

## Abraham in History and Tradition

### *Part I: Abraham the Hebrew*

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The study of Abraham in history and tradition has recently been revived. However, it is accompanied by a recrudescence of a critical trend in Old Testament scholarship which virtually dismisses Abraham as an eponymous ancestor, a mythological hero of legendary sagas, or the projection into the past of later Jewish ideologies seeking for a "founding father." On this basis the Genesis patriarchs are considered by many scholars to be unhistorical, and it is argued that this is no problem because their historicity is irrelevant to the theological value of the biblical narratives. With this development, Old Testament scholars have reacted against and reappraised the extrabiblical evidence which has led to the more conservative understanding and interpretation of a second-millennium B.C. "Patriarchal Age."<sup>1</sup> Both viewpoints will now need to be reevaluated in the light of the recent texts discovered at Ebla, which reveal for the first time the history, language, and culture of the Upper Euphrates in the latter half of the third millennium B.C.<sup>2</sup>

1 John van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975); Thomas L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives: The Quest for the Historical Abraham* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1974).

2 Giovanni Pettinato, "Testi cuneiformi del 3. millenium in paleo-cananeo rinvenuti nella campagna 1974 a Tell Mardikh=Ebla," *Orientalia* 44 (1975): 361-74; and paper read at the XXIIIeme Rencontre Assyriologique Inter-

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It is true that some of the comparisons made between the social background reflected in Genesis and extrabiblical evidence have arisen from the desire of scholars to find parallels in ancient Near Eastern texts. However, dismissing those parallels would not of itself argue against the historical origin or nature of the Genesis texts so much as against the various theories proposed for their interpretation.<sup>3</sup> Van Seters has rightly questioned some of these but goes beyond the evidence when he argues that "there is no real portrayal of a nomadic pre-settlement phase of Israelite society, nor any hint of the migratory movements or political realities of the second millennium B.C."<sup>4</sup> For him the Abrahamic tradition as it stands reflects "only a late date of composition and gives no hint by its content of any great antiquity in terms of biblical history."<sup>5</sup> His argument is that the few nomadic details--the references to camels and tents, the patriarch's presence and movements primarily confined to the Negeb, and their contact and political agreement with the Philistines--are all indications of a mid-first millennium B.C. origin.

It is the primary purpose of this paper to examine some of these contentions. However, these contentions will be examined more from an interpretive standpoint than from the chronological standpoint, since it can be shown that in the long "continuity" of tradition in the ancient Near Eastern traditions, social custom, legal convention, or literary form are by themselves no sure means of chronological identification.<sup>6</sup>

### THE EXTENT OF PATRIARCHAL NOMADISM

Was Abraham a "nomad"? The Genesis account relates the movements of Abraham primarily in relation to two factors: the

nationale, Birmingham, England, July 8, 1976; cf. also his article, "The Royal Archives of Tell Mardikh-Ebla," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 39 (May 1976): 44-52. It is reported that these texts make reference to Canaan, Palestine, and Syria ca. 2300 B.C. Many place-names may prove to be local to Ebla, and the appearance of personal names such as "Abraham" can be paralleled in other cuneiform texts (cf. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, pp. 22-36).

3 M. Selman, "Published and Unpublished Fifteenth Century B.C. Cuneiform Documents and Their Bearing on the Patriarchal Narratives of the Old Testament" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wales, 1975) and his article in *The Tyndale Bulletin* 27 (1976), forthcoming.

4 Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, pp. 121-22.

5 Ibid.

6 Donald J. Wiseman, "Israel's Literary Neighbours in the Thirteenth Century B.C.," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 5 (1977), forthcoming.

divine call, and the divine land-grant to his posterity. Thus the ultimate destination is declared from the beginning when "Terah took Abram his son and Lot . . . and Sarai . . . and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldeans, to go into the land of Canaan" (Gen. 11:31). En route at Haran after Terah's death the renewed call is still for Abraham to leave "land, family, and father's house to go to the land I will show you" (Gen. 12:1).<sup>7</sup> No details are given of the route, method, or time of travel. There is no reason to assume that a journey from southern Mesopotamia to Syro-Palestine was undertaken only by (semi-) nomads in antiquity. Movements in stages by groups of persons, possibly merchants, are attested by records of Old Babylonian itineraries.<sup>8</sup>

Gordon's suggestion that Ur (of the Chaldees) is to be identified with Ura' (modern Urfa' fifteen miles northwest of Haran)<sup>9</sup> has been adequately answered by Saggs, who has stressed, in addition to the philological weakness, the unlikely nature of a move eastward by Abraham before retracing his steps toward Canaan.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Gordon's thesis, coupled with similarity of Old Babylonian place-names with patriarchal patronyms (e.g., Serug, Gen. 11:23; Turch [Terah] and Nahur [Nahor], Gen. 24:10) would still be evidence against van Seters' late date for such allusions. Moreover, emphasis is placed on the crossing of the Euphrates River ('Eber nari,' cf. Josh. 24:2-3).

