

THE PATRIARCHAL PERIOD:

The Middle Bronze Age (2000-1550 BC)

© Daniel C. Browning, Jr.

Introduction

It is with Abraham and the other Patriarchs that the biblical story is first reported in the context of a historical setting which can, with some certainty, be identified. While the Bible does not attempt to correlate the Patriarchal narratives with the chronology of any other nation, two passages place the Patriarchs some 400 (Gen 15:13) to 430 years (Ex 12:40-41) prior to the Exodus event. There are good reasons to place the Exodus near the beginning of the thirteenth century BC (see Chapter 6). This would imply that the Patriarchs lived in the years leading up to the seventeenth century BC. It may be said, in a more general way, that the Bible points to the early second millennium BC as the period of the Patriarchs.

In archaeological terminology, the first half of the second millennium BC is known as the **Middle Bronze Age**. This was a period of profound changes and cultural development in the Near East. This chapter reviews the archaeological setting of the Middle Bronze Age and then examines questions involving the biblical Patriarchs.

The Near East in the Middle Bronze Age

Mesopotamia

The Amorites. Towards the end of the third millennium BC, rulers of the Sumerian Ur III Dynasty of Lower Mesopotamia began to feel the pressure of a semi-nomadic group referred to in their writings as the *mar.tu*. The *MAR.TU* also appear in Akkadian texts where they are called *Amurru*, or “westerners”—the Amorites. This group migrated into Sumer and Akkad and, as heirs of the Sumerians, established kingdoms around conquered cities.¹

Although textual evidence is lacking—aside from the biblical references to Amorites as inhabitants of Canaan—a wave of Amorites apparently also moved down the Levantine coast into the region of Palestine sometime shortly before or after 2000 BC.²

With the dominance of Ur broken, southern Mesopotamia broke into a mosaic of smaller states. Southern Mesopotamia was the scene of a struggle between Isin, ruled by Sumerian speaking Semitic kings, and Amorites at Larsa, while Eshnunna, a city with Elamite connections, asserted its independence. Meanwhile, to the north, the Assyrian kingdom first became viable in the region which would later bear its name.

While these struggles need not concern us, two important law texts are known from the “Isin and Larsa Period” (ca. 2000-1800 BC): the code of Lipit-Ishtar, a ruler of Isin, and the laws of Eshnunna.³ The former was laid out in Sumerian, while the latter was written in Akkadian. Both antedate the most famous of ancient law codes, the Code of Hammurabi (see below), and like it exhibit parallels to the biblical Covenant Code (Ex 21-23). These similarities indicate a long standing legal tradition, at least among certain populations of the Near East.

¹For details of this period, see Georges Roux, *Ancient Iraq*, 3rd ed (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1992), 179-94.

²William Foxwell Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1957), 163-66; Kathleen J. Kenyon, *Amorites and Canaanites* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966).

³Francis R. Steele, *The Code of Lipit-Ishtar*, Museum Monographs (Philadelphia: University Museum), reprinted from *AJA* 52 (July-September 1948): 425-50; A. Geotze, *The Laws of Eshnunna*, *AASOR* 31 (New Haven: ASOR, 1956); and *ANET*, 159-63, for translations of both.

About 1894 BC, an Amorite prince established himself in a city near Kish, known in Sumerian as *Ka-dingir* (“Gate of God”), in Akkadian as *bab-ilu* (“Gate of God”) or *Bab-ilanu* (“Gate of the gods”). This is the place known in Hebrew as *babel* and passed to us by way of the Greeks as “Babylon.” A dynasty arose there with eleven kings ruling some 300 years. The names of the kings are Amorite, and the dynasty is called the First (or Amorite) Dynasty of Babylon.

The Old Babylonian Period. Near the turn of the eighteenth century BC, a West Semite named Shamshi-Adad I (about 1809-1776 BC) took Assur and came to dominate the region of Assyria. He managed to capture the city of Mari on the middle Euphrates, installing his son as regent over the Amorite population there. In the west, expansion brought Shamshi-Adad into contact with the kingdoms of north Syria. Yamhad ruled northern Syria from its capital Aleppo and was hostile to Shamshi-Adad for his support of Qatna in middle Syria. Assyria enjoyed generally friendly relations with Carchemish on the upper Euphrates.⁴ To the south lay Babylon, an expanding power.

The sixth and most powerful of the Amorite kings of Babylon was Hammurabi, most famous for his law code. At the time of its discovery in Susa, where it had been taken by the Elamites as war booty, the Law Code of Hammurabi was the oldest known. But now three bodies of law from Mesopotamia predate it: the codes of Ur-Nammu, Lipit-Ishtar, and Eshnunna. Of special interest are the similarities of these codes to biblical laws (see above).

Three systems of chronology have been developed for the reign of Hammurabi, giving the following possible dates: 1) the ‘high chronology,’ about 1848-1806 BC; 2) the ‘middle chronology,’ about 1792-1750 BC; or 3) the ‘low chronology,’ about 1728-1686 BC. In recent years the majority of scholars have adopted the ‘middle chronology’ which is followed here.

Babylon expanded into contact and competition with other nations, especially Assyria in the north and Mari to the west. Early in Hammurabi’s reign, no king or kingdom had an absolute advantage. A text from Mari illustrates the political fragmentation and alliance-based balance of power:

There is no king who, of himself, is the strongest. Ten of fifteen kings follow Hammurabi of Babylon, the same number follow Rim-sin of Larsa; likewise after Ibal-pi-El of Eshnunna, the same number follow Amut-pi-il of Qatanum [Qatna], twenty kings follow Yarim-Lim of Yamhad.⁵

Hammurabi was a patient and cunning diplomat, statesman, and military leader. Through a combination of alliances and wise military moves, he built Babylon into the dominant power of southern Mesopotamia. With the death of Shamshi-Adad of Assyria about 1776 BC, Mari asserted its independence under Zimri-Lin. This king maintained friendly relations with Hammurabi, until Babylon had established firm control over southern and central Mesopotamia. Then, in 1763 BC, Babylon attacked Mari, forcing it into a vassal role. Two years later, the city was sacked, the wall torn down, and Zimri-Lin’s palace burned.

Excavations at Mari have revealed the palace of Zimri-Lin, containing frescoed murals showing the king performing ritual duties. More important is the discovery of the royal archives containing about 20,000 cuneiform tablets in Babylonian Akkadian. These tablets, most of them letters, provide a remarkable glimpse into an important part of the biblical world at the time of the Patriarchs.⁶

Aside from its use in letters and recordkeeping, the Akkadian language flourished and developed a grammatical fineness, finally overtaking Sumerian as a literary vehicle in the second millennium. Sumerian classics continued to be copied in their original language, but many were adapted and given a Semitic flair. New works, destined to be classics of Mesopotamian literature, were composed in “Old Babylonian,” the Akkadian dialect of southern Mesopotamia during this period.

⁴Roux, *Ancient Iraq*, 191-93.

⁵J. M. Munn-Rankin, “Diplomacy in Western Asia in the Early Second Millennium B.C.,” *Iraq* 18 (Spring 1956):74-75.

⁶The Mari texts are mainly published in the ongoing series *Archives Royales de Mari* [ARM] (Paris, 1946-) and *Archives Royales de Mari Transcrites et Traduites* [ARMT] (Paris, 1950-).

From this period come the **Enuma Elish** (“When on High”), a Babylonian Creation Epic, known mainly from later copies; and the **Atrahasis Epic**, a Babylonian account of the great Flood with many similarities to the biblical report (see Chapter 4). The Babylonian Flood story is incorporated into later versions of the famous **Gilgamesh Epic**, which also seems to originate from the Old Babylonian Period. Apart from its use of the Flood account, the Gilgamesh Epic is a masterpiece of ancient literature. It recounts the adventures of Gilgamesh, king of Uruk during the Early Dynastic Period.⁷ Despite the clearly legendary nature of the exploits of Gilgamesh, the Epic demonstrates a thoughtful reflection on the human condition as the hero comes to grips with his mortality. The Gilgamesh Epic was shocking when first published, as it provided an opportunity to question the uniqueness—and, by implication for some, the authenticity—of the Bible.⁸ But it should come as no surprise that such literature was produced or that, coming from the same cultural heritage, it would contain many points of comparison with the biblical text.

