

ABRAHAM (PERSON) [Heb ^ʾ*abrāhām* (אַבְרָהָם)]. Var. ABRAM. The biblical patriarch whose story is told in Genesis 12–25.

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A. The Biblical Information

1. Outline of Abraham's Career. Abraham is portrayed as a member of a family associated with city life in Southern Babylonia, moving to Haran in Upper Mesopotamia *en route* to Canaan (Gen 11:31). In Haran, God called him to leave for the land which he would show him, so he and Lot, his nephew, went to Canaan. At Shechem in the center of the land, God made the promise that Abraham's descendants would own the land (Gen 12:1–9). Famine forced Abraham to seek food in Egypt, where the Pharaoh took Abraham's wife, Sarah, who Abraham had declared was his sister. Discovering the deception, the Pharaoh sent Abraham away with all the wealth he had acquired, and Sarah

(Gen 12:10–12). In Canaan, Abraham and Lot separated in order to find adequate grazing, Lot settling in the luxuriant Jordan plain. God renewed the promise of Abraham's numberless descendants possessing the land (Genesis 13). Foreign invaders captured Lot, so Abraham with 318 men routed them and recovered Lot and the booty. This brought the blessing of Melchizedek, the priest-king of Salem to whom Abraham paid a tithe (Genesis 14). Following a reassuring vision, Abraham was promised that his childless condition would end and that his offspring would occupy the land, a promise solemnized with a sacrifice and a covenant (Genesis 15). Childless Sarah gave Abraham her maid Hagar to produce a son, then drove out the pregnant maid when she belittled her barren mistress. An angel sent Hagar home with a promise of a harsh life for her son, duly born and named Ishmael (Genesis 16). Thirteen years later God renewed his covenant with Abraham, changing his name from Abram, and Sarai's to Sarah, and imposing circumcision as a sign of membership for all in Abraham's household, born or bought. With this came the promise that Sarah, then ninety, would bear a son, Isaac, who would receive the covenant, Ishmael receiving a separate promise of many descendants (Genesis 17). Three visitors repeated the promise of a son (Gen 18:1–15). Lot meanwhile had settled in Sodom, which had become totally depraved and doomed. Abraham prayed that God would spare the city if ten righteous people could be found there, but they could not, so Sodom and its neighbor were destroyed, only Lot and his two daughters surviving (Gen 18:16–19:29). Abraham living in southern Canaan encountered the king

of Gerar, who took Sarah on her husband's assertion that she was his sister. Warned by God, King Abimelech avoided adultery and made peace with Abraham (Genesis 20). Now Isaac was born and Hagar and Ishmael sent to wander in the desert, where divine provision protected them (Gen 21:1–20). The king of Gerar then made a treaty with Abraham to solve a water-rights quarrel at Beersheba (Gen 21:22–34). When Isaac was a boy, God called Abraham to offer him in sacrifice, only staying the father's hand at the last moment, and providing a substitute. A renewal of the covenant followed (Gen 22:1–19). At Sarah's death, Abraham bought a cave for her burial, with adjacent land, from a Hittite of Hebron (Genesis 23). To ensure the promise remained within his family, Abraham sent his servant back to his relatives in the Haran region to select Isaac's bride (Genesis 24). The succession settled, Abraham gave gifts to other sons, and when he died aged 175, Isaac and Ishmael buried him beside Sarah (Gen 25:1–11).

2. Abraham's Faith. Although it was Abraham's grandson Jacob who gave his name to Israel and fathered the Twelve Tribes, Abraham was regarded as the nation's progenitor (e.g., Exod 2:24; 4:5; 32:13; Isa 29:22; Ezek 33:24; Mic 7:20). Israel's claim to Canaan rested on the promises made to him, and the God worshipped by Israel was preeminently the God of Abraham (e.g., Exod 3:6, 15; 4:1; 1 Kgs 18:36; Ps 47:9). God's choice of Abraham was an act of divine sovereignty whose reason was never disclosed. The reason for Abraham's favor with God (cf. "my friend," Isa 41:8) is made clear in the famous verse, "Abraham believed God and he credited it to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6; cf. Rom 4:1–3),

