reliably transmitted across several centuries is all very well in principle. But what about practice? In the case of the patriarchs, how far is it true that the narratives indeed reflect early second millennium conditions? Or has recent reactionary scholarship really won the day? A brief review is in order.⁵²

(i) *Proper Names* The position here is that practically all the patriarchal names find their best equivalents and analogues in the early second millennium BC. Some names, elements and forms are attested also in later centuries—and some from as early as the third millennium BC. A point of particular importance is that all are human names, names of individuals, in external sources as in Genesis—not simply names of tribes, deities or other entities. Both elements in the name Ab-ram, ‘the father is exalted’ or ‘the exalted one is father’ occur in the Mari archives⁵³ and other early second millennium sources, as well as in later centuries. Ab(u)-ram(a) should not be confused with Abi-ram, ‘my father is exalted’. The extended form Abraham has its nearest relative in the name Aburahan of the Egyptian Execration Texts (c. 1800 BC), *n* and *m* being dialect-variants in some cases.⁵⁴ Ben-(‘son’-) names such as Benjamin are common at all periods. ‘Amorite Imperfective’ names such as Jacob, Joseph, Isaac, Ishmael, Israel, are particularly favoured in the early second millennium BC, go back to the third millennium BC, and are in use in the later second millennium BC, sometimes appearing later still. Thus, Ishmael is paralleled not only by Yasmakh-El, etc., in the Mari archives (eighteenth century BC) but five hundred years earlier at Ebla, as Ishmail. Likewise, Israel is paralleled not only by the thirteenth century Yisra-il of Ugarit but also by the twenty-third century Ishrail of Ebla. Parallels for Jacob are particularly well-known in the early to mid-second millennium.⁵⁵ Zebulun is close to Old-Babylonian Zabilanu and the Zabilu-Hadda of the Execration Texts, while Levi compares with equally early second millennium names in Lawi-; and so on.⁵⁶ As virtually the whole body of ‘patriarchal’ names has parallels from the early second millennium BC (sometimes even from the third), it is impossible to use later occurrences of some names or elements to prove a late date. The names indicate a date either in or after the early second millennium.

(ii) *Social and Legal Usages* Various of the social customs of the patriarchs find no echo in the days of the Hebrew monarchy, and practically none in the laws of Moses (Exodus-Deuteronomy).

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⁵² Most of what was said by the present writer in *Tyndale Bulletin*, 17 (1966), pp. 63-97, and in *Anc. Orient & OT*, 1966, pp. 41-56, etc., still retains full validity (only some Nuzi references should be dropped, such as the ‘Dilbat’ Abram). The panicky judgements expressed (e.g.) by S. M. Warner and J. M. Miller, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 2 (1977), pp. 50 ff. and 62 ff., betray muddled thinking on methodology and a failure to understand the nature of evidence. They fail totally to grapple with the fallacies in Thompson and van Seters.

⁵³ Elements Abu-, rama, in H. B. Huffmon, *Amorite Personal Names in the Mari Texts*, 1965, pp. 154, 262, refs. Similar type of name, Ab(u)-shar(ru), ‘the father is king’, in the Beni-Hasan scene (19th century BC) of 37 Asiatics visiting Egypt.

⁵⁴ As in the forms Naharin, Nahrma, equivalents of Naharaim, in mid 2nd millennium BC. Van Seter’s South-Arabian parallel is rather uncertain (wrong h?), on his own admission (*Abraham ...*, p. 42, n. 7).

⁵⁵ References, see my *Anc. Orient & OT*, p. 48, n. 64; in his desperate efforts to get late material, T. L. Thompson is forced to go for non-‘Imperfective’ names on the root ‘agab, hence not proper parallels to Jacob.

⁵⁶ See *Ancient Orient & OT*, pp. 48-49 with nn. 63-68; Kitchen, *Tyndale Bulletin* 17 (1966), pp. 68-69 and refs.