New Nations. By the mid-17th century BC, non-Semitic groups were exerting pressure on the West Semitic kingdoms of Mesopotamia and Syria. Foremost among these were the **Hurrians** and the **Kassites** which developed into formidable military and political forces. In Anatolia, the Indo-European **Hittite** kingdom became a great power, especially under Hattusili I late in the century. Hattusili’s successor, Mursili I, continued Hittite expansion by destroying the kingdom of Yamhad and ending the Amorite dynasty at Babylon by sacking the city in 1595 BC.⁹

The Kassites, taking advantage of the opportunity afforded by the sack of Babylon, created a dynasty there and dominated southern Mesopotamia for four centuries (the Kassite Period, about 1600-1200 BC). In the meantime, the Hurrians established themselves in northern Mesopotamia and northern Syria.

The Hurrians were integrated into the Semitic population of Upper Mesopotamia as early as the eighteenth century BC. Of particular interest are documents discovered in the palace and in private homes at Nuzi, a Hurrian center. Twenty thousand tablets, mainly legal documents written in a Babylonian dialect, cover several generations during the fifteenth and fourteenth centuries BC, and preserve the complete archives of a number of individuals. These texts contain some remarkable similarities to details in the Genesis account of the Patriarchs and have thus played a major role in the debate surrounding the historicity of the biblical ancestors of the Israelites.

Egypt

Middle Kingdom (about 2050-1750 BC). The chaos of the Egyptian First Intermediate Period was eased when Mentuhotep of Dynasty 11 at Thebes defeated rival kings at Herakleopolis, thus reunifying Egypt and beginning the Middle Kingdom (about 2050-1750 BC). Greater stability came with the establishment of Dynasty 12 (1991-1786 BC) by Amenemhet I. Amenemhet contains the name of Amon (Amen), chief deity of Thebes (biblical No-Amon) in Upper Egypt. This minor god was combined with the northern sun-god Ra and was transformed into Amen-Re, henceforth the chief of Egyptian deities.

The Middle Kingdom was a period of great literary activity. Worthy of note are the Instruction of King Amenemhet and the Satire on the Trades. Of more interest is the **Tale of Sinuhe**, which recounts the adventures of an official in the royal court who fled to Palestine following the assassination of Amenemhet I. Sinuhe found a home in the land of “Yaa” among semi-nomadic pastoralists and was successful there, but eventually returned in good graces to Egypt.¹⁰ The story became a classic of Egyptian literature, serving as a model text copied by generations of Egyptian scribal students. The Tale of Sinuhe is important for biblical study as its details of political and social life in Palestine about 1950 BC are quite similar to the picture given by the Patriarchal account of Genesis.

Dynasty 12 was a prosperous period in which many Asiatics visited Egypt, as is described of the Patriarchs in Genesis. It is from such visits that we have one of the most interesting finds from the Middle Kingdom for Biblical

⁷For translations, see *ANET*, 73-99; Alexander Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

⁸Jack M. Sasson, “Gilgamesh Epic,” in *ABD*, 2:1024-27.

⁹For a convenient overview, see Benjamin Mazar, “The Middle Bronze Age in Canaan,” in *The Early Biblical Period: Historical Studies*, eds. Shmuel Ahituv and Baruch A. Levine (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1986), 24-25.

¹⁰*ANET*, 18-23.

Archaeology. A twentieth century BC painting in a tomb at **Beni Hasan** provides our best evidence for the appearance of West Semitic transhumants of the period [fig. 5-**], and thus our best visual approximation of Abraham’s clan and entourage. Thirty-seven Asiatics, under the leadership of a certain Absha (who is given the title “Hyksos;” see below) are shown bringing eye paint to Egyptian officials for trade. Though apparently semi-nomadic, their donkeys bore advanced implements used in metalworking.

The visits by Asiatics to Egypt were a preview of the downfall of the Middle Kingdom. From the beginning of Dynasty 13 (1783-ca. 1650 BC), Egypt was weak internally and increasingly declined as a power in Western Asia. The conquests of Shamshi-Adad in Mesopotamia and Syria may have cut off vital trade connections from Egypt’s main partner, Byblos. Perhaps as a result of this, but for whatever reason, large numbers of West Semites migrated from Canaan into the Delta region of Egypt. The 13th Dynasty’s control over the Asiatic hordes continued to erode, even within Egypt itself.

Second Intermediate (“Hyksos”) Period (about 1750-1550 BC). Around 1720 BC Asiatics living in the Delta region established a regime independent of Dynasty 13. About 1670 BC, a line of rulers comprising Dynasty 15 assumed control. The native Egyptians called these kings **Hyksos**, meaning “foreign rulers.” Josephus (*Against Apion* 1. 14) recounts Egyptian memory that the Hyksos—which he takes to mean “shepherd kings”—forceably invaded the land. On the strength of Josephus’ account, scholars have generally assumed a Hyksos invasion was responsible for the breakdown of Egyptian authority in this **Second Intermediate Period**. Recent archaeological evidence, however, suggests a more gradual infiltration and opportunistic takeover.¹¹

Egyptian texts locate the Hyksos capital at Avaris, which has been recently and certainly identified with Tell ed-Dab’a in the eastern Nile Delta. Excavations conducted there show that the city was founded in the nineteenth or eighteenth century BC and inhabited by persons whose material culture was clearly West Semitic. The finds suggest that the Asiatic settlers continued their peaceful colonization until the internal weakness of Dynasty 13 presented an opportunity to seize power.

Several of the known Hyksos kings bore clearly West Semitic names,¹² as did the biblical Patriarchs. In short, the Hyksos were more akin to the Patriarchs than were the native Egyptians. Thus Joseph’s rise to power (Gen 41:39- 45) would have been far more likely under a Hyksos king than under a native Egyptian.

Palestine

Terminology. The terminology for the periods dating 2000-1550 BC in Palestine varies greatly and depends on the name given to the previous transitional period of 2200-2000 BC (see Chapter 4). Albright, who designated 2200-2000 BC Middle Bronze (MB) I, used the term MB IIa for the period 2000-1750 and MB IIb-c for 1750-1550, and his terminology has been preserved by most. Others, having renamed the transitional period, have used the term MBI for the beginning of the second millennium. Further confusion results from the combining of Albright’s MB IIa and MB IIb into single period. Some basic systems of nomenclature are as follows:¹³

Dates B.C.	Albright/Mazar/NEAEHL	Kenyon	Dever	Israeli (Kempenski)
2200-2000	Middle Bronze I	Intermediate Bronze	Early Bronze IV	Middle Bronze I
2000-1750	Middle Bronze IIA	Middle Bronze I	Middle Bronze I	Middle Bronze IIA
1750-1650	Middle Bronze IIB	Middle Bronze II	Middle Bronze II	Middle Bronze IIB
1650-1550	Middle Bronze IIC		Middle Bronze III	

¹¹Manfred Bietak, “Canaanites in the Eastern Nile Delta,” in *Egypt, Israel, Sinai: Archaeological and Historical Relationships in the Biblical Period*, ed. Anson F. Rainey (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1987), 41-56; but see Donald B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 101-106.

¹²Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times*, 100.

¹³For the various terminologies, see Patty Gerstenblith, *The Levant at the Beginning of the Middle Bronze Age*, ASOR Dissertation Series, 5 (Winona Lake, IN: ASOR, 1983), 2-3.

Reurbanization: The MB IIA Period (about 2000-1750 BC). In contrast to the MB I, the MB IIA period saw the reestablishment of large fortified cities. This change was not sudden, as the Egyptian Tale of Sinuhe presents a picture of tribal pastoralism in the early decades of the new millennium, a situation not significantly different from the MB I.

The reurbanization of Palestine is demonstrated by documents from Middle Kingdom Egypt. Three bodies of **Execration Texts** consist of magical curses against rulers in Canaan who posed a threat to Egyptian interests. The names of Asiatic rulers were written on bowls or figurines and ritually smashed as a curse on those named. Two earlier groups consist of bowls on which several chiefs are named for each location in Palestine. Most locations were rural enclaves, though a few town names appear, suggesting tribal organization and transhumant conditions like those found during the MB I. By contrast, the later group of figurine Execration Texts (perhaps late nineteenth century) feature a single ruler for each place name. While a few tribal groups still appear, most of the considerably more numerous locations are identifiable towns or cities. These texts show the transition back to an urban society from the rural existence of the MB I.¹⁴ By the beginning of the eighteenth century, Palestine contained a number of growing cities, among which vestiges of a more nomadic culture might be found.¹⁵

A change in the material culture, especially pottery and metal technology, clearly indicates the arrival of new elements in the population of Palestine. It is difficult to say whether these new elements arrived as agents of the destruction and chaos of the MB I period, or of the reurbanization of the land in the MB IIA. Nevertheless, certain features of the material culture point north to Syria as the origin of the MB culture of Palestine. The peoples of both places were clearly West Semitic; their arrival in Palestine is often referred to as the “Amorite invasion.” In any case, the new elements and reurbanization of this period gave rise to the classical Canaanite culture.¹⁶

Among the cities listed in the Execration Texts are a number of names familiar to students of the Bible. Thus appear Tyre, Akko, Laish (biblical Dan), Hazor, Shechem, Aphek, Beth Shemesh, and Jerusalem. Also important during this period were Jericho and Megiddo, perhaps not mentioned in the Execration Texts because they were loyal to Egypt.