and in other demonstrations of Abraham's trust (e.g., Gen 22:8). Convinced of God's call to live a seminomadic life (note Heb 11:9), Abraham never attempted to return to Haran or to Ur, and took care that his son should not marry a local girl and so gain the land by inheritance, presumably because the indigenous people were unacceptable to God (Gen 24:3; 15:16). Throughout his career he built altars and offered sacrifices, thereby displaying his devotion (Gen 12:7, 8; 13:4, 18), an attitude seen also in the tithe he gave ^{V 1, p 36} to Melchizedek after his victory (Genesis 14). The places sacred to him were often marked by trees, a token of his intention to stay in the land (Gen 12:6; 13:18; 21:33). Abraham believed his God to be just, hence his concern for any righteous in Sodom (Gen 18:16ff.). Even so, he attempted to preempt God's actions by taking Hagar when Sarah was barren (Gen 16:1–4), and by pretending Sarah was not his wife. In the latter cases, God intervened to rescue him from the results of his own deliberate subterfuge because he had jeopardized the fulfilment of the promise (Gen 12:17f.; 20:3f.).

The God Abraham worshipped is usually referred to by the name *yhwh* (RSV LORD); twice Abraham "called on the name of the LORD" (Gen 12:8; 13:4), and his servant Eliezer spoke of the Lord, the God of Abraham (Gen 24:12, 27, 42, 48). The simple term "God" (*ʿēlōhîm*) occurs in several passages, notably Gen 17:3ff; 19:29; 20 often; 21:2ff; 22. Additional divine names found in the Abraham narrative are: God Almighty (*ʿel šadday*, Gen 17:1), Eternal God (*yhwh ʿel ʿolām* Gen 21:33), God Most High (*ʿel ʿelyôn* Gen 14:18–22), Sovereign Lord (*ʿādōnāy yhwh*, Gen 15:2, 8), and Lord God of heaven and earth (*yhwh ʿēlōhê haššā-mayim*

wēhā'āres Gen 24:3, 7).

Abraham approached God without the intermediacy of priests (clearly in Genesis 22; elsewhere it could be argued that priests were present, acting as Abraham's agents but not mentioned). God spoke to Abraham by theophanic visions (Gen 12:7; 17:1; 18:1). In one case, the appearance was in human form, when the deity was accompanied by two angels (Gen 18; cf. v 19). Perhaps God employed direct speech when no other means is specified (Gen 12:1f.; 13:14; 15:1; 21:12; 22:1). Angels could intervene and give protection as extensions of God's person (Gen 22; 24:7, 40). Prayer was a natural activity (e.g., 20:17) in which Eliezer followed his master's example (Gen 24). Eliezer did not hesitate to speak of Abraham's faith and God's care for him which he had observed (Gen 24:27, 35). God commended Abraham to Abimelech as a prophet (Gen 20:7, *nābî'*). Abraham is portrayed as worshipping one God, albeit with different titles. Abraham's is a God who can be known and who explains his purposes, even if over a time span that stretches his devotee's patience.

3. **Abraham's Life-style.** Leaving Ur and Haran, Abraham exchanged an urban-based life for the seminomadic style of the pastoralist with no permanent home, living in tents (Gen 12:8, 9; 13:18; 18:1; cf. Heb 11:9), unlike his relations near Haran (Gen 24:10, 11). However, he stayed at some places for long periods (Mamre, Gen 13:18; 18:1; Beersheba, Gen 22:19; Philistia, Gen 21:3, 4), enjoyed good relations with settled communities (Gen 23:10, 18 mentions the city gate), had treaty alliances with some, and spoke on equal terms with kings and the Pharaoh (Gen 14:13; 20:2, 11–14; 21:22–24). He is represented as having

owned only one piece of land, the cave of Machpelah (Genesis 23). Wealth flowed to him through his herds, and in gifts from others (Gen 12:16; 20:14, 16), so that he became rich, owning cattle, sheep, silver, gold, male and female slaves, camels and donkeys (Gen 24:35). He may have traded in other goods, for he knew the language of the marketplace (Genesis 23). His household was large enough to furnish 318 men to fight foreign kings (Genesis 14). He was concerned about having an heir, and so looked on Eliezer his servant before sons were born (Gen 15:2), and took care to provide for Isaac's half-brothers so that his patrimony should not diminish (Gen 24:36; 25:5, 6; cf. 17:18). While Sarah was his first wife, Abraham also married Keturah, and had children by her, by Hagar, and by concubines (Gen 25:1–6). His burial was in the cave with Sarah (Gen 25:9–10).