Genesis places no stress on Abraham's "nomadism"; it merely states that he moved in response to the divine call from Haran to the land of Canaan, with no detail of that land which he crossed, to Shechem (Gen. 12:6). The route would have taken him through or near some of the city-states known to have dominated the region in both the second and first millennia B.C. At Moreh, near Shechem, Abram built an altar to the Lord after He in a theophany granted as a gift the land where he then was (Gen. 12:7). It is noteworthy that the first mention of "tents" is now made, and it is suggested that here (as subsequently near Bethel, Hebron, and at Beersheba) the tents indicate not so much his mode of living as a tent-shrine set up symbolically at places where he publicly avowed the promise

<sup>7</sup> This is usually taken as an early source; it is quoted by Stephen (Acts 7:2-4).

<sup>8</sup> William W. Hallo, "The Road to Emar," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 18 (1964): 57-88.

<sup>9</sup> Cyrus H. Gordon, "Abraham and the Merchants of Ura," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 17 (1958): 28-31.

<sup>10</sup> H. W. F. Saggs, "Ur of the Chaldees," *Iraq* 22 (1960): 200-209.

of the land as a token of its take-over.<sup>11</sup> A further journey to Bethel, near which another altar was erected and named in association with a "tent-site" (Gen. 12:8), was followed by a short journey southward. Following the diversion to Egypt due to famine (Gen. 12:10-20), Abraham returned to the promised land, to the previously occupied tent- and altar-site near Bethel (13:4).

Following the separation from Lot, which sprang from local Canaanite opposition and insufficiency of grazing for the flocks and herds, Abraham was given a further revelation about the extent of the land (Gen. 13:5-13). From a vantage point on high ground he was able to look north, south, east, and west at the covenant-promised territory before walking throughout its length and breadth (13:17; cf. Josh. 18:4-8), acting as one who already held title to it. The southward measurement was made by Abraham first; he moved to Mamre (13:18) where he stayed for some time (18:1). There a further theophany reaffirmed the possession of the land through an heir. Then he went further south between Kadesh and Shur (20:1) to stay in the land then dominated by Abimelech of Gerar (20:1-18) which bordered Beersheba. The latter was taken over and was marked as a special place by tent and altar and "sacred tree," to become the symbol of the southernmost part of the promised land stretching "from Dan to Beersheba." The references to "tents" used by Abraham's successors refer principally to these same sites except for the use of a tent by Lot prior to his establishing a permanent lodging in a house in Sodom (13:12; cf. 19:2) and of Jacob's inclusion of tents and camels in his caravan on the flight from Laban (31:28). He is described as staying "among the settlements ['tents,' AV]" (Gen. 25:25) when his settled life is contrasted with the nomadic and hunting existence of Esau. Jacob himself settled in a house at Succoth (33:17).

These scant references to tents are not in themselves indicative of any special type of nomadism, even of the "enclosed nomadism" described by Rowton.<sup>12</sup>

#### THE TYPE OF PATRIARCHAL NOMADISM

The Genesis picture is not specifically one of semi-nomadism though it could be compared in some features with the well-documented nomadism of Syria and the Upper Euphrates region in the

11 Donald J. Wiseman, "They Lived in Tents," *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 7 (1977), forthcoming.

12 M. B. Rowton, "Enclosed Nomadism," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 17 (1974): 1-16.

second millennium B.C. or with the even earlier activities of the Sutu (ca. 2700 B.C.) or Egyptian *ssyw*.<sup>13</sup> Some scholars, however, have tended to exaggerate the supposedly "nomadic" elements by reference to named groups in the same region at different periods (e.g., Amurru, Aramu) and to their sedentary condition by reference to the settled life of the same tribes.

