Lion and Lamb Apologetics

The Patriarchal Age: Myth or History?

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The Biblical data match objective facts from the ancient world in an almost uncanny way, establishing the general reliability of Biblical time periods.

Over a century ago, the great would-be reconstructor of early Israelite history, Julius Wellhausen, claimed that "no historical knowledge" of the patriarchs could be gotten from Genesis. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were merely a "glorified mirage" from later Hebrew history, projected back in time.[1]

Then between the 1940s and 1960s, such scholars as William Foxwell Albright and Cyrus H. Gordon tried to show that the Patriarchal Age as described in the Bible could be set against specific Near Eastern backgrounds, namely the Middle Bronze Age, roughly 1800 B.C.[2] Since the mid-1970s, a small but vocal group of scholars, notably Thomas L. Thompson, John Van Seters and Donald B. Redford, have re-examined some of the

Julius Wellhausen

material relied on by Albright and Gordon, rightly dismissing a variety of faulty comparisons, especially those between the patriarchal narratives and the social conditions reflected in the Nuzi tablets (15th century B.C.). These scholars failed to deal with the full weight of the evidence, however, preferring to set the clock back 100 years; like Wellhausen, they concluded that the stories of the patriarchs are fictional creations—dating to the Babylonian Exile (6th century B.C.) or later[3]—and are historically worthless.

So where do we stand? Did the patriarchs actually live, or not? And how can we tell?

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[1] Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels*, 6th edition (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1927), p. 316; reprinted as *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957).

[2] See John Bright, *A History of Israel* (London: SCM Press, 1972), pp. 76 ff.

[3] See Thomas L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1974); John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1975); and Donald B. Redford, *A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph* (Leiden: Brill, 1970).

Admittedly, their names have not been identified in any original ancient documents, though the names of other Biblical figures—Hezekiah, king of Judah in the eighth century B.C.; Sanballat, governor of Samaria in the fifth century B.C.; and King David from the tenth century B.C.—have been found.

But the absence of the names of the patriarchs in the extra-Biblical historical record is, in itself, inconclusive: Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. What the future will bring we cannot know, except that it will be full of surprises, as the recent discovery of the House of David inscription attests.[a]

To evaluate the material we do possess, we must start with the Genesis narratives—containing the stories of the patriarchs and their families, who are regarded throughout the Bible as the ancestors of the later clans of ancient Israel—and test the data provided in them against objective data from the ancient world.

We have two rather solid dates to work with. Exodus 1:11 tells us that Israelite slaves built Raamses, the city of the pharaoh Ramesses II (c. 1279–1213 B.C.), which suggests that the 13th century B.C. was the time of Moses. The first extra-Biblical reference to "Israel" as a people in Canaan is on the famous hieroglyphic monument erected by Pharaoh Merneptah and known as the Merneptah stela.[b] According to the inscription on this stela, Israel existed in Canaan in 1209 B.C., a date entirely consistent with placing Moses and the Exodus in the 13th century B.C.—in archaeological terms, the Late Bronze Age.

If we work backward to date the patriarchs, figures in Genesis and Exodus suggest that they lived 400 to 430 years before the Exodus, perhaps about the 17th century B.C. Biblical genealogies from Jacob to Moses/Joshua (between 7 and 11 generations), on the other hand, suggest that the patriarchs lived at least 220 years before the Exodus. According to this combination of Egyptian and Biblical evidence, then, the patriarchs, if they lived at all, should be dated to the first half of the second millennium B.C. (the Middle Bronze Age).

What objective evidence, independent of the Bible, do we have to support the Middle Bronze Age as the Patriarchal Age?

As it turns out, quite a bit.

The Price of Slaves

One important item involves the price of slaves in silver shekels. From ancient Near Eastern sources we know the price of slaves in some detail for a period lasting about 2,000 years, from 2400 B.C. to 400 B.C. Under the Akkad Empire (2371–2191 B.C.), a decent slave fetched 10–15 silver shekels, though the price dropped slightly to 10 shekels during the Third Dynasty of Ur (2113–2006 B.C.).[4] In the second millennium B.C., during the early Babylonian period, the price of slaves rose to about 20 shekels, as we know from the Laws of Hammurabi and documents from Mari and elsewhere from the 19th and 18th centuries B.C.[5] By the 14th and 13th centuries B.C., at Nuzi and Ugarit, the price crept up to 30 shekels and sometimes more.[6] Another five hundred years later, Assyrian slave markets demanded 50 to 60 shekels for slaves; and under the Persian Empire (fifth and fourth centuries B.C.), soaring inflation pushed prices up to 90 and 120 shekels.[7]

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[4] For a summary, see Isaac Mendelsohn, *Slavery in the Ancient Near East* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1949), p. 117. For detailed commentaries, see A. Falkenstein *Die neusumerische Gerichtsurkunden* 1 (Munich: Beck, 1956), pp. 88–90; and D.O. Edzard, *Sumerische Rechtsurkunden des III. Jahrtausends* (Munich: Beck, 1968), p. 87.