4. **Abraham, Ancestor of the Chosen People.** Belief in their ancestry reaching back to one man, Abraham, to whom God promised a land, was firmly fixed among Jews in the 1st century (e.g., John 8:33–58; cf. Philo), and is attested long before by the prophets of the latter days of the Judean Monarchy (Isa 41:8; 51:2; 63:16; Jer 33:26; Ezek 33:24; Mic 7:20). The historical books of the OT also contain references to Abraham (Josh 24:2, 3; 2 Kgs 13:23; 1 Chr 16:16–18; 2 Chr 20:7; 30:6; Neh 9:7, 8) as does Psalm 105. In the Pentateuch the promise is mentioned in each book after Genesis (Exod 2:24; 33:1, etc.; Lev 26:42; Num 32:11; Deut 1:8; etc.).

B. Abraham in Old Testament Study

1. **Abraham as a Figure of Tradition.** Building on meticulous literary analysis of the Pentateuch, Julius Wellhausen concluded "... we attain to no historical knowl-

edge of the patriarchs, but only of the time when the stories about them arose in the Israelite people; this latter age is here unconsciously projected, in its inner and its outward features, into hoary antiquity, and is reflected there like a glorified mirage.” And of Abraham he wrote, “Abraham alone is certainly not the name of a people like Isaac and Lot: he is somewhat difficult to interpret. That is not to say that in such a connection as this we may regard him as a historical person; he might with more likelihood be regarded as a free invention of unconscious art” (*WPHI*, 319f.). The literary sources of the early Monarchy, J and E, drawing on older traditions, preserved the Abraham stories. At the same time, Wellhausen treated the religious practices of Abraham as the most primitive in the evolution of Israelite religion. Hermann Gunkel, unlike Wellhausen, argued that investigating the documentary sources could allow penetration beyond their final form into the underlying traditions. Gunkel separated the narratives into story-units, often very short, which he alleged were the primary oral forms, duly collected into groups as sagas. These poems told the legends attached to different shrines in Canaan, or to individual heroes. Gradually combined around particular names, these stories were ultimately reduced to the prose sources which Wellhausen characterized. Gunkel believed the legends arose out of observations of life associated with surrounding traditions, obscuring any historical kernel: “Legend here has woven a poetic veil about the historical memories and hidden their outlines” (Gunkel 1901: 22). The question of Abraham’s existence was unimportant, he asserted, for legends about him

could not preserve a true picture of the vital element, his faith: “The religion of Abraham is in reality the religion of the narrators of the legends, ascribed by them to Abraham” (122).

The quest for the origins of these elements has continued ever since. Martin Noth tried to delineate the oral sources and their original settings, building on Gunkel’s premises (Noth 1948), and Albrecht Alt investigated ^{V 1, p 37} religious concepts of the expression “the gods of the fathers” in the light of Nabatean and other beliefs. He deduced that Genesis reflects an older stage of similar seminomadic life, the patriarchal figures being pegs on which the cult traditions hung (Alt 1966). The positions of Alt and Noth have influenced commentaries and studies on Abraham heavily during the past fifty years. At the same time, others have followed the literary sources in order to refine them and especially to discern their purposes and main motifs (e.g., von Rad *Gene i OTL*). For Abraham the consequence of these studies is the same, whether they view him as a dim shadow in Israel’s prehistory, or as a purely literary creation: he is an example whose faith is to be emulated. The question of his actual existence is irrelevant; the stories about him illustrate how generations of Jews believed God had worked in a man’s life, setting a pattern, and it is that belief, hallowed by the experience of many others, which is enshrined in them (see Ramsey 1981).

2. Abraham as a Figure of History. Several scholars have searched for positions which allow a measure of historical reality to Abraham. While accepting the literary sources as the channels of tradition, they have seen them as reflecting a