The MB IIB-c Period (about 1750-1550 BC). Rather than a major cultural shift, the MB IIB-c period (about 1750-1550 BC) is defined by gradual and technical changes in the pottery typology. Overall, the period represents the flowering of the Middle Bronze Canaanite culture. There is no significant break between the MB IIB and c subdivisions and many scholars disregard the distinction. The MB IIB-c also conveniently corresponds with the Second Intermediate Period in Egypt, so that often the term “Hyksos Period” is used collectively for northern Egypt and Palestine. Hyksos scarabs found from sites in Palestine correlate finds from the two areas.

The reurbanization of Palestine brought a renewed need for city fortifications, and the MB II inhabitants brought new methods for meeting this need. Freestanding walls, as used in the EB period, were now usually supplemented by earthworks. Some of these were in the form of a **glacis**, a steep slope constructed of layers of earth and plaster against the outer face of the city wall. A glacis strengthened the wall and kept attackers away from its foundations. Other fortifications utilized ramparts, massive mounds of earth which surrounded the city or part of it. Ramparts were heaped up on both sides of a city wall to raise, strengthen, or supplement it. At a couple of sites, stone or mudbrick walls were merely the core for enormous ramparts, so that the walls were completely concealed. Sometimes the earthen rampart alone served as a city’s fortification, there being no wall on or within it. In all the variations, the MB rampart-wall constructions represent enormous public works projects which imply a strong government and organization as well as some external threat.

As impressive as the fortifications themselves were the means by which one entered them—the city gates. Entrance was typically through a narrow passage between guardrooms defined by three pairs of short walls attached

¹⁴For a detailed discussion, see Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times*, 87-93; for a brief discussion and helpful map, see *MBA*, map 23.

¹⁵On the period in general, see Mazar, “The Middle Bronze Age in Canaan,” 1-33.

¹⁶Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible: 10,000-586 B.C.E.* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 188-89.

to two large facing towers. The towers were two halves of a massive gatehouse and often contained stairs leading to its second story.¹⁷

Temple architecture in the MB II was fairly consistent throughout the Fertile Crescent. All were rectangular buildings with extremely thick walls, indicating significant height compared to earlier structures. More elaborate examples incorporated an anteroom or entrance chamber and sometimes projections or towers which flanked the entrance. Such symmetrical temple structures seem to be typical of West Semitic civilization and prefigure some of the characteristics of the Temple of Solomon. An interesting open air cult site is represented by a row of monumental stone monoliths (stelae) and hewn basin at Gezer.¹⁸ The stelae (Hebrew *masseboth*) may witness to the making of some covenant, as similar stones served the Patriarchs (Gen 28:18-22; 31:45-52), while the basin may have been a socket for a missing object or a basin for religious use.

Space prevents a thorough review, but two of the many MB II sites excavated in Palestine bear mentioning: Hazor and Dan. Hazor, though not mentioned in the Patriarchal narratives, was no doubt the most important city of MB Palestine. The site consists of a typical tell covering some 30 acres and a huge lower city area of some 170 acres enclosed by a massive earthen **rampart**, supplemented in places by a fosse or supporting wall. Excavations have uncovered a city gate, subterranean tombs connected by tunnels, and temples which begin a series continuing through the Late Bronze Age.¹⁹

Contemporary with the Syrian states Qatna and Yamhad, Hazor dominated northern Palestine and southern Syria as indicated by tablets from Mari. A king of Hazor appears in the Mari documents with the name *Ibni-Adad* (“[the god] Adad/Hadad has created”). The first part is linguistically equivalent to *Yabni*, or Jabin, the Biblical name given of two later kings of Hazor (Josh 11:1; Judg 4:2). Recently, two Middle Bronze Age tablets were discovered at Hazor itself, one being a letter to the king *Ibni*[. . .], perhaps referring to the same king as the Mari text. It is more than possible that the name *Ibni-Adad/Yabni-Addu* was used as a dynastic name. Thus, “Jabin” appears, perhaps more than once, in the MB II and twice again (in the Bible) at the end of the Late Bronze Age.²⁰

Also mentioned in the Mari texts is Laish, known later in the Bible as Dan, where a superb example of a MB gate was found. Constructed near the MB IIa-MB IIb transition, the gate went out of use soon after and was filled in completely. This preserved the mudbrick superstructure in its entirety, including a fine archway over the entrance passage.²¹

About the middle of the sixteenth century BC, a number of MB cities were destroyed or abandoned. These changes are most probably related to the expulsion of the Hyksos from Egypt. Despite the failure of a number of Palestinian cities to cover from this turmoil, the Canaanite civilization continued into the following Late Bronze Age.

The Historicity of the Patriarchs

The Debate

Without doubt, the major issue for Biblical Archaeology in the Middle Bronze Age is the bearing of archaeological data on an understanding of the biblical Patriarchs. Dozens of sites have been excavated, yielding tens of thousands of documents from the second millennium BC, the period in which the Bible seems to place Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

¹⁷Aharon Kempenski, “Middle and Late Bronze Fortifications,” in *The Architecture of Ancient Israel*, eds. A. Kempenski and R. Reich (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1992), 127-36.

¹⁸Amihai Mazar, “Temples of the Middle and Late Bronze Ages and the Iron Age,” in *Architecture in Ancient Israel*, 162-69.

¹⁹“Hazor,” in *NEAEHL*, 594-606.

²⁰Abraham Malamat, “Northern Canaan and the Mari Texts,” in *Near Eastern Archaeology in the Twentieth Century: Essays in Honor of Nelson Glueck*, edited by James A. Sanders (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 168, 175; Wayne Horowitz and Aaron Shaffer, “A Fragment of a Letter from Hazor,” *IEJ* 42/3-4 (1992): 165-66.

²¹Avraham Biran, *Biblical Dan* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1994), 47- 104.

During the last century, the pendulum of scholarly opinion has swung back and forth between the view that denies the veracity of the patriarchal narratives and that which sees them as reflecting actual events of the second millennium BC. By the end of the nineteenth century, the source-critical view of Old Testament origins held sway; namely that the Old Testament was composed quite late from four major documents (J, E, D, and P) dated from the ninth century BC to post-exilic times. This hypothesis naturally led to a skeptical view of the patriarchal accounts and other early traditions of Israel. These stories, according to this view, reflect the world as it existed at the period during which the source document was written, but contain little factual information regarding Israel's prehistory.²²

Archaeology, as a budding discipline in the early years of this century, seemed to offer the promise of restoring the patriarchs to history. W. F. Albright brought scholarly respectability to this notion by integrating archaeology, Near Eastern, and biblical studies and virtually creating the field of "Biblical Archaeology." The resulting "Albright-Wright-Bright school" (see Chapter 1) viewed the patriarchs as historical figures. The archaeological evidence, it was argued, demonstrates that the patriarchal narratives accurately reflect the world of the early to mid second millennium BC—rather than that of the first millennium, when critical scholars would date the composition of the source material. On this basis, the conclusion was made that the patriarchal traditions are "firmly anchored in history."²³ This view held sway in Palestinian archaeology and in American biblical studies in the 1950s and 1960s.

In the mid-1970s, however, the reconstruction of the Albright-Wright-Bright school was attacked. In separate monographs, T. L. Thompson and J. Van Seters charged that evidence used to support the historicity of the Genesis stories has been distorted or is non-existent.²⁴ Effectively argued and ineffectively countered, the work of Thompson and Van Seters has won the field, so that today mainline historians of ancient Israel eschew the Albright-Wright-Bright reconstruction and, generally, doubt the historicity of the Patriarchs.²⁵

Does evidence remain that the Patriarchal account reflects conditions prevalent in the early second millennium BC? It does, and indeed, a number of scholars are beginning to question the "deconstructionist" opinion and revive the view that the Patriarchs could well have existed as recounted in Genesis. Current discussion in the field makes a distinction between literary and historical or archaeological evidence.²⁶ The following review of the arguments is limited to data which is primarily archaeological in nature.