But they do find analogy in the law-collections and usages of early second millennium Mesopotamia. These make it clear that the rights of children by more than one wife were to be safeguarded. Just as Jacob kept both Leah (whom he had not desired) and Rachel (whom he did), without divorcing the former, so in the Lipit-Ishtar laws (twentieth century BC), § 28, a man was to maintain his first as well as second wife.⁵⁷ Again, the children of more than one wife, including by slave-girls if acknowledged, all had rights of inheritance, as is clear from Lipit-Ishtar, § 24, and from Hammurabi's laws (eighteenth century BC), § 170. This too is admitted by Jacob, as all of his sons—by the handmaids Bilhah and Zilpah, as well as by Leah and Rachel—are included in his final blessing (Gen. 49); this usage did continue into at least the late second millennium, being recognised in Deuteronomy 21:15-17. Across the centuries, one may see a shift in emphasis in some details. Thus, in the twentieth century BC, Lipit-Ishtar's laws envisage (§ 24) equal shares among all the inheriting children. In the eighteenth century BC, Hammurabi's laws (§ 170) qualify this by giving a 'first choice' in the estate to the son(s) of the first wife. In the fifteenth century BC, various Nuzi adoption-tablets clearly accord a double share to a first-born natural son (in contrast to an adoptee).⁵⁸ In the thirteenth century BC, a double share is also the prerogative of the firstborn son in Deuteronomy 21:15-17. Several centuries later, in the sixth century BC, the Neo-Babylonian laws go a stage further, assigning two-thirds (i.e. double share) of the inheritance to the sons (plural; not solely the first-born) of the first wife, and one-third to the sons of the second wife.⁵⁹ As Jacob in Gen. 49 bestowed blessings upon all his sons, he stands closest to the oldest legal tradition here, not the latest.

However, the sons of wives of different status did not always fare analogously. The Lipit-Ishtar laws (§ 26) reserved the main inheritance to the children of a deceased first wife, excluding sons by a subsequent lesser (slave?) wife (separate provision). One may here compare Gen. 25:1-6, in which (correspondingly) Abraham 'gave all that he had to Isaac' his main heir, while giving parting gifts to lesser sons by the (lesser) wife Keturah and concubines.⁶⁰ In Hammurabi's laws, sons of slave-wives shared inheritance if acknowledged by their father (§ 170) but not if unacknowledged (§ 171). In this context, it is interesting to observe Abraham's evident desire to 'recognise' Ishmael (Gen. 17:18), and reluctance to dismiss Hagar and Ishmael from the family (Gen. 21:10-11). However, God's plan was for an heir (Isaac) by Abraham and Sarah, not Ishmael for whom a separate destiny was intended. Normally, if a slave-wife had borne children, she was not to be ex-

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⁵⁷ Gen. 29:25 ff.; Lipit-Ishtar, cf. Kramer in Pritchard, *Anc. Near E. Texts*, p. 160. Cf. also Hammurabi's laws, § 148 (Meek/Pritchard, p. 172).

⁵⁸ E.g., the texts in Speiser, Annual, *American Schools of Oriental Research*, 10 (1930), pp. 8, 30, 32, 35, 39. This double share can occur as early as the 18th century BC (as at Mari, text, n. 63 below).

⁵⁹ In § 15 (Meek, in Pritchard, *Anc. Near E. Texts*, p. 198). Of course, if there is but one son by the first wife, the result is the same as in the preceding thousand years (examples of 1st-millennium documents, cf. van Seters, *Abraham ...*, pp. 91-92, who deliberately refuses to acknowledge the closer Mari parallel in order to overlay the late data).

⁶⁰ Cf. also Lipit-Ishtar, § 25; Abraham's sending the lesser offspring away duly provided-for implies their having their freedom, as here.

pelled or sold (so, Hammurabi's laws, § 146), thus Abraham's unwillingness to do so (Gen. 21:10-11) was reinforced by binding custom of the day; divine urging was needful to persuade him to send Hagar and Ishmael away (Gen. 21:12-14).⁶¹

Before he had children at all, Abraham had adopted Eliezer, a 'son of his house' (cf. Gen. 15:3, RV) as his heir. Possibly a slave,⁶² probably simply a member of the household, the inheritance-rights of such an adoptee were commonly guarded in Mesopotamian law, even against the subsequent birth of offspring (natural heirs) to the adoptor.⁶³ Such a position was explicitly accepted by Abraham (Gen. 15:2, 3), until he was told and commanded otherwise (Gen. 15:4).

