

Abraham in History and Tradition

Part II: Abraham the Prince

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In the previous article in this series it was suggested that Abraham's designation as "the Hebrew" marked him not as a semi-nomad, but as a resident-alien (גר) newly arrived in the land, who took active and public steps to take possession of land granted him by divine covenant-promise.¹ He was in effect taking over "by faith" the area known later as Judah.²

ABRAHAM AS A POLITICAL LEADER

This leads to a study of his ascription as "Abraham the prince" (Gen. 23: 5, AV) or the נשיא, a title given by a group of foreigners living among the Canaanites who also held land rights in the same region *de facto*.³ This was after Abraham had lived in the area for sixty-two years (cf. Gen. 12:4; 17:17; 23:1) when the "sons of Heth" (Hittites) under Ephron who owned the field and cave of Macpelah in a district of Canaan treated Abraham with respect as the head of a clan residing as their neighbors.

"We look on you as a mighty leader (נשיא אלהים) among us" (Gen. 23:6), they said, and there is no hint that Abraham's dealings with them were unexpected, insincere, or contrary to accepted local

1 Donald J. Wiseman, "Abraham the Hebrew," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 134 (January-March 1977):123-30.

2 With the defeat of the coalition of kings near Damascus, Abraham would be regarded as succeeding them "as far as Dan" (Gen. 14:14), thus taking over the rest of the Promised Land.

3 Cf. Genesis 25:16 and Numbers 7. The title was later extended to the chief representatives of the Israelite tribes in state and religious groupings (Gen. 17:20; Num. 1:16; 1 Kings 8:1).

custom. Whether this phrase is taken as a superlative⁴ or as an acknowledgement of his affiliation to God ("a נִשְׂיָא of God") by men of another religion,⁵ the use of the term נִשְׂיָא clearly denotes a position of dignity and leadership.⁶ It is similarly used in early texts of the chiefs of the Midianites (Josh. 13:21; Num. 25:18) and Shechem (Gen. 34:2), which, with Edom, were all tribes involved in the promise made to Abraham (17:4-8). The title is later applied to David⁷ and Solomon (1 Kings 11:34) as to the chief political authority, comparable to the later "king" (מֶלֶךְ) (Exod. 22:28).

Moreover, the suggestion that the term may well include the idea of official selection by the people⁸ would be appropriate in a situation where ten named ethnic groups all lay claim to adjacent territory in the same area as that promised to Abraham (Gen. 15:18-21).⁹ Such groups would normally make local alliances for defence as did Abraham during the time of the raid on Sodom by a covenant-association with Mamre, Eshcol, and Aner specified as part of the local "Amorites" (14:13, 21).¹⁰ By such an agreement the parties rendered themselves liable to provide forces to assist an injured colleague.¹¹ That Abraham was the acknowledged leader on this occasion may also be shown by reference to them as dependent on Abraham's division of the spoil (14:24), and to him is attributed both the reception of the intelligence information and the military leadership in which his initiative and stratagem culminated in a surprise night attack resulting in, complete victory.¹² He was

4 D. W. Thomas, "A Consideration of Some Unusual Ways of Expressing the Superlative in Hebrew," *Vetus Testamentum* 3 (1953):210-19.

5 H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg Press, 1942), p. 644.

6 E. A. Speiser, "Background and Function of the Biblical Nasi" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963): 111-19.

7 In applying the title to Edom (Ezek. 32:29) Ezekiel's preference may not necessarily be, as commonly suggested, because the kingship of Israel and Judah was insignificant (34:34) but rather may be a reversal to the earlier tradition of the title applied to persons in a subordinate position under a great king.

8 Speiser, "Background and Function of the Biblical *Nasi*," p. 115.

9 The "River of Egypt" is not the Wadi al Arish but is a wadi located nearer Gaza. The use of "rivers" to mark boundaries was common (cf. Josh. 1:4; Judges 4:13; 1 Kings 4:21).

10 M. Liverani, "The Amorites" in *Peoples of Old Testament Times*, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 124.