Patriarchal Lifestyle and Movements

Is the semi-nomadic existence portrayed in the patriarchal stories is an authentic representation of early second millennium life in Canaan? The patriarchal lifestyle, characterized by dwelling in tents and moving about in search of pasturage, accurately depicts a transitional stage between a nomadic and settled way of life,²⁷ precisely the situation in MB IIa Palestine. Objections to this view rest on claims that details of the Patriarchs' lifestyle are not entirely consistent with that of second millennium semi-nomads in northern Syria as revealed by the Mari texts. Incredibly, the charge is made that dwelling in tents is more characteristic of the first millennium than the second!²⁸

²²Most prominently expressed by Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (New York: Meridian, 1957), 318-19.

²³This is the view of Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, 236-43; John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 70, 78. A more cautious evaluation of the archaeological evidence is seen in the view of the "Alt-Noth School" in which the patriarchs are to be studied only in the context of the history of the twelve tribes. Though the patriarchs are "clearly men who had once lived as historical persons," this school finds it too risky to make "any definite historical assertions about the time and place, presuppositions and circumstances of the lives of the patriarchs as human beings;" Martin Noth, *The History of Israel*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), 121-23.

²⁴Thomas L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, BZAW 133 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1974); John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale, 1975).

²⁵see, for example, J. Maxwell Miller, "Reflections on the Study of Israelite History," in *What Has Archaeology to Do With Faith?*, James H. Charlesworth and Walter P. Weaver, eds. (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), 69.

²⁶M. J. Selman, "Comparative Customs and the Patriarchal Age," in *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives*, eds. A. R. Millard and D. J. Wiseman (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 106-112.

²⁷The details can be found in Roland de Vaux, *The Early History of Israel*, trans. David Smith (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1978), 229-33.

²⁸Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, 13-20.

Such objections fail to consider the specific situation of the Patriarchs as described by the Bible and also tend to focus attention away from the larger picture.

Genesis depicts the patriarchs as freely moving about in the Central Hill Country, Negev, and Transjordanian regions in search of pasture while having limited contact with urban centers. This coexistence of tribal groups and minor city-states is precisely in accord with the condition of the land as revealed by the Egyptian Execration Texts and the Tale of Sinuhe. Indeed, the word used for Abraham's "armed men" in Genesis 14:14 is used nowhere else in the Bible, but appears in the Execration texts and a tablet from Taanach, where it means "armed supporters."²⁹

The freedom of movement assumed by the biblical narrative (even for individuals as in Gen 24) seems to have reached a peak in Mesopotamia during the Old Babylonian period, as evidenced in the Mari texts. Free intercourse between Palestine and Egypt, as enjoyed by the Patriarchs is demonstrated by the Tale of Sinuhe and graphically illustrated by the Beni-Hasan tomb painting.

Visits to Egypt by Semites were common during the Middle Kingdom as well as in the Later New Kingdom. But the visits of Abraham (Gen 12:10-20) and Jacob (Gen 45:28-47:28) imply an Egyptian royal residence in the eastern Nile Delta. Amenemhet I, founder of Dynasty 12, established a residence and temple at Ro-waty. The Hyksos of Dynasty 15 made their capital at Avaris, quite nearby. Thus, Egyptian and foreign pharaohs had residences in the eastern Delta from about 1950-1550 BC. This situation would not again be true until the 19th Dynasty, the period of the Exodus.³⁰

Covenants and Treaties

In several instances the Patriarchs are described as having or entering into covenant, or treaty, relationships. Abraham, for example, is said to be in covenant with the Amorites Mamre, Eshcol, and Aner (Gen 14:13). Abraham and Isaac make covenants with Abimelech of Gerar (Gen 21, 26), and Jacob comes to an understanding with his father-in-law Laban (Gen 31). In these three cases, the terms of the covenants or treaties are given, and the essential elements are the same: an introductory oath is demanded and given, sometimes preceded by the invocation of witnesses; stipulations are given; and the agreement is accompanied by a ceremony.

Several early second millennium treaties from Mari and Tell Leilan have recently become known. These compare well with the covenants recorded in Genesis in their basic format. Deities are cited as witnesses to the oath which is followed by stipulations of non-aggression, alliances, trade relationships, and so forth. A ceremony, consisting of a feast or exchange of gifts, accompanies the making of the treaty if the parties met in person.

Enough treaties are known from the ancient Near East to establish something of a typology. Without going into detail, the Genesis covenants do not match the format of third millennium BC treaties, or that of later second or first millennium examples. In short, the Genesis covenants fit perfectly well with the norms of the early second millennium BC and not with treaties of other periods.³¹

In addition to their form, some of the specific terms in the covenants of the Patriarchs are consistent with norms of the early second millennium. For example, the shepherding arrangements between Laban and Jacob compare favorably with known Old Babylonian shepherding contracts.³² Other examples will be covered below.

²⁹de Vaux, *Early History of Israel*, 217.

³⁰Kenneth A. Kitchen, "Genesis 12-50 in the Near Eastern World," in *He Swore an Oath: Biblical Themes from Genesis 12-50*, 2nd ed., eds. R. S. Hess, G. J. Wenham, and P. E. Satterthwaite (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 70-71, 89.

³¹Kenneth A. Kitchen, "The Patriarchal Age: Myth or History?" *BAR* 21 (March/April 1995): 52-56; idem, "Genesis 12-50 in the Near Eastern World," 74-77.

³²M. J. Selman, "Comparative Customs and the Patriarchal Age," in *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives*, eds. A. R. Millard and D. J. Wiseman (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 117-18.

The Geopolitical Situation

The question of treaties brings up the situation recounted in Genesis 14, where an alliance of four kings from the north and east defeats five kings of the Dead Sea area. Though alliances of kings in the Levant were possible in several periods, only the period about 2000-1750 BC had conditions which allowed as much in Mesopotamia.³³ From the fall of the Ur III dynasty to the dominance of Hammurabi, Mesopotamia consisted of a myriad of small states combining in ever-changing coalitions. In addition to the text quoted above, numerous documents from this period refer to alliances of three to five rulers.

Unfortunately, none of the attacking kings mentioned in Genesis 14 can be identified in a contemporary record. Nevertheless, the names are proper for the period and the locations named. For example, Chedorlaomer is a good Elamite name having the initial element Kutir, of which several examples are known, while Tidal is Tudkhalia, the name of several Hittite rulers of the second millennium.³⁴ The claim was once made that the Ebla tablets make reference to the “cities of the plain” mentioned in Genesis 14. But this claim (and its subsequent refutation) has been the subject of great controversy,³⁵ and has been largely discounted.

Patriarchal Names

The personal names of the Patriarchs and their families in the biblical stories may be favorably compared with names found in extra-biblical texts from the early second millennium BC. The name Abram, for example, has parallels in documents of the First Babylonian Dynasty at Dilbat. The longer form, Abraham, has been compared with Aburahana in the Execration Texts of Middle Kingdom Egypt.³⁶ This line of evidence can even be extended to include the names of some of the Patriarchs’ ancestors as well; the names Serug and Nahor are known from documents of the Ur III period.³⁷

More relevant are the Patriarchal names beginning with *y* or *i* in the original language: Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph (in English, the *y* has often become a *j*—there is no *j* in Hebrew). The initial *y* in these cases is a prefix which is added to a verbal root in the “imperfect” form; the names are thus called “Amorite imperfect” names. Amorite imperfect names are known as early as the third millennium, but are extremely common in the early second millennium. Objections to this argument for the historicity of the Patriarchs have suggested that such names continued in use after the Middle Bronze Age. But these objections have been met with overwhelming statistical evidence that, in fact, Amorite imperfective names were considerably less common in later periods, especially the Iron Age.³⁸ Thus, the names of the Patriarchs, except Abraham, belong to a class belonging mainly to the first half of the second millennium BC.