The whole of the foregoing sample of comparative legal material gives some indication of how simply and straightforwardly the data of the patriarchal narratives go along with evidence for prevailing usage in the first half of the second millennium BC, especially the early part. It will be noticed that Nuzi has hardly been drawn upon—and when cited (in the notes) it essentially goes with the other Mesopotamian evidence. Three lessons are to be learnt here. First, patriarchal usage finds ample early context, well before, and independently of, Nuzi. Second, usages at Nuzi often belong to the mainstream Mesopotamian tradition. Third, the thesis of a specially Hurrian component in the legal/social usages at Nuzi largely evaporates—and has no bearing on the patriarchs either. Here, as in other things, the Hurrians largely assimilated to Mesopotamian modes and culture; Nuzi is nearer the end of a development than the beginning.

In contrast to the foregoing survey of 'positive' context, it is well to note cases of alleged parallels that have not stood the test of time, particularly from Nuzi. One such is the supposed Nuzi parallels for Abraham calling his wife his 'sister' (Gen. 12:10-20; 20:2 ff.; cf. Isaac, 26:6-11) which are totally irrelevant.⁶⁴ The supposed role of the *teraphim* or 'household gods' (Gen. 31:19, 30-35) as constituting the title-deeds to inheritance, inspired by Nuzi documents, seems also to be fallacious;⁶⁵ Rachel simply took them for her own protection and blessing. Again, much has been made of supposed sale of birthright, and of oral deathbed blessings, and here too the Nuzi evidence is not what it was thought to be.⁶⁶

⁶¹ A situation still true in Nuzi (cf. Speiser, *Annual, American Schools of Oriental Research*, 10 (1930), p. 32. Contrast Assyrian usage, both early (Finkelstein in Pritchard, *Anc. N. E. Texts*, 3rd ed., p. 543:4, or *Supplement*, p. 107:4) and late (example, J. N. Postgate, *Fifty Neo-Assyrian Legal Documents*, 1976, p. 106), perhaps showing regional differentiation.

⁶² But not definitely, as seen by van Seters, *Abraham...*, pp. 18-19, who compares Akkadian *mar-bitī*, misleadingly defining this as Late Babylonian, whereas it is attested as early as Old Babylonian (early 2nd millennium) and Middle Babylonian (later 2nd millennium), in references given by W. von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch*, p. 616a, § 10b, and by M. David, *Die Adoption im altbabylonischen Recht*, 1927, p. 101, VAT 8947:21. The constant refusal by van Seters, Thompson, etc., to deal fairly with the full data—early as well as late—is a serious distortion of the evidence, and emphasises the weakness of their basic case.

⁶³ Examples from the early 2nd millennium BC range from Sippar and Babylon (M. Schorr, *Urkunden des altbabylonischen Zivil- und Prozessrechts*, 1913, Nos. 8, 9, 17, 22) far northwest to Mari (*ARMT*, VIII, No. 1; Finkelstein in Pritchard, *Anc. Near E. Texts*, 3rd ed., p. 545:13, or *Supplement*, p. 109:13). Slaves could also be freed by adoption, cf. Schorr, *op. cit.*, Nos. 23-29, and remarks by David, *Die Adoption ...*, pp. 68-69. In a Middle Assyrian adoption (David, *op. cit.*, p. 101), the adoptee is also safeguarded, but with lesser share.

⁶⁴ Duly criticised and dismissed by van Seters, *Abraham*, pp. 71 ff. and refs., following D. Freedman, *Journal of Anc. Near Eastern Society*, Univ. Columbia, 2 (1970), pp. 77-85.

⁶⁵ On this, cf. M. Greenberg, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 (1962), pp. 239-248; followed by van Seters, *op. cit.*, pp. 93 f.

⁶⁶ For a critical reassessment of Nuzi data (better balanced than van Seters or Thompson), see M. J. Selman, *Tyndale Bulletin* 27 (1976), in press.

