

Chapter 7

Summary

The book of Genesis tells us about the beginnings of the people of Israel. God reveals Himself to Abram in Ur, Mesopotamia, and Harran in northern Syria, and makes him the progenitor of a new nation. Not only were he and his descendants to settle in a foreign land, but God would also make them a great nation. However, their beginnings are harsh. Repeatedly, the land is ravaged by famine. Abraham, as he will be called later, is temporarily forced to move to Egypt for the safety of his clan, while Jacob and his sons eventually migrated to Egypt, where under the supervision of Joseph (who had become a high Egyptian official) they would survive the famine. The clan then settled in the eastern Nile Delta, where it would remain for several centuries until Moses took the Israelites back to Canaan.

Few biblical scholars and archaeologists today acknowledge the historicity of these things. However, this has not always been the case. As late as the middle of the 20th century, many scholars still accepted that the stories contained true history, finding them widely confirmed by archaeological evidence. But since the 1970s the situation has radically changed. This monograph set off by providing an overview of these developments, lining out the increased negative opinion on the patriarchal narratives in recent years.

However, research is constantly subject to changes and consequently, even more recent archaeological evidence has now yielded information that has prompted the authors to raise the question on the historicity of the patriarchal narratives once again. By doing so, they place themselves outside the prevailing paradigm of a late date for the biblical texts, whose theological justification they question.

Any serious historical-archaeological discussion must set off by determining the chronological baseline. In other words, before we deal with questions relating to the historical reliability of ancient documents, we must clarify when the stories described therein actually took place. To achieve this daunting task, we must not rely on ambiguous considerations on when we feel these stories fit best, but on a largely independent chronological scheme. We studied different aspects including the chronological evidence in the biblical texts as well as archaeological information. Especially astronomical retrocalculations proved to be a worthy tool in determining the general timeframe of the patriarchs. These provided a chronological scenario, which then served as a plausible benchmark, allowing biblical information to be compared with available extra-biblical evidence. Consequently, the following key points stood out: while Abraham would have lived mainly during the poorer Early Bronze Age IV period in Canaan, his son Isaac would have witnessed the final stages of that period and of the transitional phase between EB IV and the beginnings of re-urbanization in Canaan during Middle Bronze Age I. His grandson Jacob would have been a contemporary of a full-blown Middle Bronze Age I culture (even before he entered Egypt), when Bronze Age cities began to be refortified. We then concluded that the biblical texts

not only reflect the climatic situation of the period, but also that they fit the settlement patterns of Canaan during EB IV and MB I. This was quite surprising as former scholars had rejected the historicity of the narratives precisely because of archaeological evidence known by the 1970's. Yet more recent excavations and additional information allowed us to question this now outdated position.

Politically speaking, during his earlier years in Canaan Abraham would have witnessed small independent political units. While this situation is not unique for Canaan, it was for Mesopotamia, whose political structure disintegrated toward the end of Ur-III and during the early stages of the so-called Isin-Larsa period. This striking situation fits the patriarchal narratives well, as they mention four Mesopotamian rulers who as allies conducted a military campaign to Canaan (Genesis 14). This situation could hardly have occurred during any other time of Mesopotamian history. Also, the conditions in Egypt during the First Intermediate Period fitted Abraham's brief sojourn in the Nile Valley well, when his wife Sarah was taken to Pharaoh. The biblical narratives also relate that Abraham's great-grandson held office at the court of Pharaoh. According to our chronological scheme this would have been during the reigns of Senwosret III and Amenemhat III of the later 12th Dynasty. Here too the biblical descriptions provide striking parallels to what is known about the history of the Egyptian Middle Kingdom.

In another chapter we dealt with the ethnic clans living in Canaan at the time of the patriarchs by looking closely at extrabiblical evidence. It showed that long-held criticisms concerning the occurrence of the Hittites, Philistines, and Arameans, are no longer valid in the light of contemporary evidence. Moreover, we were able to show that the biblical accounts describe the ethnic conditions as they were during the periods under consideration. This also concerns other criticisms including the domestication of camels. While their domestication may not have been widespread at that time, positive evidence does exist that at least the two-humped Bactrian camel existed even before Abraham's time.

In closing the question must be asked if we have succeeded in rediscovering the biblical Abraham and his descendants? The answer is a sobering one: "no, we haven't." But what else would we have expected? Would it at all have been likely to find archaeological evidence of only a hand full of people? What we found instead, was that the biblical narratives fit well with what we know from archaeology about the relevant period. If ever we were to discover one of the patriarchal figures, then this would likely be Joseph, who held one of the most elevated positions in the Nile Valley when Egypt reached its zenith during the late Middle Kingdom. Perhaps we have seen glimpses of Joseph in the guise of one of the "high stewards" during the late 12th Dynasty. A statue of a West Semitic dignitary at Tell el-Daba at least showed that the Western Asiatics of the Eastern Nile Delta could attain such high positions. Evidence of West Semitic settlers in Egypt and of servants or slaves was also listed. This material undoubtedly provides us with a vivid picture of what Israelite life in Egypt would have looked like.

Current archaeological evidence invites us to rethink the origins of the patriarchal narratives. Based on this evidence alone, the early stories of the Bible no longer stand aloof and consequently can no longer be considered as fanciful fabrications produced by a late generation of redactors.