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Foreword

The first book of the Bible tells us about Israel's origins. As the story goes, God reveals himself to Abram in Ur and Harran and chooses him as the patriarch of an elect clan, which eventually was to become the nucleus of the people of Israel. Not only would Abram and his descendants settle in Canaan, but as had been promised by God, he would also become the ancestor of several peoples, including Israel. Even so, Abram's beginnings are harsh. Canaan is repeatedly struck by famine and Abraham, as he will be called later, is forced to seek temporary shelter in Egypt. His grandson Jacob and his family, the so-called "children of Israel," will also eventually migrate to Egypt, the traditional granary of the ancient Levant. It is here that Jacob's small clan will become the nation of Israel as God had promised to Abraham. After centuries of sojourning in the Nile Valley, the Israelites eventually return to the Promised Land with Moses and Joshua as their leaders.

Few biblical theologians and archaeologists today believe that this is what happened. This, however, has not always been the case. As late as the mid-20th century, many archaeologists were prepared to accept the core stories of Genesis and Exodus as true history, as the circumstances described in these chapters appeared to have been widely confirmed by what archaeological spades had uncovered.

However, based on more recent study, the situation has dramatically changed, and the atmosphere of the debate has become highly critical. What does this mean for the history of ancient Israel? Can we at all still expect to disentangle the biblical patriarchs from the mist of ancient history, or must we abandon the patriarchal stories to the realm of myth once and for all?

The authors of this volume have undertaken a thorough analysis of the available data. Starting with the question of chronology, they examined the archaeological, climatic, and sociological conditions in Canaan, Syria, Mesopotamia, and Egypt at the time and compared these with the circumstances described in the Hebrew Bible. Although they did not actually identify Abraham in ancient inscriptions, they strongly feel that the biblical tradition is reliable and that the archaeological evidence forbids a too hasty refusal of Old Testament patriarchal history.