Then there is the question of special pleading and misuse of data, whether of first or second millennium BC. Thus, thrice over, van Seters has tried to correlate a seventh-century Assyrian marriage-conveyance with Sarah's giving of Hagar to Abraham to have a son (Gen. 16:1 ff.), as well as an Egyptian text of the twelfth century BC.⁶⁷ The Egyptian text can be dismissed without further ado;

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it consists solely of a remarkable series of adoptions (of a wife by a husband, of a brother by a sister, etc.), in which only one element is comparable with Sarah/Hagar—as direct background to Gen. 16 its value is virtually nil.⁶⁸ The Assyrian text is hardly in much better case. Van Seters overstresses the initiative of Sarah (Gen. 16:2), whereas it is Abraham to whom the matter of a son and heir is central concern (Gen. 15:2-6; 16:5; 17:2-6, 16-17; 22). The Assyrian document contains the parallel of a servant-girl bearing sons in the childless wife's stead, but has no word about future inheritance, etc. Furthermore, it stipulates that the slave-girl may be sold off at will, in direct contrast to the position in Genesis (21:10-11) where—in harmony with most early second-millennium usage—Abraham did not expect to dispose of Hagar (whether by sale or simple expulsion). Hence, the Assyrian document is an inferior parallel to the second millennium data. And, as its latest editor makes clear,⁶⁹ this selfsame document is *not* a normative Neo-Assyrian marriagecontract, it is by its conditions 'without any parallel', 'out of the ordinary' for its epoch. Hence, this very imperfect, anomalous 'parallel' hardly links Genesis to the first millennium.

In the case of Genesis 23, two issues must be viewed separately. A question that remains open is the possible use of the Hittite Laws as background to that chapter. This would suggest that Abraham sought to buy only the Machpelah cave (carrying no land-dues), but—under the necessity of burying Sarah—had in fact to buy the entire holding inclusive of the cave (which meant paying also the dues).⁷⁰ Already, § 46 of the Hittite Laws has been rightly excluded, as it deals with gift, not sale.⁷¹ However, the relation of § 47 (utilised above) turns on the status of Ephron (unknown!) and the meaning of particular terms in the laws.

But a question that can be considered closed is the attempted misuse of a class of first millennium documents to prove a late date for Gen. 23. These are so-called 'dialogue-documents' of Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian times, asserted to be the 'model' for Gen. 23.⁷² However, there is not a scrap of evidence that Gen. 23 is a 'dialogue-document'—it is merely a narrative of negotiations and agreement; and the assertion that 'dialogue-documents' were only of the first millennium BC rested solely on negative evidence, notoriously

⁶⁷ *Journal of Biblical Literature* 87 (1968), pp. 401-8; *Abraham in History & Tradition*, 1975, pp. 68 ff.; with A. K. Grayson, in *Orientalia* 44 (1975), 485 f.

⁶⁸ See the original publication by Gardiner and De Zulueta, *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 26 (1940/1), pp. 23-29. This document is exceptional, not a sample of 'normality'.

⁶⁹ See J. N. Postgate, *Fifty Neo-Assyrian Legal Documents*, 1976, p. 106.

⁷⁰ First propounded by M. R. Lehmann, *Bulletin, American Schools of Oriental Research* No. 129 (1953), pp. 15-18; cf. my *Ancient Orient & OT*, pp. 154-5.

⁷¹ As pointed out by H. A. Hoffner, *Tyndale Bulletin* 20 (1969), pp. 33-35, who would discount the Hittite parallel completely.

⁷² So, G. M. Tucker, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85 (1966), pp. 77-84, followed by van Seters, *Abraham*, pp. 98-100.

unreliable.⁷³ And in fact erroneous, as this type of document is attested from the Old-Babylonian period, i.e. the early second millennium BC!⁷⁴ At a stroke, the special pleading by Tucker and van Seters for a first millennium date must be dismissed. The type of document alleged is as likely to be early as late, and may not even be relevant.

(iii) *Patriarchal Religion* It remains true that by far the most

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cogent parallels and background for the concept of ‘the God of the fathers’ go back to the Old-Assyrian tablets of the nineteenth century BC, clearly superior to Nabatean and Safaitic part-parallels so late (virtually New Testament times!) as to have no bearing on the Genesis narratives.⁷⁵