Rowton has shown that long-range nomads, dependent on the limitations of the desert and rainfall, are rare and probably confined throughout history to north and south Arabia. They are distinct from the true self-sufficient long-range "external nomadism" of central Asia and central Arabia. The short-range semi-nomads engaged in pastoral nomadism, owning livestock and a few camels, and their migration might have involved tribal communities. Such combinations of camels, sheep, goats, and donkeys moved slowly and never more than a day's journey from water. They followed the seasons and interacted with the local market where their more sedentary brethren lived.<sup>14</sup> For this reason there is no single term in the ancient Near Eastern texts for such people who could be designated by their role or settlement. The individual group with its family head or chief (*abum*, "father") and elders might be referred to by several names (e.g., Ubrabum, Yahrurum, Amnanum), which could denote the total group (e.g., Bene-Yamina = "Benjaminites").<sup>15</sup> Nomads and sedentary members of a single tribe linked the former to an urban base as has been suggested for Abraham and Nahur (Aram).<sup>16</sup> The long continuity of this tradition can be illustrated from the traditional genealogies of the second millennium B.C. (Hammurapi);<sup>17</sup> Assyria (King List);<sup>18</sup> and Israel (Abraham

13 R. Giveon, *Les bedouins shosou des documents egyptiens* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971); also references are made to nomads in the Ebla texts.

14 M. B. Rowton, "Autonomy and Nomadism in Western Asia," *Orientalia* 42 (1973): 252.

15 So also Midian, Amalek, and Bene-Qedem, all Midianites (Moshe Anbar, "Changement des noms des tribus nomades dans la relation d'un meme evenement," *Biblica* 49 [1968]: 221-32).

16 A. Malamat, "Aspects of Tribal Society," in *La Civilisation de Mari*, ed. J. R. Kupper (Liege: Bibliotheque de la Faculte de Philosophie et Lettres de l'Universite de Liege, 1967), pp. 129-38.

17 J. J. Finkelstein, "The Genealogy of the Hammurapi Dynasty," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 20 (1966): 95-118; cf. W. G. Lambert, "Another Look at Hammurabi's Ancestors," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 22 (1968): 1-2.

18 F. R. Kraus, *Konige die in Zelten wohnten* (Amsterdam: N. V. Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevers Maarschappij, 1965); cf. Ebla text linking the "ancestor" Tudiya with the Duddia of Assur, a vassal of Ebrum of Ebla.

and Nahor, Gen. 22:20-24; 25:1-4). Such semi-nomads could become very influential and take over the government of an urban settlement.<sup>19</sup>

The designation and characteristic functions of these groups varied but little over the centuries. The Amorites (*Amurru* -"westerners" centered on Jebel Biri) are first named in texts from Fara (ca. 2600 B.C.) and in a date formula of the reign of sar-kalli-sarri (2250 B.C.) and last as an ethnic group in Babylonia in the time of Ammisaduqa (ca. 1645 B.C.).<sup>20</sup> The Habiru ('Apiru), though occasionally mentioned in Syria (Brak, Syria, ca. 2200 B.C.), Mari, and Alalah, are increasingly referred to as semi-nomads in the west from the seventeenth century B.C. They performed similar functions within the same general area as the Amorites and disappeared with the Hurrians about the thirteenth century. Opinions are divided as to whether these Hapiru (Egyptian *'prw*) are to be equated with the Hebrew 'ibri(m) linguistically or in function, since Habiru designates a sociological phenomenon rather than an ethnic group.<sup>21</sup> The role of the semi-nomad is then taken up into the term Aramu (Aramean), though before the thirteenth century this is already used of a place-name in the Upper Euphrates (Naram-Sin, ca. 2350 B.C.) and at Mari, Alalah, Drehem, and Egypt,<sup>22</sup> Van Seters' assumption that references to Arameans or to related groups must always portray first millennium B.C. background is therefore open to strong criticism. The designation *Ara/i/bu* (Arab) for semi-nomads in the Damascus area is first attested in Shalmaneser III's sixth year among the allies facing him at the Battle of Qarqar (853 B.C.) and thereafter is primarily used by the Assyrians in their rare references to rulers in northern Arabia. At this time the existence of the Assyrian provincial system precludes this from being taken as the background of the Abrahamic narratives.

It has been proposed that Amurru, (H)apiru, Aramu, and Arabu are to be understood as dialectical variants, used at different periods, of a term for "semi-nomad."<sup>23</sup> Many attempts have been made to identify "Abram the Hebrew" (Gen. 14:13, ha'ibri) with the Habiru of their fellows; though lately it has been argued to be

19 E.g., the founders of second millennium dynasties: Naplanum at Larsa; Sumu-Abum at Babylon; Abdi-Erah at Kish; and Yaggid-Lim at Mari.

20 M. Liverani, "The Amorites," in *Peoples of Old Testament Times*, ed. Donald J. Wiseman (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1973), pp. 100-133.