[5] For the Laws of Hammurabi, sections 116, 214 and 252. For Mari, see G. Boyer, *Archives Royales de Mari VIII* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1958), p. 23; and M. Van De Mieroop, *Archiv für Orientforschung* 34 (1987), 10, 11.

[6] See Barry L. Eichler, *Indenture at Nuzi* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 16–18; and Mendelsohn, *Slavery in the Ancient Near East*, p. 118.

[7] For Assyria, see C.H.W. Johns, *Assyrian Deeds and Documents* 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1924), pp. 542–546. For the Neo-Babylonian and Persian periods, see Bruno Meissner, *Babylonien und Assyrien* 1 (Heidelberg: Winter, 1920), pp. 365–366; and his *Warenpreise in Babylonien* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1936), pp. 35–36. See also, Mendelsohn, *Slavery in the Ancient Near East*, p. 117; and Muhammed Dandamaev, *Slavery in Babylonia, from Nabopolassar to Alexander the Great* (626–331 B.C.) (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois Univ. Press: 1984), pp. 195–206.

These data provide a solid body of evidence that we can compare with the figures in the Bible, in which the price of slaves is mentioned on several occasions.

The first occurs in the patriarchal narratives: Joseph is sold to some passing Ishmaelites for 20 silver shekels (Genesis 37:28), the price of a slave in the Near East in about the 18th century B.C. Another reference is in the Sinai Covenant, where Moses, on God's instructions, sets forth the laws to govern the people when they settle in the Promised Land (Exodus 20 ff.). One of the laws concerns the compensation to be paid to the owner of a slave if someone else's ox gores the slave to death: The responsible party is to reimburse the slave-owner with "30 shekels of silver" (Exodus 21:32)—reflecting the price of slaves in the 14th or 13th century B.C. Later, in the 8th century B.C., Menahem, king of Israel,

ransoms some Israelites from Pul, king of Assyria. To obtain the money, Menahem taxes every Israelite of means "50 shekels of silver" (2 Kings 15:20); once again, this sum accords with the cost of slaves at the time.
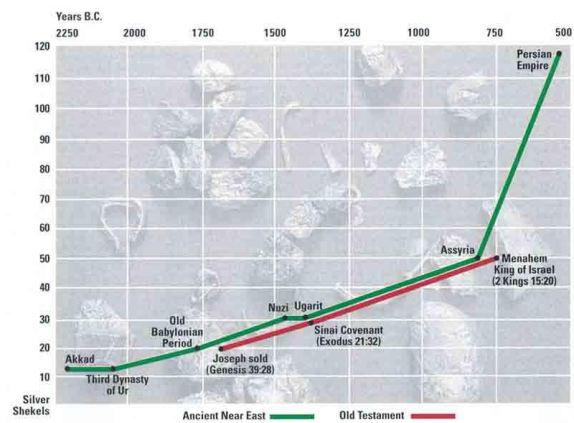
In each case, the Biblical slave price fits the general period to which it relates. If all these figures were invented during the Exile (sixth century B.C.) or in the Persian period by some fiction writer, why isn't the price for Joseph 90 to 100 shekels, the cost of a slave at the time when that story was supposedly written? And why isn't the price in Exodus also

90 to 100 shekels? It's more reasonable to assume that the Biblical data reflect reality in these cases.

Treaties and Covenants

Another kind of evidence comes from our knowledge of treaties and covenants from as early as the third millennium B.C. The subject is a complex one, but suffice it to say that we can now construct a typology of treaties that allows us to date them by their essential form and structure, which vary from time to time and from place to place.
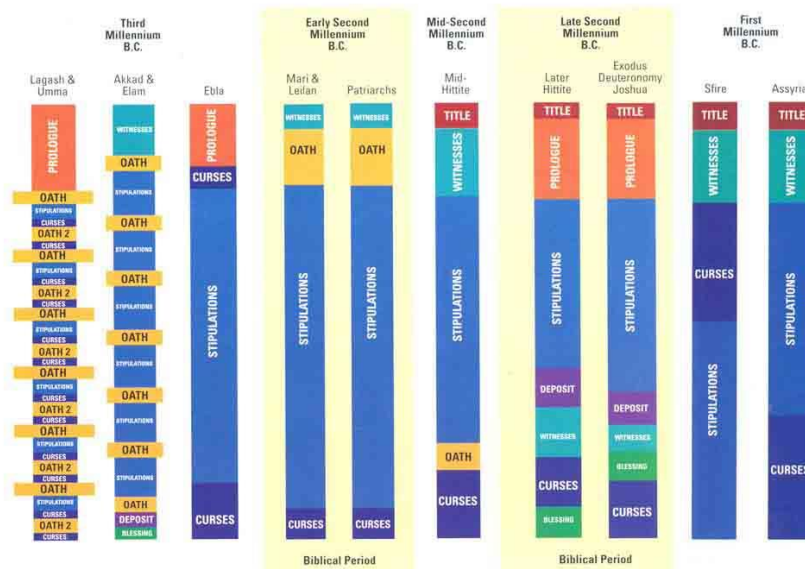
As they pastured their flocks up and down Canaan, the patriarchs needed to make agreements with their neighbors that can be characterized in Biblical terms as covenants or treaties. In Genesis 14:13, for example, we learn that Abraham enters into an alliance with three Amorite rulers, Mamre, Eshcol and Aner.