Nor can the Patriarchal names be dismissed as tribal, non-personal names as some have suggested.³⁹ External data clearly demonstrate the patriarchal names to be personal rather than tribal. Jacob provides the best example, as it is known from numerous documents of Middle Bronze Mesopotamia and, more significantly, on Egyptian scarabs of the Hyksos period.⁴⁰ Jacob’s other name, Israel, is paralleled by not only the thirteenth century *Yisra-il* of Ugarit, but also by *Ishrail* in the twenty-third century texts at Ebla. Also, the name Ishmael is paralleled by *Yasmakh-el* in

³³Kitchen, “Genesis 12-50 in the Near Eastern World,” 71-74; idem, “The Patriarchal Age,” 56-57.

³⁴For details, see K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity, 1966), 43-47.

³⁵See Bright, *History*, 38, n. 29, 84.

³⁶Kitchen, *Ancient Orient*, 48; and de Vaux, *Early History*, 196-98, who notes that the change from Abram to Abraham could have resulted from movement from one linguistic zone to another.

³⁷de Vaux, *Early History*, 191.

³⁸Kenneth A. Kitchen, “New Directions in Biblical Archaeology: Historical and Biblical Aspects,” in *Biblical Archaeology Today*, 1990: Proceedings of the Second International Congress on Biblical Archaeology (Jerusalem: IEJ, 1993), 45-46; idem, “The Patriarchal Age,” 90-92.

³⁹Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, 39.

⁴⁰de Vaux, *Early History of Israel*, 191, 199.

the Mari texts as well as by *Ishmail* in the Ebla archives.⁴¹ Virtually the entire corpus of patriarchal names are known from early second millennium contexts. Indeed, the popular etymologies of the patriarchs' names given in Genesis—which are explained on the basis of synonyms rather than the true roots—suggest that their original meanings had been forgotten. The evidence remains sufficient to say that the patriarchal names “fit perfectly in a class known to have been current in both Mesopotamia and Palestine in the second millennium, specifically among the Amorite element of the population.”⁴²

The Patriarchs and the Amorites

Beyond their names, other parallels exist between the Patriarchs and the West Semites usually called Amorites. The original homeland of the Amorites is unclear, but *Amurru* in the Akkadian texts refers to the region of northwestern Mesopotamia. The Genesis account of Abraham's adventures begins in the city of Ur (11:28, 31) in Sumer, but the patriarch clearly regarded his ancestral homeland as northwestern Mesopotamia (24:1-10). Certain place names associated with the patriarchs are known from Mesopotamian texts to have been located in the same area. These include frequent references to *Harran* (Haran; Gen 11:31; 12:4) and *Nakhur* (Nahor; Gen 24:10) at Mari and in later Assyrian texts. Assyrian texts also speak of *Til-turakhi* (Terah; Gen 11:24-26) and *Sarugi* (Serug; Gen 11:20-22).⁴³

Clearly, Amorites could be found in the region of Ur soon after 2000 BC. It is plausible to suppose that these Amorites would regard northwestern Mesopotamia as their ancestral homeland. A movement back to this region by a family group such as Terah's is quite conceivable during this period. It is objected that a patriarchal migration from Ur to Haran would be against the supposed flow of Amorite movements.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, Amorites could be found in both Sumer and northwestern Mesopotamia during this period. There is no reason to deny the possibility that a single family would, for whatever reason, move from the newly settled territory (Sumer) towards their ancestral homeland (Haran?). A subsequent move by a portion of this group southward into Palestine would also be quite in line with the usual reconstructions of the period.

The concept of an Amorite Invasion of Palestine—whether in the MB I or MB IIa periods—with which the patriarchs may be connected has also been challenged.⁴⁵ The arguments used, while demonstrating the wide gaps in the current state of knowledge of the period, are on the whole unconvincing, and the consensus of scholarly opinion continues to hold that an influx of West Semitic elements (usually termed Amorite) occurred during either the MB I or MB IIa periods.

Social and Legal Customs

Thousands of tablets unearthed at Mesopotamian and North Syrian sites dating to the second millennium have enabled comparison between the customs at these sites and those represented in the patriarchal stories. Many parallels to details found in the Genesis account have been cited from these texts, especially tablets from Nuzi. But these arguments have come under heavy criticism in the works of Thompson, Van Seters, and others.

Some claimed parallels have been effectively countered and discarded. For example, claims that the Nuzi tablets demonstrate the practice of adopting one's wife as a sister (cf. Gen 12:10-20; 20:1-18; 26:1-11) have been shown to be false.⁴⁶ Also doubtful are claims that the Nuzi tablets provide parallels to Esau's sale of his inheritance to Jacob

⁴¹K. A. Kitchen, *The Bible in Its World* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 68. See Giovanni Pettinato, *The Archives of Ebla: An Empire Inscribed in Clay* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1981), 249.

⁴²Bright, *History of Israel*, 77; de Vaux, *Early History of Israel*, 199-200.

⁴³Bright, *History of Israel*, 78.

⁴⁴Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, 87.

⁴⁵Primarily by Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, 89-171.

⁴⁶Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, 71-76; Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, 238-40; Kitchen, *Bible in Its World*, 70.

(Gen 25:29-34) and the validity of patriarchal blessings, even when gained by deceit as in the case of Jacob (cf. Gen 27:30-36).⁴⁷ Other parallels have been questioned but must, for the time being, be left open.

Abraham's Purchase of a Burial Site. An example of the latter is the claim that the Hittite law code found at Hattusas may clarify Abraham's purchase of the Cave of Machpelah at Hebron. The Hittite law specified that if an entire piece of property was inherited or sold, the new owner was bound to perform the feudal service.⁴⁸ This would explain the peculiar bargaining process recorded between Abraham and Ephron the Hittite in Genesis 23. Abraham's offer to buy "the cave . . . at the end of his field," (v. 9) may be a request to purchase only part of the property, and thus avoid the feudal service. Ephron however, perhaps taking advantage of an opportunity to rid himself of the service, offers "the [whole] field, and . . . the cave" (v. 11), to which Abraham reluctantly agrees (v. 13).⁴⁹

Some studies have suggested that Neo-Babylonian and Persian "dialogue documents," in which the parties demonstrate extreme politeness during the bargaining, provide better parallels for Genesis 23.⁵⁰ There is no concrete evidence that Abraham's bargaining represents a "dialogue document." Even so, such documents are now known to exist from the second millennium as well. In any case, the relevance of the Hittite law has not been by any means disproved, and an early second millennium origin for the story certainly remains a viable option.⁵¹

Possession of the Household Gods. Another widely-questioned parallel has to do with the question of inheritance and possession of the father's household gods. One adoption tablet from Nuzi reads:

The adoption tablet of Nashwi son of Arshenni. He adopted Wullu son of Puhishenni. As long as Nashwi lives, Wullu shall give [him] food and clothing. When Nashwi dies, Wullu shall be the heir. Should Nashwi beget a son, [the latter] shall divide equally with Wullu but [only] Nashwi's son shall take Nashwi's gods. But if there be no son of Nashwi's then Wullu shall take Nashwi's gods. And [Nashwi] has given his daughter Nuhuya as wife to Wullu. And if Wullu takes another wife, he forfeits Nashwi's land and buildings. Whoever breaks the contract shall pay one mina of silver [and] one mina of gold.⁵²

The emphasis on the possession of Nashwi's gods recalls Rachel's curious theft of her father's household gods (Gen 31:19, 30). It has been suggested that Rachel's act was an attempt to secure for Jacob inheritance of Laban's estate. This idea has been rejected as it is not clear that possession of the gods at Nuzi was tantamount to holding title to the estate or that Rachel (or Jacob) intended to lay claim to Laban's property.⁵³ Nevertheless, it is clear from both the Nuzi tablet and the biblical account that some importance or benefit—not specified in either case—was perceived as connected with possession of the household gods.

An Adopted Son Becomes Heir. The adoption tablet of Nashwi has also been compared to the story of Jacob and Laban—where, it is assumed, Laban has adopted Jacob for lack of a son.⁵⁴ But nowhere is it stated in the biblical account that Laban was sonless or that he adopted Jacob.⁵⁵ Rather, this text is more properly connected to Abraham and Eliezer. The childless Abraham is convinced (Gen 15:2-3) that Eliezer, a slave (v. 3) and apparently "his servant, the oldest of his house, who had charge of all that he had" (24:2), would be his heir.

⁴⁷Cyrus H. Gordon, "Biblical Customs and the Nuzu Tablets," *BA* 3 (February 1940): 1-12, reprinted in *BA Reader* 2, 23-24, 27- 28; Kitchen, *Bible in Its World*, 70.

⁴⁸Hittite Code, 46-48, 169; *ANET*, 191, 195. Such duties are known from elsewhere in the second millennium BC, as in the Code of Hammurabi.