21 H. Cazelles, "The Hebrews," in *Peoples of Old Testament Times*, p. 23.

22 A. Malamat, "The Aramaeans," in *Peoples of Old Testament Times*, pp. 134-35.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 135.

a denominative from Eber (Gen. 10:21), now equated by some with Ebrum king of Ebla ca. 2300 B.C. Others consider the references to the "Hebrew" slaves (Gen. 39:14, 17; Exod. 1:15-19; etc.) to indicate these semi-nomadic groups rather than an identifiable ethnic identification.<sup>24</sup> However, there seems to be no logical requirement for taking either "Abram the Hebrew" or "the ancestor who was a roving Aramean" (Deut. 26:5, possibly Jacob) as late interpolations, in the light of the early and frequent occurrences of both terms.

While it may be argued that the designation "Abraham the Hebrew" accords with much of the traditions of the early semi-nomads or Habiru, there is no certainty as to the meaning of the word "Hebrew." Suggestions include "dusty ones" (*epru*); "providing/receiving subsidies" (*eperu*; 'pr);<sup>25</sup> "transferred, without a stable habitat" (*apr*); "confederates" (*eburu*); "lord" (Hurr. *ewri*);<sup>26</sup> or, more likely, "one who passes through, crosses territory" (*'eberu*), i.e., a stranger who has left his country and crossed a frontier or "one who seeks a new means of existence after having lost his place in the old order of things."<sup>27</sup> Though this last agrees with the Septuagint interpretation of Genesis 14:13, which describes Abraham as "the wanderer, the transient, he who passes through," it can be questioned whether this is in keeping with the stated life of the patriarch.

#### ABRAHAM AND THE PROMISE OF THE LAND

The references to Abraham in the land are primarily concerned with the land as promised to him by divine grant. This does appear to place the Genesis narratives outside the limited theme of any land which may be shown to have been inherited by semi-nomads (even though the form or structure of the narrative does show similarities with royal grants of land, as argued by Weinfeld).<sup>28</sup>

24 J. Weingreen, "Saul and Habiru," *IVth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1967), 1:63-66.

25 G. Posener, "Textes Egyptiens," in *Le probleme des Habiru*, ed. J. Bottero (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1954), p. 166.

26 Cazelles, "The Hebrews," pp. 4-16; F. F. Bruce, in *Archaeology and Old Testament Study*, ed. D. Winton Thomas (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 12-15.

27 Donald J. Wiseman, *The Word of God for Abraham and Today* (London: Westminster Chapel, 1959), p. 11.

28 M. Weinfeld, "The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 90 (1970): 184-203; S. E. Loewenstamm, "The Divine Grants of Land to the Patriarchs," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 91 (1971): 509-10.

While such grants might associate tribes with sedentary groups, Abraham is concerned not with his "nomadism" but with his status as a "(resident-) alien" (*ger*), and a *landless one at that* (*ger w<sup>e</sup>tosab*). But this is when he is in Canaanite Kirjath-Arba bargaining for a burial place for Sarai (Gen. 23:4; cf. 37:1; 35:27).<sup>29</sup> All other references to his status as a *ger* refer to his temporary residence outside the land granted him by God -- when in Egypt (Gen. 12:10; cf. 15:13; 47:49), in Gerar (20:1; cf. 26:3), and in the territory of Abimelech (21 :23-34). Lot is also called a *ger* in Sodom (19:9), and Jacob is a *ger* when in Laban's territory (23:4; cf. 28: 4 ).

There is therefore no reason to think that Abraham considered himself only temporary, or merely a transient, or without rights, in the very land granted him by his God. In this lay the measure of his faith, in claiming *de facto* and *de jure* what had been promised by God *de jure*. Hebrews 11:14, 16 certainly agrees with this interpretation, for there too the description of the great faith of this "resident-alien and exile" (cf. "strangers or passing travellers," NEB) lays stress on his settling, albeit as a foreigner, in the promised land (Heb. 11:9). This does not mean that he, like any man, was unaware of the transitory nature of life or of the temporary status of life on earth (cf. Ps. 39:12; 1 Chron. 29:15).

<sup>29</sup> Manfred R. Lehmann's interpretation of this transaction as Hittite ("Abraham's Purchase of Machpelah and Hittite Law," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 129 [1953]: 15-18) has been questioned by Gene M. Tucker ("The Legal Background of Genesis 23," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85 [1966]: 77-84). However, Tucker's (and van Seters' [*Abraham in History and Tradition*, p. 99]) equation of the literary structure of Genesis 23 with *Zweigesprachsurkunde* (following Herbert Petschow, "Die Neubabylonische Zwiengesprachsurkunde und Genesis 23," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 19 [1965]: 103-20, a late neo-Babylonian form) ignores the fact that this type of document occurs also in the earlier (old Babylonian) period (*Bibliotheca Orientalis* 22 [1965]: 171; *Cuneiform Texts in the British Museum* [London: British Museum, 1964], vol. 45, no. 60).

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