In three other places in Genesis, we learn not only of the existence of other covenants or treaties, but also of their terms. Abraham and Isaac make separate treaties with Abimelech of Gerar (Genesis 21, 26); and Jacob makes an agreement with Laban (Genesis 31). From the brief reports of these three covenants, it is possible to cull the essential elements.

First, in each case, an introductory oath is part of the pact. The oath is demanded (Genesis 21:23, 26:28) and given (Genesis 21:24, 26:31, 31:53b). At times, the oath is preceded by the invocation of witnesses: In Jacob's pact with Laban, a mound of stones and a pillar serve as witnesses (Genesis 31:44–52); in Abraham's pact with Abimelech, God himself is called upon to act as witness (Genesis 21:23).

Next, the agreements or stipulations are given. In Abraham's pact with Abimelech, Abraham agrees not to deal falsely with Abimelech or his family (implying respect for family succession). Certain rights to terrain and water supplies are also stipulated (Genesis 21:23, 30). Isaac's pact with Abimelech includes a stipulation to refrain from hostilities: "You will not do us harm, just as we have not molested you" (Genesis 26:29). Jacob and Laban, in their covenant, establish a boundary line between their territories (Genesis 31:52).

Last, the event is marked by a curse as sanction for violation of the treaty's terms, which seems to be implied in the words sworn by Jacob and Laban: "May the God of Abraham and the god of Nahor judge between us" (Genesis 31:53). In addition, the completion of the pact is sometimes accompanied by a ceremony. The agreements between Isaac and Abimelech and between Jacob and Laban are marked by a feast (Genesis 26:30, 31:54); and Abraham apparently plants a tree to celebrate his agreement with Abimelech (Genesis 21:33).

The history of treaties and covenants is long and varied; we cannot go into it in full here. But some essential elements will be enough to make the point.

In the third millennium B.C., the oldest treaties from Mesopotamia follow Sumerian rules of composition. These treaties are characterized by considerable repetition of standard features in each section of the treaty. Thus, each stipulation or agreement in Eannatum's treaty with Umma is preceded by a formal oath and is followed by a curse embodying a second oath. The treaty between Naram-Sin and Elam likewise has a formal oath before each stipulation. Further west, at Ebla, things were drastically simplified. A prologue and curse were followed by a long list of stipulations; then curses were invoked for violation of the whole.

Very recently some treaties have become partly available from Mari and Tell Leilan dating to the early second millennium B.C.,[8] where we would place the patriarchs. These treaties exhibit a different basic format—similar to the patriarchal pacts in the Bible. First, deities are cited as witnesses to the oath binding the parties to the treaty. Curses do not appear in the preliminary "little tablets," but only in the final "large tablets."[c] The

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[8] For Tell Leilan and its archives, see J. Eidem, *Annales Archéologiques Arabes de Syrie* 38/39 (1987–1988), pp. 110–127; and Eidem's contribution in *Revue d'Assyriologie* 85 (1991), pp. 109–135. For the Treaty of Till-Abnu of Leilan with Assyria, see Eidem in D. Charpin and F. Joannes, eds., *Marchands, Diplomates et Empereurs* (Paris: Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1991), pp. 185–207. For more information on Mari treaties, see in *Marchands, Diplomates et Empereurs*, D. Charpin, pp. 139–47 and F. Joannes, pp. 167–70 and 176–77; see also J.M. Durand in L. de Meyer, H. Gasche and F. Vallat, eds., *Fragmenta Historiae Elamicae* (Paris: Editions Recherche, 1986), pp. 111–28. Fuller publication of the Tell Leilan texts is awaited.

invocation of the deities and the oath are followed by stipulations—prohibiting hostilities, establishing commercial ties, forming alliances, and so on. A ceremony may accompany the making of the treaty, consisting of a feast and sacrifice, or the exchange of gifts.

The common features between these early second-millennium treaties and the covenants recorded in Genesis are striking.[9] The treaties, alliances and covenants described in Genesis differ in form and structure from the treaties of the third millennium B.C., but are very much like the treaties of the early second millennium B.C.—corresponding to our dating of the Patriarchal Age to the early second millennium, say about 1950–1700 B.C.

This conclusion is strengthened by evidence concerning the form and structure of later treaties. In about 1400 B.C. the middle-Hittite Ishmerikka treaty sets its stipulations between witnesses and oath. This differs from the early second millennium treaties—both those attested in the Bible and those from Mari and Tell Leilan—in which both witnesses and oath precede the stipulations.

In the late second millennium, we see a further development of form and structure. Numerous Hittite imperial treaties from the 14th and 13th centuries B.C. have been found that reflect an elaborate seven-fold scheme: title (preamble), historical prologue, stipulations, a recitation of the deposit of the treaty, a reading of the treaty (optional), witnesses, curses and blessings.