⁴⁹Manfred R. Lehmann, "Abraham's Purchase of Machpelah and Hittite Law" *BASOR* 129 (February 1953):15-18; V. R. Gold, "Machpelah," in *IDB*, 3:219.

⁵⁰Especially Gene M. Tucker, "The Legal Background of Genesis 23" *JBL* 85 (March 1966):77-84; Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, 98-100.

⁵¹Kitchen, *Bible in Its World*, 71, 145; Bright, however, has apparently removed reference to this reconstruction in the third edition of his *History of Israel*.

⁵²Nuzi tablet Gadd 51; translated by Gordon, "Biblical Customs and the Nuzu Tablets," 24-25; *ANET*, 219-20.

⁵³Moshe Greenburg, "Another Look at Rachel's Theft of the Teraphim," *JBL* 81 (1962):239-48.

⁵⁴Gordon, "Biblical Customs and the Nuzu Tablets," *BA Reader* 2, 24-25; George Ernest Wright, *Biblical Archaeology*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), 44.

⁵⁵Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, 79-80.

The Nashwi tablet is indicative of the practice at Nuzi whereby childless couples would adopt a son who would serve them for life and inherit the estate upon their death. Any subsequently born true son would replace the adopted one as chief heir. Other Nuzi texts also illustrate this practice,⁵⁶ while an Old Babylonian tablet from Larsa demonstrates that the adopted son might be a slave.⁵⁷ God's reply to Abraham, that "this man shall not be your heir; your own son shall be your heir," only strengthens the possibility that such an agreement was in effect between the patriarch and his chief servant.⁵⁸ Objectors note that Eliezer does not seem to have an inheritance after the birth of Abraham's own sons, which would be contrary to the stipulations of the Nashwi tablet, and that the later Proverbs 17:2 can be used to explain Abraham's slave is an heir.⁵⁹ These arguments, however, fail to demonstrate that Abraham's concerns were contrary to a widespread Near Eastern custom reflected in the specifics of second millennium adoption contracts. Other second millennium texts contain more certain parallels to specific Patriarchal actions.

Designation of the First Born. Several texts suggest that the father had the right to designate the son to be considered "first born." A fifteenth-century marriage contract from Alalakh on the North Syrian coast contains the clause:

If Naidu does not give birth to a son, then the daughter of his brother, Iwashura, shall be given Irihalpa [as wife]. If another wife of Irihalpa gives birth to a son first and afterwards Naidu gives birth to a son, the son of Naidu alone shall be the first-born.⁶⁰

This contract recalls again the incident of Sarah and Hagar, where Isaac is chosen as the first born (Gen 21:10-13). This practice was later explicitly forbidden by Israelite law (Deut 21:15-17).⁶¹ One is also reminded of Jacob's "choice" by Isaac (Gen 35:22), his choice of Ephraim over Manasseh (48:8-22), and—in a negative sense—his repudiation of Reuben for sexual offenses against his concubine (Gen 49:3-4). The last case is consistent with the Code of Hammurabi and evidence elsewhere that disinheritance was not subject to a father's arbitrary decision, but the result of a serious offense against one's family.⁶²

The Childless Wife. Childlessness is a recurring theme in the Patriarchal narratives which finds an echo in the second millennium texts. In a remarkable example, Sarah's offer of her handmaiden, Hagar, as a concubine to produce an heir for Abraham (Gen 16) is paralleled by a Nuzi adoption tablet:

Furthermore, Kelim-ninu has been given in marriage to Shennima. If Kelim-ninu bears (children), Shennima shall not take another wife; but if Kelim-ninu does not bear, Kelim-ninu shall acquire a woman of the land of Lullu as wife for Shennima, and Kelim-ninu may not send the offspring away. Any sons that may be born to Shennima from the womb of Kelim-ninu, to (these) sons shall be given [all] the lands (and) buildings of every sort.⁶³

The presentation of the maids Bilhah and Zilpah to Jacob by Rachel and Leah (Gen 30:1-13) may also reflect the custom underlying the above contract. The contract's stipulation that any children of the concubine may not be sent away may illustrate Abraham's reluctance to drive out Hagar and Ishmael (21:8-14).⁶⁴ Other second millennium contracts and the Law Code of Hammurabi also attest to the use of a slave-concubine to provide an heir.⁶⁵

⁵⁶Especially text HSS 5 7, 60, 67; see English translations in *ANET*, 219-20.

⁵⁷M. J. Selman, "Comparative Customs and the Patriarchal Age," 114.

⁵⁸Gordon, "Biblical Customs and the Nuzi Tablets," *BA Reader* 2, 22; Wright, *Biblical Archaeology*, 43.

⁵⁹As put forth by Thompson, *Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, 203-30; Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, 85-87.

⁶⁰AT 92, 15-19; Andre Parrot, "Alalakh," in *AOTS*, 127.

⁶¹Bright, *History of Israel*, 79-80.

⁶²Code of Hammurabi, 168-69, *ANET*, 173; Selman, "Comparative Customs and the Patriarchal Age," 120, 135-36.

⁶³Tablet HSS V 67, as translated in *ANET*, 220.

⁶⁴Gordon, "Biblical Customs and the Nuzi Tablets," *BA Reader* 2, 22-23; Kitchen, *Bible in Its World*, 69-70.

⁶⁵See, for example, an Old Assyrian example from Kültepe in *ANET*, 543; Code of Hammurabi, 144, 146 *ANET*, 172; also, a discussion in Thompson, *Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, 261-68.

Other Marriage Issues. The adoption tablets of Shennima and Nashwi quoted above contain the restriction that the adopted son-in-law may not take another wife. This is a common clause in marriage contracts and accords well with Laban's admonition to Jacob (Gen 31:50).⁶⁶

It is interesting to note that three times in the patriarchal narratives a slave-girl is mentioned as part of the bride's dowry (Gen 24:59, 61; 29:24, 29). This practice is well-known in various periods in the Near East. Also regarding the dowry, Laban's daughters complain that their father "sold" them and "entirely consumed our money" (Gen 31:15). Texts from the Old Babylonian period and Nuzi show that on occasion a father would withhold a part of the dowry. Furthermore, the phrase "consume(d our) money" (Hebrew *'akal keseph*) appears in identical contexts in texts from Nuzi (Akkadian *kaspa akalu*).⁶⁷

Implications. Objections to the proposed correlations between patriarchal customs and legal practices revealed by tablets of the second millennium BC have correctly pointed out that *exact* parallels to the biblical situations have not been discovered. This is not surprising, as the tablets in question are legal contracts with clauses tailored to the needs and desires of the individuals involved. The clauses are no doubt expressions of and somewhat limited by the general social customs of their day. Overall patriarchal practice, as recorded in Genesis, is remarkably in line with the social customs which existed throughout the Near East in the early second millennium BC. Most scholarly debate has revolved around the proposed parallels between the Bible and the fifteenth-century BC Nuzi texts. But the Nuzi texts are only a reflection of a larger context, the Near East as a whole. It is through the accidents of preservation and discovery that the Nuzi texts have taken first place in the patriarchal discussions. Clearly, certain associations have been made too hastily between the patriarchal material and texts of the second millennium. Nevertheless, assertions that the customs reflected in the patriarchal stories better fit the milieu of the first millennium, when critical scholarship would prefer to see them written, have remained largely unsubstantiated.

The Price of Slaves

Other details which would be difficult for a later writer to reproduce accurately give the Genesis stories an "authentic" flavor. An example is the price of slaves in the Bible. The price for slaves in the Near East is known from documents of various periods. In the Akkadian Empire and Ur III periods, a slave brought 10-15 silver shekels; in the Old Babylonian Law Code of Hammurabi, the price for a slave is one third mina, or 20 shekels; at fourteenth century Nuzi and thirteenth century Ugarit, slaves were 30 shekels or a little more. In the first millennium, by contrast, the Neo-Assyrian slave market of the eighth century the price had risen to 50 shekels; and by the Persian period, the price skyrocketed to 90-120 shekels.⁶⁸

The sale price received when Joseph is sold by his brothers is twenty shekels—exactly the price set in the Code of Hammurabi. A writer of the first millennium, however, would not know this. Again, when the eighth-century Israelite king Menahem ransoms Israelite citizens from Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria, the amount per man seems to be 50 shekels, quite in accordance with Assyrian slave market prices of the period. If we include the Sinai Covenant's thirteenth century slave price of 30 shekels (Ex 21:32)—quite in line with prices at Nuzi and Ugarit—we can observe that in every case, biblical slave prices fit the period for which they are given. Returning to our argument, then, the price paid for Joseph is the correct price for the early second millennium, and not for any other period for which we have data.