(iv) *Geopolitical* In Genesis 14 occur rival coalitions of kings from Mesopotamia and Transjordan. Petty kingdoms flourished in Canaan and Transjordan at most periods. By the thirteenth century BC onwards, city-states (Sodom, Gomorrah, etc.) were replaced by larger kingdoms in Transjordan (Moab, Edom; Sihon’s realm, etc.). Hence, reports of city-state coalitions there must relate to the thirteenth century BC or earlier. But with coalitions of Mesopotamian and neighbouring kingdoms, the scope for dating seems to be still more limited. Between about 2000 BC (fall of the Third Dynasty of Ur) and roughly 1750 BC (triumph of Hammurabi of Babylon), such power-alliances were an outstanding feature of the politics of the day, reaching as far east as Elam, and far north-west to the borders of Anatolia. One famous Mari letter mentions alliances of ten, fifteen and even twenty kings. At least five other Mesopotamian-based coalitions are known from the nineteenth/eighteenth centuries BC, usually with four or five members per grouping.⁷⁶ Western expeditions by eastern kings are known from at least Sargon of Akkad onwards.⁷⁷ The phenomenon of Mesopotamian coalitions in the form found would not fit a date before 2000 BC (when the Third Dynasty of Ur dominated), and certainly not after Hammurabi’s time (c. 1750 BC), when the twin kingdoms of Babylon and Assyria in due course became the only heartland Mesopotamian powers. Therefore, even though it is impractical to identify (and thus date) the individual kings of Gen. 14, the political framework in which they move is that of the early second millennium BC. Attempts to assign a late, still more a very late, date to Gen. 14 fail entirely to account for this situation. The comparison with late Mesopotamian chronicles⁷⁸ is spurious. The third-person narrative and brief speeches in Gen. 14 are no different to those elsewhere in Genesis; the subject-matter does not justify a ‘chronicle’ classification. With the rarest exceptions, the first-millennium Mesopotamian chronicles are altogether more stilted and staccato than Gen. 14, commonly with frequent regnal dates and month notations. In Gen. 14, we have no regnal dates, merely a period of twelve/fourteen years independent of any given reign. Just as it is no chronicle, so Gen. 14 is not a royal inscription, but it has more in

⁷³ Points clearly set out by me, *Ancient Orient & OT*, pp. 155-6, as seen by (e.g.) Bright, *A History of Israel*, 2nd ed., 1972, p. 79, n. 84; but deliberately ignored (hence, suppressed) by van Seters, *Abraham*, pp. 98-100.

⁷⁴ Pointed out by D. J. Wiseman, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 134 (1977), p. 130, n. 29, with reference to the tablet British Museum, *Cuneiform Texts*, 45, 1964, No. 60.

⁷⁵ References, see my *Ancient Orient & OT*, pp. 50-51 with notes.

⁷⁶ Full references, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-46, with nn. 48-52.

⁷⁷ Refs., see *op. cit.*, p. 47 with nn. 55-58, to which add Iahdun-Lim of Mari, cf. Oppenheim in Pritchard, *Anc. Near E. Texts*, 3rd ed., pp. 556-7, or *Supplement*, pp. 120-1.

⁷⁸ As by van Seters, *Abraham...*, p. 300 and n. 13, and in *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 33 (1976), p. 220.

common with the flowing narrative of a text like the early second millennium ‘foundation-text’ of Iahdun-Lim, King of Mari,⁷⁹ describing his

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Syrian campaign, etc., than with any late chronicle.

(v) *Other Aspects* The preceding sections are in no way exhaustive; more could be said in each, and other topics added. The semi-settled status of the patriarchs, etc., is most easily comparable with the early second millennium data from Mari, when this is properly understood. The wide travel of the patriarchs is particularly in harmony with what we find in the early second millennium.⁸⁰ The Canaan in which they circulate is a Canaan of petty, independent city-states and tribal groups—not one dominated by (e.g.) the Egyptian Empire, as was the case during c. 1540-1150 BC. Their Canaan is much more that of the Execration Texts of the nineteenth/eighteenth centuries BC. And so on.