Interestingly, this seven-fold structure also characterizes the Sinai Covenant (Exodus 20–31, 34–35; Leviticus 1–7, 11–26). The preamble is given in Exodus 20:1 ("God spoke all these words…."). And a brief historical prologue follows in Exodus 20:2 ("I am the Lord your God who has brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage").[d]

Third, we have the stipulations, first the basic ones (the Ten Commandments) in Exodus 20:3–17, and then the detailed regulations to govern social life (Exodus 21–23, 25–31) and the provision concerning an abode (the Tabernacle) for the divine sovereign (Exodus 35). In Leviticus 1–7 and 11–25, the service of that sovereign (the cult) and other religious and social norms for the community are set out.

Fourth, the text (the "testimony" in most English versions) is to be deposited with the Ark of the Covenant in the sanctuary (Exodus 25:16). Fifth, an altar and 12 pillars or stelae (standing for the 12 tribes) probably fulfill the role of mute witnesses (Exodus 24:4–8).

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[9] See Kenneth A. Kitchen, "Genesis 12–50 in the Near Eastern World," in R. Hess et al., eds., *He Swore an Oath, Biblical Themes from Genesis* 12–50; *Studies for D.J. Wiseman* (Cambridge: Tyndale House, 1993), pp. 74–77.

Finally, blessings (for obedience) and curses (for disobedience) complete the sequence (Leviticus 26).

This 14th–13th-century form is also found in the renewal of the Sinai Covenant in Deuteronomy 1–32 and Joshua 24. Much happened to the Israelites between leaving Sinai and reaching Jordan on the brink of Canaan. So in Deuteronomy, for example, we find a longer preamble or title (Deuteronomy 1:1–5), and then a much longer historical prologue (Deuteronomy 1:6–3:29), as is normal at the period. Then come the stipulations: the basic ones (Ten Commandments) in Deuteronomy 4, broader commands in chapters 5–11, and more specific regulations in chapters 12–26. Next, the covenant document is to be deposited with the Ark of the Covenant in the sanctuary (Deuteronomy 31:9–13); at the same time, Moses commands the elders to give periodic public readings of the law. For witnesses, the Hebrews are given both the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 31:19), the text of which is given in Deuteronomy 32, and the book of the covenant itself (31:26); moreover, heaven and earth are also called on as witnesses (31:28). Finally, there are a set of blessings (Deuteronomy 28:1–14) and many curses (Deuteronomy 28:15–68).[e]

It is extraordinary that the treaties which, according to the Biblical chronology, fall in the patriarchal period resemble early second millennium B.C. treaties and the Sinaitic covenants resemble late second millennium B.C. treaties. In both cases, the Biblical chronology is supported by external evidence.

Treaties from the early first millennium B.C. are again different. Almost all of these treaties have only four elements: title, witnesses and either curses plus stipulations (in the West) or stipulations plus curses (in the East); they have no historical prologues, no reciprocal blessings, no deposit or reading clauses.[10] If the Biblical text had been written in the mid-first millennium B.C., one would expect the patriarchal covenants and treaties to be in this form (the same would hold true for the Sinaitic covenants). On the contrary, the treaty forms fit the times when the Bible places the narratives. In short, this typology of treaties provides factual material that broadly substantiates the Biblical chronology.

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[10] The essential facts are set out in Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (London: Tyndale Press, 1966), pp. 90–102; *The Bible in Its World* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1977), pp. 79–85; and "The Fall and Rise of Covenant, Law and Treaty," in *Tyndale Bulletin* 40 (1989), pp. 118–135. See also J.H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), pp. 95–109. The supposed "historical prologue" in the Assurbanipal-Qedar treaty is, given its position, not a prologue at all; the only blessing in the first millennium group (Sfire I) relates to respect for the actual stela, not for the treaty provisions.

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Geo-Political Conditions

A third kind of evidence concerns the changing geo-political situation in the Biblical lands. In Genesis 14, as mentioned above, Abraham and five Canaanite kings fight a war near the Dead Sea against their overlords, consisting of an alliance of four kings from Elam, Mesopotamia and southern Anatolia.

Now it is true that alliances such as Abraham makes with his neighbors—petty Canaanite kings—could have occurred from at least the Early Bronze Age (third millennium B.C.) down to the end of the 13th century B.C., though they would have been less likely during the period of Egyptian domination from the 15th to the 13th centuries B.C. In the 12th and 11th centuries B.C., however, new conditions presented themselves in Canaan: the emergence of early Israel, the rise of the Philistine league, and the consolidation of Aramean power in the north. So the situation in Canaan is not very helpful in answering our chronological question, except to say that the alliance between Abraham and the Canaanite kings must have occurred before the 12th century.

But, further east, the situation was entirely different. In the history of Mesopotamia and its neighbors, we find that the geo-political conditions match the situation in Genesis 14 in only one period, the Patriarchal Age according to the Biblical chronology.