11 D. J. Wiseman, *The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon* (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 1958), p. 41, lines 162-68.

12 A. Malamat, "Conquest of Canaan: Israelite Conduct of War according to the Biblical Tradition," in *Encyclopedia Judaica Year Book 1975/6* (1977), p.180.

acknowledged as leader of the group both by the king of Salem and by the king of Sodom and such leadership may not have resulted solely from his affinity to Lot whose cause he was espousing.

It was, however, not only those living within the bounds of the land promised to Abraham by the covenant land-grant who reacted to Abraham as the leader of the group occupying defined territory. Abraham is portrayed as the head of a substantial family group who had acquired possessions and dependents before entering Canaan (Gen. 12:5). He was a person of independent means, well able to provide for his family (cf. 24:22). His wealth was increased by gifts given by the king of Egypt (12:16, 20) so that he could be called "a very rich man" (13:2). The Hebrew **גביר** here also denotes the honor and respect due to a man of high position, thus demonstrating that he was not simply a poor wanderer.

ABRAHAM'S STATUS BEFORE PHARAOH

Difficult though the episode in Egypt may be to interpret, Abraham was still held in awe by the royal household there even after the so-called "deception of an innocent pharaoh" was known (Gen. 12:10-20). A major Egyptian ruler would have dismissed an insignificant foreigner without recompense. This accords with the evidence of the attitude of other external rulers to him, and it may be questioned whether this really was the "low moral point" in his life or that the story was invented to show the "climax of God's intervention and deliverance in the face of Abraham's failure which thus accounts for its popularity."¹³ The act of going to Egypt for corn to save life is not of itself classed as a sign of lack of faith.¹⁴ It would appear to have been a deliberate and regular practice of Abraham while abroad to refer to Sarai as his "sister" (Gen. 12: 14) and this could be related to his description of Lot, his nephew (11:34), as his "brother" (**אחיו**; 14:14; cf. 13:8), which in the context could be "ally" -- a person in association with Abraham on a covenant basis¹⁵ who had been given, in effect, a preferential

13 *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. "Abraham," by L. Hicks, 1:17.

14 Cf. Genesis 42:1; Egypt was commonly a place of escape from famine or opposition in Palestine (1 Kings 11:40; Matt. 2:13).

15 Genesis 29:12 is probably to be interpreted in a similar way rather than as "person of the same class" or status. Thomas L. Thompson, in *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1974, p. 298), argues that the phrase in Genesis 14:4 is probably a priestly addition to make the story fit the "priestly" view of the relationship of Abraham and Lot. If this were so, a more exact kinship term would be expected (cf. Frances I. Andersen, "Israelite Kinship Terminology and Social Structure," *Bible Translator* 20 (1969): 29-39).

choice in the inheritance of the land as if he were a true eldest son (13:9-11, 15). Similarly, the use of "sister" for Sarai might have been intended to denote a special covenant relationship, as if she had independent rights and responsibilities which might be expected to be exercised in revenge if the life of the allied party was at risk, though being a woman, and a beauty, Abraham was well aware whose life was most at risk (12:11-14)! It is also possible that Abraham could have called Sarai his (half-)sister legally (20:12) on the parallel of the marriage of Abraham's brother Nahor to Milcah the daughter of Harran, another of his brothers (11:29).¹⁶ Any supposed parallel with Hurrian wife-sister marriages¹⁷ is to be rejected.¹⁸ Also any relationship with the ancient Egyptian practice of royal weddings between brother and sister is unlikely since this was confined to the Egyptians and there is no evidence here that a marriage between a king of Egypt and the sister of a suppliant ruler from south Palestine relates to any treaty arrangement.¹⁹ However, in view of the strong later tradition that Sarai was faithful to both her husband and his God (Isa. 51:2)²⁰ it may be questioned whether this episode is yet adequately interpreted.²¹ For the present purpose it is sufficient to note that Abraham's status in the eyes of a powerful foreign king was such that he had to be adequately compensated and not simply expelled. Both Sarai and Abraham (Gen. 12:17) rightly rejected any association with Egypt.