So what, then do we end up with? Perhaps the following would be a fair summary. First, we have no external mentions of the patriarchs themselves beyond the pages of the Bible. Therefore, their historical existence remains unproven. In this, they stand on exactly the same level as (e.g.) Jezebel, Jeremiah, Zedekiah or Ezra—none of whom is named by name in any external, contemporary document, yet whose former existence is doubted by none. And so for many other characters of ancient history, high and low, famed or obscure. Negative evidence does not take one anywhere. Second, the patriarchs are figures of Israel’s beginnings, from well before Moses, on the unanimous verdict of biblical tradition in its entirety. So, any real traditions surviving about the patriarchs should have their roots in the early second millennium, unless they have been totally changed; spurious ‘traditions’ first concocted in the first millennium BC cannot be expected to relate to second millennium conditions. Third, the actual narratives that we possess are clearly different from the ‘legend’ and ‘fiction’ groups of ancient Near-Eastern narratives. They are closest to the ‘historical’ class, differing from it only in past time-setting and third-person (which features can occur in that class); ‘wonders’ have remarkably little role. Thus, on literary-comparative grounds alone, essential historicity should be granted. Fourth, comparisons between the features of the narratives and external data show that the recent attempts to link the patriarchal narratives exclusively or predominantly with the mid-first millennium BC are artificial and mistaken. Some features are common to the second and first millennia, others more specifically belong to the early second millennium, and nearly all find their *optimum* place in the early second millennium, even when not exclusively.

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Israel Into Egypt: Joseph

Essentially, the Joseph-narrative is today in the same position as the rest of the patriarchal narratives. It is a straightforward account, without artificial flourishes. Some elements in the

⁷⁹ See n. 77, end, above.

⁸⁰ Important here is the critical reassessment of the Mari evidence on pastoralism and ‘nomadism’ by J. T. Luke, *Pastoralism and Politics in the Mari Period*, (University Microfilms), 1965, a work available, but totally ignored by van Seters.

story suggest an early/mid second millennium origin.⁸¹ Such features include the price paid for Joseph as a slave (20 shekels), the correct average price in the eighteenth century BC, and the use of the term *saris* in its earlier meaning of ‘official’, not its later meaning of ‘eunuch’, when applied to the (married) dignitary Potiphar.⁸² Other features are not specifically tied to the earlier second millennium, but are well attested then. Asiatic slaves in Egypt, attached to the households of officials, are well-known in later Middle-Kingdom Egypt (c. 1850-1700 BC),⁸³ and Semites could rise to high position (even the throne, before the Hyksos period),⁸⁴ as did the chancellor Hur. Joseph’s career would fall easily enough into the period of the late thirteenth and early fifteenth dynasties. The role of dreams is, of course, well-known at all periods. From Egypt, we have a dream-reader’s textbook in a copy of c. 1300 BC, originating some centuries earlier; such works are known in first-millennium Assyria also.⁸⁵

‘Corn in Egypt’ is a proverbial phrase, even in English. And as well as vivid tomb-paintings with fields of golden grain, Egyptian texts speak frequently of famine, and occasionally show its emaciated victims. The Delta was a favoured region for pasturing cattle, and the east Delta a favoured objective for herdsmen such as Joseph’s family. Through becoming steward of a large Egyptian household (Gen. 39:4-6), and then as a chief official of pharaonic government (Gen. 41:39-45), anyone placed in Joseph’s situation would willy-nilly be brought into close contact with writing and records. In about this period, the Middle Bronze Age, alphabetic writing seems first to have been invented. There is, therefore, the attractive (but totally unproven) possibility of patriarchal traditions being put into such script, in West-Semitic, from the seventeenth/sixteenth centuries BC onwards, as the basis of what later we now find in Genesis.

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⁸¹ The attempt by D. B. Redford, *A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph*, 1970, to date that narrative to the 7th/5th centuries BC is simply wishful thinking based on special pleading (e.g., *paqad* called ‘late’, but known from the 18th century BC at least); sufficiently refuted by me, *Oriens Antiquus* 12 (1973), pp. 233-242.

⁸² On slave-prices, cf. already *Ancient Orient & OT*, pp. 52-53; on *saris*, Kitchen, *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 47 (1961), p. 160, completing *Anc. Orient & OT*, pp. 165-6.

⁸³ Papyrus Brooklyn 35. 1446, W. C. Hayes, *A Papyrus of the Late Middle Kingdom*, 1955 (cf. Wilson-Pritchard, 3rd ed., p. 553 f.); Posener, *Syria* 34 (1957), pp. 145-163.

⁸⁴ As did a king ‘Ameny the Asiatic’, and perhaps the king Khendjer, if his name is related to Ugaritic *hnzr*, with strong *h*.

⁸⁵ Papyrus Chester Beatty III, in Gardiner, *Hieratic Papyri in the British Museum*, Third Series, I, 1935, pp. 9-23; A. L. Oppenheim, *The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East*, 1956.