In the late third millennium B.C., Mesopotamia was dominated for a time by a single power, the Third Dynasty of Ur. This dynasty was overthrown by Elam in about 2000 B.C. Then, for some 250 years, no single power ruled in greater Mesopotamia, from Ur to Carchemish. Instead, the area swarmed with major and minor city-states, combining and recombining in ever-changing alliances. Some, like Isin and Larsa, Mari, and then Assyria and Babylon, became more prominent than others. States such as these occasionally headed major alliances, but power was still divided. As one oft-quoted ancient text observes:

> "There is no king who is strong just by himself. Ten (to) fifteen kings are following Hammurabi the man of Babylon; so, too, Rim-Sin the man of Larsa; so, too, Ibal-pi-el the man of Eshnunna; so, too, Amut-pi-el the man of Qatna; (and) twenty kings are following Yarim-Lim the man of Yamhad."[11]

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[11] James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, third edition (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), p. 628.

Other documents of the period repeatedly refer to alliances of three, four and five powers.[12]

Despite the abundance of cuneiform records from Mesopotamia, none of the kings who, according to Genesis 14, fought against the Abrahamic alliance have been identified in an extra-Biblical account. Nevertheless, the right names go with the right places in Genesis 14: "Amraphel king of Shinar; Arioch king of Ellasar, Chedor-laomer king of Elam, and Tidal king of Goiim" (Genesis 14:1). Chedor-laomer is clearly an Elamite name (a Kudur-X or Kutur type).[f] Arioch is Arriyuk(ki)/Arriwuk(ki), attested at Mari and Nuzi in Mesopotamia. Amraphel is less clear.

But Tid'al is universally recognized as an early form of Tudkhalia, well known from the Hittite world centered in Anatolia (modern Turkey). Interestingly, Tudkhalia served as a "king of peoples/groups," reflecting the fractured nature of political power in Anatolia in the 19th and 18th centuries B.C., according to archives of Assyrian merchants in Cappadocia.[13] In these archives we read of chiefs (*rubaum*) and overlords or paramount chiefs (*rubaum rabium*).

Moreover, military campaigns from Mesopotamia into the Levant are well attested from the third millennium B.C. (Akkad and Third Dynasty of Ur) through the early second millennium B.C.[14] A war by the Abrahamic alliance against an alliance of kings from the east in the patriarchal period is certainly plausible.

Indeed, one account from the early second millennium is similar to Genesis 14—though from the opposite perspective, that of the alliance of eastern kings. In a splendid inscription of Iahdun-Lim of Mari, we are told that Shamsi-Adad I of Assyria reached Lebanon, advanced past the timber mountains and proceeded to the Mediterranean Sea; he made offerings to celebrate his success (as Abraham tithed to Melchizedek [Genesis 14:20]) and imposed his rule and "perpetual tribute" on the Levantine peoples he conquered, which was paid until the very year of the inscription, when Shamsi-Adad I defeated an alliance of four other vassals who rebelled.

The conquest, servitude and revolt described in this inscription are paralleled in Genesis 14:1–11, but from the opposite viewpoint. In short, the kind of military engagement described in Genesis 14 is at home in the early second millennium B.C.

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[12] See Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, pp. 45ff.; for more details, see D.O. Edzard, *Die "Zweite Zwischenzeit" Babyloniens* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1957), pp. 105–108, 121, 155–160, 181–182.

[13] Lists of cities, areas and rulers are provided in Albrecht Goetze, *Kleinasien* (Munich: Beck, 1957) pp. 75–76; and L.L. Orlin, *Assyrian Colonies in Cappadocia* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), pp. 73–113.

[14] See Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, pp. 43–47.

From about the 18th century B.C. on, however, the situation drastically changed in Mesopotamia. The triumphs of Hammurabi of Babylon and Shamsi-Adad I of Assyria ended the era of rival alliances, with the numerous Mesopotamian city-states vanishing forever. From then on, the land was dominated by just two powers, Assyria and Babylon. For two centuries (c. 1550–1350 B.C.) they shared power with Mitanni, but that was all.

Not only did the political map of Mesopotamia then become incompatible with the situation as described in Genesis 14, but in the north, in Anatolia, there were drastic changes as well: The chiefs and overlords were absorbed into the Hittite kingdom that dominated the area until about 1200 B.C.

Later, during the first millennium B.C., the Levant was dominated by Aramean and Neo-Hittite states in the north, by Israel (later Israel and Judah) and the Philistines in the south, by the Phoenicians along the coast, and in due time by Ammon, Moab and Edom east of the Jordan. All, however, fell under the ever-growing shadow of Assyria, and in most cases vanished politically as Babylon and then the Persian Empire succeeded, one after the other, to Assyrian hegemony.

Thus, there is one—and only one—period that fits the conditions reflected in Genesis 14—the early second millennium B.C. Only in that period did the situation in Mesopotamia allow for shifting alliances; and only then did Elam participate actively in the affairs of the Levant, sending envoys not only to Mari but as far west as Qatna on the Orontes in Syria.[15]

References to Egypt

Biblical references to Egypt provide additional evidence for dating the patriarchs to the Middle Bronze Age. Abraham and Jacob both encounter Egyptian pharaohs. Abram (as he then was) sojourns in Egypt during a famine (Genesis 12:10–20); Jacob, with his family, visits Joseph in Egypt during another famine, remaining there until he dies 17 years later (Genesis 45:28–47:28). Jacob, we are told, settled in Goshen, in the eastern Nile delta; there is no reason to believe Abraham went further into Egypt.[g] Both Abraham and Jacob thus encounter Pharaoh and the Egyptian government in the eastern Nile delta.