16 E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1964), pp. 78-79. It is also noteworthy that Abraham's son married the granddaughter of Abraham's brother, Nahor (Gen. 24:15), the difference in generation being accounted for by the advanced age of Abraham and Sarah at Isaac's birth. Such meticulous description would be unexpected if the composition of this chapter were as late as some suppose.

17 E. A. Speiser, "The Wife-Sister Motif in the Patriarchal Narratives," in *Biblical and Other Studies*, Studies and Texts, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Altmann (Waltham, MA: Advanced Judaic Studies, Brandeis University, 1963), pp. 15-28 (esp. p. 25).

18 C. J. Mullo-Weir, "The Alleged Hurrian Wife-Sister Motif in Genesis," *Transactions of the Glasgow University Oriental Society* 22 (1967-68), p. 23; and Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, pp. 233-34. Cf. S. Greengus, "Sisterhood Adoption at Nuzi and the 'Wife-Sister' in Genesis," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 46 (1975):5-31.

19 This was always between members of the same Egyptian royal family. Also treaty marriages involve the daughter of one party.

20 Cf. also Hebrews 11:11 and 1 Peter 3:6.

21 If taken as an example of a sin of Abraham this would be further evidence of an early rather than a late source for the tradition. In the latter it would have been explained in such a way as not to impugn the character of Abraham as a man of courage.

ABRAHAM'S STATUS BEFORE ABIMELECH

There is evidence too that another foreign ruler, Abimelech, king of Gerar "in the land of the Philistines," was prepared to deal with Abraham as one of equal status and to enter with him into a covenant-treaty which included provision of territorial rights (Gen. 20: 15). It is more likely that this was conceived as an inter-state relationship rather than an inter-individual relationship since, when the terms were considered to have been broken by Abimelech's unwitting action over Sarah, the divine curses which guarded such agreements were thought to fall not merely on Abimelech as an individual but on his city-state (20:7, 9) and the penalties to be paid publicly are duly prescribed (20:16).²² The solemn agreement made by Abimelech and his army commander with Abraham bears the hallmarks of an ancient parity treaty which included provisions whereby the parties had to keep each other informed of transgression of border or well rights (21:26-27). Once again Abimelech's fear of Abraham is brought out by the clauses prohibiting the latter's interference with his dynasty or his kingdom which he must have envisaged as in Abraham's power to do (21:22-23). This may be further evidence of Abraham being already thought of as representing a group of "state-equivalents." It is unlikely that Abraham is here treated as of "vassal" status and he would therefore have demanded at least equivalent terms.²³ The treaty-covenant, customarily envisaged as enduring for the foreseeable future,²⁴ remained in force at least until its ratification in the time of Isaac (26:28-29) and possibly until the time of Samson (Judg. 13:1).

Exception has been taken by some to the mention of "Philistines" in the patriarchal period (Gen. 21:32, 34; 26:1, 8, 14-18). These references are classed as anachronisms since, it is argued, these sea-peoples did not settle in southwest Palestine until ca. 1200 B.C. when they resided in a pentapolis led by lords (סַרְנִים).²⁵ However, it should be noted that contacts between the Aegean sea-

22 The omission of the weight in "a thousand pieces [shekels] of silver" (Gen. 20: 16) was common in sources earlier than the late Middle Babylonian period, as was the qualification "of the merchants" (Bab. *sa damqarim*) of Genesis 23:16.

23 E.g., D. J. Wiseman, *The Alalakh Tablets* (London: British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, 1953), No.2.

24 Further study is needed on the time-duration envisaged by all covenant-transactions. Note the "forever" in divine covenants (Gen. 3:22, Adam; 13:15, Abraham; Deut. 11:1, Moses; 2 Sam. 7:13, David; etc.).