Other Considerations

Some factors, it must be admitted, seem to point to a later date for the composition of portions of the Genesis stories. Several incidents can be convincingly explained as traditions which grew out of later Israel's historical experience. For example, Jacob's triumphs over Esau can be seen as reflections of Israel's subjugation of Edom. Similarly, the blessings of the twelve sons ascribed to Jacob (Gen 49) could easily be said to reflect the situation of the twelve tribes in the period of the monarchy. On the other hand, some elements indicate the antiquity of the

⁶⁶Selman, "Comparative Customs and the Patriarchal Age," 119, 138.

⁶⁷Selman, "Comparative Customs and the Patriarchal Age," 122-23, 137-38.

⁶⁸Code of Hammurabi, 116, 214, 252 in *ANET*, 170, 175-76; for other references and general summary, see Kitchen, "The Patriarchal Age," 52, 53, chart, 95.

Genesis narratives. For example, the worship of the patriarchs represents an earlier form of cultic practice known from Canaanite and Old Assyrian religion.⁶⁹ Indeed, the patriarchs are frequently depicted as performing activities which were forbidden by later Israelite law. Abraham, for example, marries his half-sister (Gen 20:12; cf. Lev 18:9, 11; Deut 27:22); and Jacob is the husband of two sisters at once (Gen 29; cf. Lev 18:18). Abraham also plants a sacred tree (Gen 21:33; cf. Deut 16:21); and Jacob sets up *masseboth* (Gen 28:22; 31:45). It is most unlikely that a post-exilic author would picture the ancient heroes of Israel in such a way.⁷⁰

Conclusion

The “deconstructionist” attack on the Albright-Wright-Bright school has served the useful purpose of exposing sloppy argumentation and excesses of speculation which have led to false or tenuous parallels, and have emphasized the need to extend the search for parallels into all periods. But deconstructionists in turn have made selected use of the evidence to fit their preconceived notions of biblical authorship. The fact remains that the patriarchal narratives present an authentic picture of the Near East in the early second millennium BC. While the details of the Genesis stories are largely consistent with what is known of that period, they do not all require such a dating. The possibility that certain details are anachronistic remains open.

It must be cautioned that even if it could be conclusively demonstrated that the patriarchal accounts are accurate reflections of the early second millennium BC, this would not prove that the events described within the narratives actually occurred. It is in the understanding of the Patriarchs’ historical setting that the tablets and remains of the second millennium BC have their greatest value.

The Patriarchs in Their World

Ur of the Chaldees

The patriarchal story begins in detail with the family of Terah, Abraham’s father, in Ur “of the Chaldees” (Gen 11:28), a location which is reconfirmed several times (Gen 11:31; 15:7; Neh 9:7). In the nineteenth century, Ur of the Chaldees was generally identified with Urfa (Edessa), a city in upper Mesopotamia. Other than the similarity in names, however, there was nothing to commend this identification, and it was largely abandoned in favor of the Sumerian city of Ur in lower Mesopotamia after the latter’s excavation by Woolley in the 1920s.⁷¹

A north Mesopotamian location for Ur has received renewed attention because of a letter found at Ugarit. The letter, from the Hittite king Hattusili III to Niqmepa, king of Ugarit, mentions “merchant men, citizens of the city of Ura,” whose trading activities in Canaan are to be regulated. This Ura cannot be identified, but was apparently in the region to the north and east of Haran. Some have thus placed Ur of the Chaldees there.⁷² This identification is unlikely, as the term Chaldean in biblical and cuneiform sources is applied exclusively to southern Mesopotamia. For this and other reasons, it is scarcely possible to place Ur of the Chaldees in the north.⁷³ Others have continued this identification, however, by relating the Chaldeans to other groups which may have northern roots.⁷⁴ This is apparently motivated by a desire to avoid seeing “of the Chaldees” as an **anachronism**, that is a reference that is chronologically out of place.

The “Chaldees” are the *Kaldu* of the cuneiform texts, not attested by historical sources until the eleventh century BC. The origin of these people is obscure, but they are associated in early sources with an area of southern

⁶⁹see Kitchen, *Ancient Orient*, 50-51; idem, *Bible in Its World*, 71-72.

⁷⁰Bright, *History of Israel*, 73-74.

⁷¹W. S. LaSor, “Ur,” in *ISBE* 4:954-55.

⁷²Cyrus H. Gordon, “Abraham and the Merchants of Ura,” *JNES* 17 (1958): 28- 31; idem, *The Ancient Near East*, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 1965), 132-33.

⁷³H. W. F. Saggs, “Ur of the Chaldees: A Problem of Identification,” *Iraq* 22 (1960): 200-209; C. J. Gadd, “Ur,” in *AOTS*, 93-95.

⁷⁴as in Barry J. Beitzel, *The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 80.

Mesopotamia called Sea Land. In the seventh century BC, they consolidated themselves in Babylon and created the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

Rather than an anacronism, the phrase “of the Chaldees” should be seen as a scribal note. Ur is a well known city of the region of Sumer, but the Sumerians had vanished as an ethnically identifiable group by the time Genesis was written in its present form. As the scribal tradition emphasized understanding of the biblical text, “of the Chaldees” was probably added as a qualifier for this city to give contemporary readers a known locale for the beginning of Abraham’s journey. Such scribal notes are found elsewhere in the patriarchal narratives. Genesis 14, for example, is filled with supplemental place names. In some cases only the supplemental, or later, name is given. Thus, Abraham pursues the northern kings as far as “Dan,” a place not called by that name until some seven centuries after Abraham. These supplemental notes, added by scribes for understanding, do not affect the historicity or accuracy of the narratives themselves.

West Semites, like the Patriarchs, were quite numerous in southern Mesopotamia at the beginning of the second millennium. Thus, there is no good reason to deny that the journey of Abraham began in the Sumerian Ur. The glory of Ur departed, however, at the end of the Ur III period, and it is difficult to say anything about the city of Abraham.

Haran and the Lunar Cult

From Ur, Abraham’s father Terah moved the family to Haran, a city well known in second millennium cuneiform texts as *Harran*. Located in the Balikh valley, the city served as a commercial center on the main trading route from Nineveh to the Euphrates and Aleppo. More than the migrations of the biblical patriarchs binds the two cities.

Haran was a center of worship for Sin, the Semitic name for the Sumerian moon god Nanna, chief deity of Ur. In the sixth century BC, the Neo-Babylonian (Chaldean, in fact) king Nabonidus rebuilt the ziggurat at Ur and the Sin temple at Haran as part of his religious reform. His mother and daughter were installed as the high priestesses of Sin at Haran and Ur, respectively. The prominence of the two cities in the lunar cult of the Neo-Babylonian period has been cited as evidence for a first millennium origin of the Patriarchal stories. But the worship of the moon god dates to at least the third millennium at Ur, and there is no reason to deny that it did so at Haran as well. Limited excavations at the site in the 1950s discovered reused steles of Nabonidus in a mosque beneath which seems to lie above a temple of the moon god Sin.⁷⁵ No doubt the one rebuilt in the Neo-Babylonian period, it remains unclear if this temple has predecessors from the second millennium.

Some patriarchal names may also be connected to lunar worship. Terah has been related to the Semitic word for the lunar month and the Moon. Sarah is the same as *sarratu*, “queen,” an Akkadian translation of the Sumerian name for Ningal, Sin’s consort. Milcah, the name of Nahor’s wife, is equivalent to that of Sin’s daughter, *Malkatu*. Laban means “white,” a form of which is used as a poetic term for the full moon.⁷⁶ These connections have been used to suggest that the Patriarchs were mythological or astrological characters. It seems more likely that the names are simply a reflection of the environment out of which the patriarchs came. It seems rather unlikely that a first millennium writer would choose such names while concocting stories about Israel’s ancestors.

The Patriarchs in Palestine

Shechem. Upon reaching the land of Canaan, Abraham and his party arrived at “the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh” (Gen 12:6; RSV). Like several other Palestinian sites associated with the patriarchs, Shechem is called in Hebrew a *makom*; normally “place,” but in these cases the word carries the expanded meaning “sacred place.” The “oak” of Moreh was a sacred tree. It is unclear if the shrine was founded by the patriarch who, in any case, built an altar there before moving on. Jacob, upon returning from Paddan-aram, bought from the sons of Hamor, Shechem’s father, the piece of land on which he camped and erected an altar outside the city (Gen 33:18-20). Following the rape of Dinah, Jacob made a covenant with the men of Shechem, and his sons conquered

⁷⁵K. Prag, “Haran (Place),” in *IDB*, supplementary volume, 387.