Under the XIIth and XIIIth Dynasties (20th to 17th centuries B.C.), Egyptian pharaohs had a palace and temples in the eastern Nile delta—named (at least in part) Ro-waty, "Mouth of the Two Ways"—where the coastal road from Canaan met the road from Wadi Tumilat, in the eastern delta.

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[15] Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, pp. 46, 73.

The XIIIth dynasty was followed by the Hyksos period in the 17th and 16th centuries B.C.[h] The Hyksos kings took over the old Egyptian center in the eastern Nile delta and rebuilt it as their summer capital, Avaris.

Therefore, from the 20th to the 16th centuries B.C., the timespan we have on other grounds assigned to the patriarchs (19th to 17th centuries B.C.), the Egyptian government had a royal presence in Goshen in the eastern Nile delta. Prior to this period, there was no royal delta outpost, since the Old Kingdom pharaohs built only as far as Bubastis.

After the Hyksos rulers were expelled, native Egyptian power was resumed under the XVIIIth Dynasty, which manned its expeditions to Canaan basically from Memphis, 100 miles south of the Sinai border. During the period between about 1550 and 1300 B.C., there was no royal residence in the delta. Only the last king of the XVIIIth Dynasty, Haremhab (1327–1295 B.C.), showed interest in renewing the temple of the god Seth at Avaris.

The new XIXth Dynasty, however, originated in the eastern delta and had a summer palace there, finally moving its capital to Pi-Ramesse, built by Ramesses II. This was the theater for the events of the Exodus (Exodus 1:11, 12:37).

In the 12th century B.C., after Ramesses VI, Pi-Ramesse was given up and its magnificent buildings became a stone-quarry. During later periods (1070–300 B.C.) Tanis/Zoan in the eastern delta served as Egypt's gateway to the Levant, as is indicated by references in the Psalms and the later prophets. Psalm 78:12, 43 gives an "Iron Age" view of the Exodus, citing its miracles in "the land of Egypt, the region of Zoan." Isaiah scorns Pharaoh's officials in Zoan as fools (19:11, 13); and, later, Ezekiel announces the imminent destruction of Zoan and other Egyptian cities (Ezekiel 30:14 ff.).

Again, our knowledge of Egyptian residences in the eastern Nile delta is chronologically consistent with what we find in the Biblical narratives, regarding both the patriarchs in the early second millennium B.C. and the Exodus in the late second millennium B.C.—facts that would hardly be known to someone writing in the sixth or fifth centuries B.C.

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Patriarchal Names

To pursue a different line of argument, the form of the patriarchal names themselves can help us date the Patriarchal Age. Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and even Ishmael (Abraham's son by Hagar) have names that in their original language (Yitzchak, Ya'akov, Yoseph and Yishmael) begin with an *i/y*-prefix; scholars of Northwest Semitic languages call these "Amorite imperfective" names.

This was noticed long ago, as was the fact that Amorite imperfective names with an *i/y*-prefix are common in the Mari archives of the early second millennium B.C.[16]

More recently, however, one prominent scholar has questioned the use of this material to date the patriarchal period. According to P. Kyle McCarter, "[T]here is no reason to believe that its use [Amorite imperfective names] diminished after the Middle Bronze Age; in the late Bronze Age, it is well attested in Ugaritic and Amarna Canaanite names [Late Bronze Age]. Thus, while it is true that the name 'Jacob' is very common in the Middle Bronze Age, it is also found in Late Bronze sources, and related names occur in both Elephantine (fifth century B.C.) and Palmyrene (first century B.C. through third century A.D.) Aramaic."[17]

But this is totally untrue. In the third millennium B.C., *i/y*-names are already known, for example, at Ebla. But no figures are yet available as to how frequently they appear. For the early second millennium B.C., however, we do have numbers. In a standard collection of over 6,000 names from the early second millennium B.C., 16 percent of the nearly 1,360 personal names beginning with i/y are of the Amorite imperfective type. This type constitutes 55 percent of all names beginning with *i/y*.

Compare this with the Late Bronze Age (late second millennium B.C.), which includes the archives from Tell el-Amarna and Ugarit. At Ugarit, out of 1,860 names in alphabetic script, only 40 are Amorite imperfectives, a mere 2 percent. Of the syllabically written names, only 120 out of 4,050 names are of this type, a mere 3 percent. Of all names beginning with *i/y*, the figures for Amorite imperfectives are down to 30 percent and 25

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[16] See, for example, John Bright, *A History of Israel*, p. 7.

[17] P. Kyle McCarter, "The Patriarchal Age," in Hershel Shanks, ed., *Ancient Israel* (Washington, DC: **Biblical Archaeology Society**, 1988), p. 11.

percent—that is, about half of what they were in patriarchal times. These facts flatly disprove McCarter's claim that the use of such names had not "diminished."

In the Iron Age, things get even worse for McCarter's position. Of all Phoenician names, Amorite imperfectives constitute only 6 percent, making up but 12 percent of all *i/y*-names. In Aramaic, the corresponding figures are just over 0.5 percent for Amorite imperfectives, these constituting barely over 12 percent of all names that begin with *i/y*. From Assyrian sources, only a dozen out of nearly 5,000 names from the first millennium are of the Amorite imperfective type, a miserable ¼ of 1 percent; and these Amorite imperfective names make up only 1.6 percent of all *i/y*-names.