25 John van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975), p. 52.

peoples and Palestine in the Middle Bronze Age are attested. Crete (Kaptar, Heb. כַּפְתָּר), which was their place of origin or transit, is mentioned in Egyptian and Marl texts of the early second millennium,²⁶ and Middle Minoan II pottery is found at Hazor, Ugarit, and in Egypt. Further, the Philistines are usually noted in Egyptian texts ca. 1200 B.C., together with other sea-peoples (Kreti = Chere-thites) and the Genesis references could well be to "Philistines" used in a confederate sense.²⁷ It is by no means unlikely that in the prevailing situation of mixed ethnic groups some Philistines should settle south of Gaza around Gerar and be under a "king" and thus have been there already long enough to bear a mixture of Semitic (Abi-melek, Ahuzzat) and non-Semitic (Phicol, possibly Anatolian) personal names²⁸ and to conclude treaties according to formulae and procedures long attested throughout the ancient Near East.²⁹

ABRAHAM AS A GOVERNOR

The status of Abraham can be examined further, for it may not be without significance that Abraham as a leader (אֲבִי) undertook the responsibilities normally associated with the ruler of a small state or with that of a provincial governor appointed by a great king. The role of the latter in the second millennium B.C. is reasonably well known from the Mari correspondence.³⁰ His title *sapitum* (Heb. שַׁפִּיט) denotes "the one who governs" on behalf of the supreme ruler who has given him the office. Such a person was customarily addressed as "lord," being a superior person of dignity (as Abraham was addressed by the Hittites, Gen. 23: 6, 11, 15) who worked through a chief steward who had wide administrative powers (as did Abraham through Eliezer, Gen. 15:2). The office and title of *sapitum* occurs in the Ebla texts ca. 2300 B.C.³¹ and appears to be the form perpetuated in Palestine in the time of the regional "governors" (a better translation than "judges," Judg. 2: 16-18). The latter, like Abraham, were held to be sub-governors

26 K. A. Kitchen, "The Philistines," in *Peoples of Old Testament Times*, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), pp. 56-57.

27 T. C. Mitchell, "Philistia," in *Archaeology and Old Testament Study*, ed. D. Winton Thomas (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), pp. 406-13. A similar situation arises with references to early Ahlamu-Ar(a)maya-Arameans.

28 Kitchen, "The Philistines," p. 72, footnote 24.

29 Compare the treaty between Ebrum of Ebla with Duddiya of Assur ca. 2300 B.C.

30 A. Marzal, "The Provincial Governor at Mari: His Title and Appointment," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 30 (1971):186-217.

31 Giovanni Pettinato to Donald J. Wiseman, July 8, 1976.

acknowledging the Lord God as "the supreme Governor of all the earth" (Gen. 18:25; cf. Judg. 11:27). The extent of the governorship varies according to local requirements and conditions, though it was always geographically defined.³² In exercising their responsibilities some governors worked through local chiefs (*abu bitim* = "father of the house" [clan]), who could administer territories in the name of the local king or deity.³³ Provincial governors were usually granted lands by the overlord for their maintenance in lieu of salary. This may have significance for understanding the full purpose of the divine land-grant made to Abraham and his successors. The responsibilities and duties of the governors differed little from those of the local city-state rulers, who were occasionally employed in a similar role.³⁴ These included the following:

MAINTAINING ORDER

Using limited local forces, including mercenaries, the governor had to maintain law and order within his designated area. Similar action is reflected in Abraham's action with the men of Bethel and Ai (Gen. 13:7), and at Beersheba in the border dispute with Gerar (21:25). As at Mari, he also had to deal with cases of involuntary deportation. Abraham's employment of his 318 חניכים together with men supplied by his allies to recover Lot (14:14, 24) falls within this category.³⁵