⁷⁶de Vaux, *Early History of Israel*, 191-92.

the city by a surprise attack (Gen 34). Before moving on, Jacob buried “all the foreign gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears” under the “oak which was near Shechem” (Gen 35:4). Jacob’s sons continued to graze their sheep around Shechem (Gen 37:12-14), and Joseph’s remains were buried there (Josh 24:32). The Shechem tradition continues beyond the patriarchal period, however. Upon the Israelite entry into the land, Joshua conducted a covenant renewal ceremony there and “took a great stone, and set it up there under the oak in the sanctuary of the Lord” (Josh 24:26). Later, Abimelech was crowned king by the “oak of the pillar at Shechem” (Judg 9:6), and burned the people of the “Tower of Shechem” in the “house of El-berith” (9:46-49).⁷⁷

Shechem has been positively identified with Tell Balatah, located at the eastern end of the pass between Mounts Gerizim and Ebal, near modern Nablus. G. E. Wright’s excavations in the 1960s revealed that a city was established at the site, with only meager prior occupation, during the early stages of reurbanization in the MB IIa. This is corroborated by the Execration Texts and a battle report by an officer of Sesostri III which mention the city. During this period, an area was leveled and filled, apparently as the platform for a large building which has not survived.

At the beginning of the MB IIb (about 1750 BC) a rampart and wall defensive system was built around the site. Inside the city, a rectangular “acropolis” area at the location of the earlier platform was isolated from the rest of the city by a thick wall. The three phases of this area were interpreted by the excavator, G. E. Wright, as “courtyard temples,”⁷⁸ Others, however, view the enclosure and its structures as a palace complex, possibly containing a shrine.⁷⁹

About the beginning of the MB IIc period (1650 BC), a major rebuilding extended the city and a much more massive structure was built in the acropolis area, certainly a temple of the common MB II variety. This “fortress temple” was the earliest of a succession continuing through the Late Bronze to the beginning of the Iron Age.

Biblical references infer a continuous shrine at Shechem and the oak of Moreh from the Patriarchal period to the time of Joshua (Josh 24:25-27) and the period of the Judges. As the “fortress temple” at Shechem offers a continual cultic presence for most of that period, it is tempting to relate the two. Indeed, several later phases of the development within the temenos area contained examples of standing stones reminiscent of those set up by Jacob (Gen 33:18-20) and Joshua (Josh 24:26; cf. Judg 9:6), and the last structure can easily be related to the one destroyed at the time of Abimelech (Judg 9). The earliest “fortress temple” cannot be related to Abraham’s building of an altar at the site. The courtyard structures of the MB IIb, however, come closer to the patriarchs. The tendency for cult sites to remain in one location adds to the possibility that these structures could be “courtyard temples.” On the basis of this assumed continuity, Wright points out that the leveling and filling of this area in the MB IIa, at which time it was outside any fortification, accords well with the Patriarchal establishment of a shrine there.⁸⁰ Whatever the case, Shechem remained of primary importance to Israel until after the split of the kingdom (1 Ki 12).

Other Sites in Palestine. At Bethel, another sacred “place” (Gen 12:8; 13:3-4; 28:18-22), excavations have established that the city existed, but little more. Claims of evidence for a Canaanite high place and standing stone, possibly to be identified with the patriarchal shrine,⁸¹ are tenuous at best. Like Shechem, Bethel had a long history as an important cult center, but the later Israelite sanctuary there (1 Sam 10:3; 1 Ki 12:28-29; and Amos 3:14; 4:4; 5:5) has been found.

Excavations the traditional spot of the “oaks of Mamre,” modern Ramat el-Khalil just north of Hebron, have revealed a pavement of the ninth-eighth centuries BC which features a gap, perhaps to signify the location of the oak. There is no direct evidence of Patriarchal connections. At Hebron (Gen 13:18), an enclosure wall of the Herodian

⁷⁷See Bernhard W. Anderson, “The Place of Shechem in the Bible,” in *BA Reader 2*, 266-69.

⁷⁸G. Ernest Wright, *Shechem: The Biography of a Biblical City* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 80-122; idem, “Shechem,” in *EAEHL*, 1086-89.

⁷⁹Edward F. Campbell, “Shechem: Tell Balatah,” in *NEAEHL*, 1349.

⁸⁰Wright, *Shechem*, 133-38; idem, “Shechem,” 1087-92.

⁸¹James L. Kelso, *The Excavation of Bethel (1934-1960)*, AASOR, Vol. 39 (Cambridge: ASOR, 1968), 20-23, 46.

period (37 BC-AD 70) surrounds the traditional site of the Cave of Machpelah.⁸² Little is known of Middle Bronze Age Hebron, except that it existed. Renewed excavations at the site, however, may clarify its history.

Despite the possibility that the MB I settlements in the Negev may represent the type of lifestyle ascribed to the patriarchs, none of these sites can be identified with certainty as a patriarchal camp. Two place names are given, Gerar (Gen 20:1-2; 26:6, 20) and Beer-sheba (Gen 21:32-33; 22:19; 26:23-25; 46:1). The identification of the former is in doubt, and the latter has no remains from the Bronze Ages. There is no reason to suppose, however, that a city is required at Beer-sheba by the patriarchal narratives. An ancient well at the site may perhaps be identified with that dug by Isaac's servants (Gen 26:25).⁸³

Into Egypt

There are many details of the account of Joseph which find reflection in Egyptian sources. For instance, a 13th Dynasty papyrus listing household slaves contains two-thirds Asiatic names, so that Joseph's situation as a slave in the home of Potiphar is not at all unusual. With his elevation by Pharaoh, Joseph is given the Egyptian name Zaphenath-pa'aneah (Gen 41:45). This name has been recently and convincingly reconstructed as "Joseph called (I)pi-ankh"—and names of the type "x called y" dominate the slave-list papyrus just mentioned.⁸⁴

Some Asiatics are known to have reached prominent positions during the late 13th Dynasty.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, it certainly cannot be said that the evidence favors placing Joseph in the late Middle Kingdom over the Hyksos period. One clue pointing to the Hyksos period is the notice that Joseph was given use of a chariot (Gen 41:43). The horse-drawn war chariot is unknown in Egyptian records prior to the New Kingdom, and its introduction is generally attributed to the Hyksos. The settling of Joseph's family in the land of Goshen (Gen 46:28-34), apparently near his place of service, argues for a capital in the Delta region. The Hyksos period, with its capital at the adjacent Avaris, fulfills this requirement perfectly.

Much has been written concerning the nature of Joseph's titles and duties under the pharaoh, but these have little relevance to the present discussion. An exception may be found in Joseph's agrarian program (Gen 47:15-26), especially the changes in land tenure. Egyptian sources testify that the system in which the farmers were tenants of pharaoh, paying one fifth of the produce as a tax (Gen 47:24), except for temple lands (v. 22), was introduced between 1700 and 1500 BC, doubtless one of the affects of Hyksos rule.⁸⁶

In light of the many and detailed Egyptian records known to historians, it may seem surprising that Joseph is completely unknown in them. This would be expected, however, if Joseph indeed served under a Hyksos pharaoh, for the monuments and records of the Hyksos were destroyed with a vengeance by native Egyptians who reunited Egypt about 1560 BC.

⁸²See the interesting article by Nancy Miller, "Patriarchal Burial Site Explored for First Time in 700 Years" *BAR* 11 (May/June 1985): 26-43.

⁸³See Ze'ev Herzog, "Beer-Sheba of the Patriarchs" *BAR* 6 (November/December 1980):12-28.

⁸⁴Papyrus Brooklyn 35.1446; *ANET*, 553-54; see also Kitchen, "Genesis 12-50 in the Ancient Near Eastern World," 78.

⁸⁵These include a king, "Ameny the Asiatic," and perhaps the pharaoh Khendjer, as well as the chancellor Hur; Kitchen, *Bible in Its World*, 74, 146.

⁸⁶Adolf Erman, *Life in Ancient Egypt*, trans. H. M. Tirard (New York: Dover, 1971), 102; George Steindorff and Keith C. Seele, *When Egypt Ruled the East*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 38.