Moreover, McCarter's example of a Palmyrene name is that of a Jew called Jacob—hardly a persuasive argument for the name's general currency!

So, once more, when a full roll call of available independent evidence is made, the result is the same: This type of name, that of all the patriarchs except Abraham, does belong mainly to the Patriarchal Age according to the chronology emerging here—the early second millennium B.C. or Middle Bronze Age.[18]

Another point should be stressed. These names from the archaeological record are attached to ordinary people in the Near East in the third and second millennia B.C.; they are not tribal, divine or geographical names, as is still wrongly alleged from time to time.[19]

Social World of the Patriarchs

It is true that in the past efforts to draw parallels between the social world of the patriarchs and the social world reflected in the Nuzi tablets (15th century B.C.) have failed in many respects. Erroneous parallels from Nuzi regarding teraphim, images, sale of birthright, deathbed blessings, "sisterhood," etc., have been effectively swept away by so-called "deconstructionist" scholars like Thomas Thompson and John Van Seters. Still, there remains a solid, factual body of legitimate comparisons that, once again, point to the early second millennium B.C. for social features in the patriarchal narratives.

One of these legitimate points of comparison relates to the laws of inheritance. Now, Jacob had two wives, Rachel and Leah, each of whom provided him with a concubine, Bilhah and Zilpah, and Jacob had sons by all four women. In Jacob's final blessing

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[18] See Kitchen in J. Amitai, ed., *Biblical Archaeology Today*, 1990 (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1993), pp. 45–46, 20–28.

[19] See Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, pp. 48–49; "Historical Method and Early Hebrew Tradition," in *Tyndale Bulletin* 17 (1966), pp. 68–69; and *The Bible in Its World*, p. 68.

(Genesis 49) all the sons share, apparently equally, in the inheritance; there is no hint of a double portion for the first born.

In the laws handed down at the time of the Exodus, however, the eldest does get a double portion. In Deuteronomy 21:15–17, the ascribed basis for the double portion is that the eldest son is "the first fruit of his [the father's] manhood." The very same term is used of Reuben in Jacob's blessing—"the first fruit of my manhood" (Genesis 49:3)—but at this early time neither Reuben nor Judah, who replaces Reuben because Reuben had slept with his father's concubine, gets a double share.

We do have extra-Biblical information regarding inheritance laws in the ancient Near East. In the 20th century B.C., the laws of Lipit-Ishtar provided for equal shares for all the children.[20] Two hundred years later, in the 18th century B.C., Hammurabi's laws gave the sons of a man's first wife "first choice." Then, from the 18th to the 15th centuries B.C., according to the laws at Mari and Nuzi, a natural first-born son did get a double share, while the adopted son did not. And in first millennium Neo-Babylonian laws, when a man has two wives, the sons of the first wife get a double-share, while the sons of the second wife get only a single share.[21]

The inheritance of Jacob's sons in Genesis 49 and the law of a double portion for the eldest at the time of the Exodus as described in Deuteronomy are consistent with the development of inheritance laws as described in external texts—giving additional confirmation for our dating of the patriarchs to the Middle Bronze Age.

Ancient Narratives

What then are the patriarchal narratives in Genesis? Are they history or are they just fairy tales? Or something in between? Again, let us look at the external evidence for guidance. From Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria, Anatolia and elsewhere, we have a considerable body of narrative. These writings (excluding royal inscriptions, and myths that relate solely to the gods) can be divided into three main groups: first, autobiographical and biographical narratives about individuals; second, historical legends, purporting to recount tales from the lives of past historical figures; and third, purely fictional tales, usually couched in general terms with mainly anonymous actors. The patriarchal narratives fall somewhere between the first and second groups, nearer the first than the second. In other words,

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[20] See text in Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, second edition (1955), pp. 159–161; the most recent translation is by H. Lutzmann in O. Kaiser, ed., *Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments* (Gutersloh: Mohn, 1982) I/1, pp. 23–31.

[21] For Hammurabi, see Laws of Hammurabi section 170; for Mari, see G. Boyer, *Archives Royales de Mari*, 8, Text No. 1; for Nuzi, see E. A. Speiser, *Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 10 (1930), pp. 8, 35, 39; and for Neo-Babylonian laws, see Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 198.

judged on strictly external data (not our prejudices), the patriarchal traditions would be judged substantially factual.[22] That there may be some legendary features in these narratives does not negate the basic historicity of the individuals they mention.

We may compare the patriarchal narratives with the "Tales of the Magicians" (Papyrus Westcar) from Egypt dating to about 1600 B.C. This document relates some tall tales of magicians at the royal courts during the Old Kingdom in about 2600 B.C., a thousand years earlier. Yet, despite the time-lapse and the tallness of the tales, all four kings are strictly historical figures (known from other monuments), given in their correct sequence. The three founders of the next dynasty are then named in the right order. Some of the magicians are also known historical figures, while others bear names from that distant period. So, picturesque narratives do not guarantee that the characters are fiction.