EXERCISING JUSTICE

The governor as "judge" would act on behalf of the great king in local decisions, especially matters of land disputes (cf. Gen. 13:7). As judge he would sit alone or in the gate with the local elders (cf. 23:10). This role is clearly seen in the express responsibility laid on Abraham to order his family and "clan-group" to follow him in "keeping the way of the LORD" by "exercising justice and law" (18:19). Righteousness (צדקה) and judgment (משפט) mark both the ideal (divine) role of God as the supreme Ruler as also it should those to whom He gives such responsibilities as His subgovernors. They themselves will be judged according to their fulfillment of the revealed divine standard. Here "the way of the

32 J. R. Kupper, "Un gouvernement provincial dans le royaume de Mari," *Revue d'Assyriologie* 41 (1947):161.

33 A. Marzal, "The Provincial Governor at Mari," p. 213.

34 Ibid., p. 202 (piqittum).

35 The "trained retainers" (Gen. 14:14) were probably of Egyptian origin. If so, this would also illustrate the use of "mercenaries" for guard duties as attested in texts of all periods.

LORD" (18:19, a rare singular; cf. Judg. 2:22; 2 Kings 21:22; Prov. 10:29; Isa. 40:3; Ezek. 18:29) may stand for the unified concept of law later indicated by Torah. The implementation of righteousness calls for its application in every aspect of life, individually and collectively in both legal, economic, and religious affairs which were considered indivisible.³⁶ The emphasis here is on the administration of the law including customary law (משפט). The maintenance of justice, distinguishing between right and wrong, was an aspect of governorship as it is of every man's life which is continually being assessed by God.³⁷

COLLECTING TAXES AND TRIBUTE

The collection of dues and the forwarding of them to a higher authority was a time-consuming work for any governor. This included any payments made to the local cult-center whose maintenance was also his concern. There he would be present when an oath before the god was taken when a new official was appointed or a local covenant or agreement was ratified. Both these aspects may be seen in the incident of Melchizedek. If the words, "he gave him a tithe of everything" (Gen. 14:20), are interpreted as Abraham giving a tenth of the spoil to the priest-king of Salem in recognition of the identity of El Elyon with Yahweh (as traditionally interpreted according to Heb. 7:4, 10), it requires that emphasis be placed on Abraham dedicating something that was not his alone. Otherwise, it would seem to contradict Genesis 14:22-24. Elsewhere references to Melchizedek refer to the eternal nature of his royal priesthood.³⁸ Also the tenth (מעשר) is often, but not invariably, used of a sacred payment³⁹ and compared with the מכס used of a levy on war spoils (Num. 31:28).⁴⁰ It is unlikely, though grammatically possible, that Genesis 14:20 could refer to the king of Salem giving Abraham a tithe as to his acknowledged superior. It is to be noted that in Babylonian texts the tithe (*esirtu, esretu*) is used of a levy

36 D. J. Wiseman, "Law and Order in Old Testament Times," *Vox Evangelica* 8 (1973):5-21.

37 Ibid., pp. 5-6.

38 Psa110:4; Hebrews 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:10-21.

39 J. A. Emerton, "The Riddle of Genesis XIV," *Vetus Testamentum* 21 (1971): 407; E. Salonen, "Uber den Aehnten im alten Mesopotamien," *Studia Orientalia* 43 (1974):3-65.

40 Cf. the Akkadian *miksu* ("transit-tax") usually exacted by provinces and primarily from merchants (J. N. Postgate, *Taxation and Conscription in the Assyrian Empire* [Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1974], p. 134).

paid on goods in transit (*miksu*) (and by the later first millennium it was used of a tax on field produce, which cannot apply here).⁴¹

Genesis 14 has been the subject of much discussion, with the Melchizedek incident (14:18-20) regarded as secondary and interrupting the narrative.⁴² Subjective analysis of the literary style has resulted in varying attributions and dating of the sources.⁴³ Yet to conclude as some do that "consideration of Genesis 14 has generally been given up as historical"⁴⁴ or that the chapter "appears as an erratic block and is more a hindrance than a help to the historian"⁴⁵ is to overlook the inadequacies of any attempt to blend the so-called "heroic" elements with "historiographic" passages.⁴⁶ For the present it needs to be stressed that Genesis 14 does not demand a symbolic interpretation whereby Abraham is shown as confronting "a world empire."⁴⁷ Abraham is described in terms which accord with the early second millennium and do not fit in with our present knowledge of the later periods as sometimes proposed for the chapter. For example, the Genesis 14 incident would hardly have been meaningful or feasible after 1000 B.C. and certainly not after the reformation of the provincial system in Syria and southward carried out by Tiglath-pileser III in 740-734 B.C.⁴⁸ It is possible that the role of Melchizedek was primarily that of mediator between Abraham and the king of Sodom at a ceremony concerning the settlement and division of the spoils, the bread and wine being symbols commemorating the conclusion of treaty-covenants.⁴⁹ Abraham publicly declared that he would not take anything of the spoils for himself but assured the recovery of Lot's possessions (cf. 14:16) and the share of the spoils for Abraham's allies, with the women and children returned to Sodom as requested.

41 *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, s.v. "esirtu," 4:365.

42 Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, pp. 121-22; J. A. Emerton, "Some False Clues in the Study of Genesis XIV," *Vetus Testamentum* 21 (1971):24-47; cf. p. 412.

43 From an early historical source to P, JE, or D to a late Jewish Midrash (Emerton, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, pp. 407-25).

44 Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, p. 186.

45 Roland de Vaux, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1972), p. 117.

46 Emerton, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, pp. 431-32.

47 M. C. Astour, "Political and Cosmic Symbolism in Genesis 14 and Its Babylonian Sources," in *Biblical Motifs: Origins and Transformations*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), pp. 65-112; but for an opposing view see Emerton, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, pp. 38-46.

48 Kenneth A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (London: Tyndale Press, 1966), p. 45; H. W. F. Saggs, "The Nimrud Letters 1952; Part II: Relations with the West," *Iraq* 17 (1955): 150.

49 D. Wiseman, "The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon," p. 39, lines 153-54.

ACQUIRING INFORMATION

The governor was also involved through agents in commercial activity, and such may be reflected in a few of the indications from which it was once argued that Abraham was a merchant-prince.⁵⁰ In this activity a governor would acquire knowledge of activities in bordering territories, especially of events which might effect internal security. He had to keep his superior power informed of these, as of the passage of foreigners and messengers through his area. It was on this basis that Abraham intervened on behalf of oppressed loyal ("righteous") subjects. In his plea before the great "Governor of all lands" (Gen. 18:22-33) Abraham is likewise concerned not only with the impending action to be taken against Sodom (which is justified on the grounds of rebellion against the great King and the justice He requires) but also with the fate of the members of his own family-group for which he was responsible.

PROVIDING HOSPITALITY

In furthering his responsibilities as a whole, a governor had to provide accommodations for (and to welcome the" escorts of) his visiting king, foreigners of note, and any important dignitaries who might pass through his territory.⁵¹ This lies behind Abraham's entertainment of the three men at his principal base at Mamre (18: 1-21). The aged patriarch treated his visitors with the respect due to those he would recognize as his superiors ("my lord," Gen. 18:3, 27, 30-31), especially to their leader. He provided the two messengers with information, an escort, and probably provisions when he "went with them to set them on their way" (18:16).

SUMMARY

This outline study has sought to suggest that Abraham, while ruling his own family and house, acted as a princely ruler and leader exercising the equivalent functions of a respected governor owing allegiance in all matters to the great King. In this he stands in direct succession to the kingly role of Adam and as a true predecessor to Moses and David. There is nothing inconsistent in the Abrahamic narratives which demands, as some would suggest, that this is a late interpretation of the patriarch's role.

50 Cyrus H. Gordon, "Abraham and the Merchants of Ura," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 17 (1958):28-31; but for an opposing view see H. W. F. Saggs, "Ur of the Chaldees," *Iraq* 22 (1960):200.

51 M. Birot, *Lettres de Yaqqim-Addu, gouverneur de Sagaratum*, Archives Royales de Mari XIV (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1974), nos. 19, 31, 97-120.

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