This in part answers the question as to whether traditions about supposedly real people could be handed down from, say, about 1600 B.C. (Joseph) to about 1200 B.C. (Moses), then on to about 950 B.C. (Solomon)—and be canonized in the fifth century B.C. (Ezra)—while retaining essentially reliable information.

There is considerable additional evidence. From the Hittites, we have the Deeds of Anittas in copies from the 16th to the 13th centuries B.C., preserving a credible record of a prince of Kussara who flourished much earlier in the 19th or 18th centuries B.C.

From the small but wealthy city-state of Ugarit in Syria, a ritual king-list of the local kings of Ugarit (about 1200 B.C.) goes back through some 36 kings to a founder, Yaqaru (about 1900 or 1800 B.C.), a span of 600 to 700 years; data from another document might push the tradition back to 2000 B.C.[23]

In Mesopotamia, the non-royal ancestors of Hammurabi of Babylon and Shamshi-Adad I of Assyria are recorded, if imperfectly, back for several generations, beyond their royal ancestry.[24]

In Egypt, ordinary private families were able to keep track of their ancestry across the centuries. An especially interesting example involves an Egyptian man named Mose (not the Biblical Moses) who won a law-suit under Ramesses II (c. 1250 B.C.) over land given

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[22] For a more detailed presentation, see Kitchen, *The Bible in Its World*, pp. 59–65.

[23] The Ugaritic texts are published in M. Dietrich, O. Loretz and J. Sanmartin, eds., *Die Keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Butzon-Bercker Kevelaer, 1976), p. 119, No. 1:113. For a full translation and commentary see Kitchen, "The King-List of Ugarit," in *Ugarit-Forschungen* 9 (1977), pp. 131–142.

[24] See A. Malamat, "King Lists of the Old Babylonian Period and Biblical Genealogies," in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 88 (1968), pp. 163–173.

to his ancestor, Neshi, in about 1550 B.C.—a man independently attested by a contemporary record of that time.[25]

A draughtsman who served in the temple of Amun at Thebes under Sethos I (1290 B.C.) could trace and name his ancestors (of Syrian origin) back seven generations, probably back to the time of Tuthmosis III (1450 B.C.).[26]

Given that other Near Eastern peoples preserved accurate information, even over as long as a thousand years, there is no a priori reason why the early Hebrews should not have been able to do the same sort of thing.

The Genesis narratives, it is true, carry some traces of that long transmission. We have looked at features that place the patriarchs in the period 1900–1600 B.C. But the narratives also show traces of their later history. The phrase "land of Rameses" in Genesis 47:11 belongs to the period 1279–1140 B.C. (when the Rameses flourished), neither earlier nor later; this phrase was included at about the time of the Exodus. There are various other examples:

> In Genesis 14:14 we read of Abram's pursuit of his family's captors "all the way to Dan." From Judges 18:29 (12th to 11th centuries B.C.), we know that the city was called Laish before it was conquered by the Danites, so the name of the city at Dan in Genesis 14:14 was changed or included sometime after the Danites conquered Laish and renamed the city.

Similarly, the genealogies in Genesis 36 provide us with a list of Edomite kings who ruled "before any king reigned in Israel" (Genesis 36:31), though kings did not rule in Israel until the late 11th or 10th century B.C. The passage must have taken this form sometime after the late 11th century B.C.

The same phenomenon, called "modernization" by students of ancient writings, happens in non-Biblical texts as well.[27]

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[25] See G. A. Gaballa, *The Memphite Tomb-Chapel of Mose* (Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips, 1972).

[26] Published by D. A. Lowle, *Oriens Antiquus* 15 (1976), pp. 91–106; for a recent translation and commentary, see Kitchen, *Ramesside Inscriptions Translated and Annotated* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 265–267, 221–225.

[27] The Egyptian *Story of Sinuhe* is set about 1940 B.C., and we have manuscripts from the 19th/18th centuries B.C., as well as later manuscripts. One Ramesside manuscript (c. 1250 B.C.) substitutes the "new" Semitic loanword *yam* (meaning "sea") for the old word *nwy*—which dates that manuscript, but not the original story (John W. B. Barnes, *The Ashmolean Ostracon of Sinuhe* (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1952).)

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Much so-called Biblical scholarship is based on guesswork or clever hunches, rather than on a firm frame of reference supported by independent facts. The result has been a never-ending swamp of useless controversy and mindless point-scoring against entrenched rival camps. Bluntly, this is no way to do things.

Now, however, there is quietly mounting evidence that the basic inherited outline—from the patriarchs through the Exodus to the Israelites' entry into Canaan, the united monarchy and then the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and the Exile and return—is essentially sound: There is no need whatsoever to "reconstruct" early Hebrew history. Wellhausen's enterprise was an appalling bungle.[28] The same may be said of the work of that bevy of scholars determined to show that the history of Israel until the Exile was simply made up.

Instead of trying to deconstruct, we should seek to revise our knowledge of what is a basically sound historical outline, and work to fill it in from the massive wealth of external data archaeology has uncovered.

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