common heritage which was handed down through different circles and so developed different emphases. This explains the nature of such apparently duplicate stories as Abraham's twice concealing Sarah's status (Gen 12:11–20; 20:2–18). W. F. Albright and E. A. Speiser were notable exponents of this position, constantly drawing on ancient Near Eastern sources, textual and material, to clarify the patriarch's ancient context. Albright claimed the Abraham stories fitted so well into the caravan society that he reconstructed for the 20th century B.C. "that there can be little doubt about their substantial historicity" (1973: 10). Textual and material sources included the cuneiform tablets from Mari and Nuzi and occupational evidence from Palestine. The Nuzi archives were thought to have yielded particularly striking analogies to family practices in the stories (see Speiser *Gene i* AB). These comparisons were widely accepted as signs of the antiquity of the narratives, and therefore as support for the contention that they reflected historical events. Even scholars who held firmly to the literary analyses took these parallels as illumination of the original settings of the traditions (e.g., *EHI*). In 1974 and 1975 T. L. Thompson and J. Van Seters published sharp and extensive attacks on the views Albright had fostered, Thompson urging a return to the position of Wellhausen, and van Seters arguing that the stories belonged to exilic times (Thompson 1974; Van Seters 1975). The impact of these studies was great. They showed clearly that there were faults of logic and interpretation in the use made of the Nuzi and other texts, and put serious doubt on the hypothesis of an Amorite "invasion" of Palestine

about 2000 B.C. In several cases, they pointed to other parallels from the 1st millennium B.C. which seemed equally good, thus showing that comparisons could not establish an earlier date for the patriarchal stories. For many OT scholars the arguments of Thompson and Van Seters reinforced the primacy of the literary analysis of Genesis and its subsequent developments, allowing attention to be paid to the narratives as "stories" rather than to questions of historicity.

Inevitably, there have been reactions from a variety of scholars who wish to sustain the value of comparisons with texts from the 2d millennium B.C. These include an important study of the Nuzi material by M. J. Selman (1976) and investigations of the Mari texts in relation to nomadism by J. T. Luke (1965) and V. H. Matthews (1978). Equally important, however, are considerations of the methods appropriate for studying the Abraham narratives, and these will be discussed in the remainder of this article, with examples as appropriate.

C. Abraham—A Contextual Approach

When the literary criticism of the Old Testament was elaborated in the 19th century in conjunction with theories of the evolution of Israelite society and religion, the ancient Near East was hardly known. With increasing discoveries came the possibility of checking the strength of those hypotheses against the information ancient records and objects provide. Were Genesis a newly recovered ancient manuscript, it is doubtful that these hypotheses would be given priority in evaluating the text. A literary analysis is one approach to understanding the text, but it is an approach that should be followed beside others and deserves no preferential status.

The current analysis is unsatisfactory because it cannot be demonstrated to work for any other ancient composition. Changes can be traced between copies of ancient texts made at different periods only when both the earlier and the later manuscript are physically available (e.g., the Four Gospels and Tatian's *Diate aron*). Moreover, the presuppositions of the usual literary analysis do not sustain themselves in the light of ancient scribal practices, for they require a very precise consistency on the part of redactors and copyists. Ancient scribes were not so hide-bound. Rather, the Abraham narratives should be judged in their contexts. They have two contexts. The first is the biblical one. Historically this sets Abraham long before Joseph and Moses, in current terms about 2000 B.C. (Bimson 1983: 86). Sociologically it places Abraham in the context of a seminomadic culture not controlled by the Mosaic laws, moving in a Canaan of city-states. Religiously it puts Abraham before the cultic laws of Moses, aware of God's uniqueness and righteousness, yet also of others who worshipped him, such as Melchizedek. To an ancient reader, there was no doubt that Abraham, who lived many years before the rise of the Israelite monarchy, was the ancestor of Israel, a position which carried with it the promise of the land of Canaan and of God's covenant blessing. That is the biblical context and it should not be disregarded (see Goldingay 1983). The detection of apparently duplicate or contradictory elements in the narratives, and of episodes hard to explain, is not sufficient reason for assuming the presence of variant or disparate traditions, nor are anachronisms necessarily a sign of composition long after the events described took place.

These questions can only be considered when the narratives are set in their second context, the ancient Near Eastern world, at the period the biblical context indicates. Only if it proves impossible to fit them into that context should another be sought.

1. Abraham the Ancestor. Although Abraham's biography is unique among ancient texts, its role in recording his ancestral place is not. Other states emerging about 1000 B.C., like Israel, bore the names of eponymous ^{V 1, p 38} ancestors (e.g., Aramean Bit Bahyan, Bit Agush). Some traced their royal lines back to the Late Bronze Age, and many of the states destroyed at the end of that period had dynasties reaching back over several centuries to founders early in the Middle Bronze Age (e.g., Ugarit). Assyria, which managed to survive the crisis at the start of the 1st millennium B.C., listed her kings back to that time, and even before, to the days when they lived in tents. In this context, the possibility of Israel preserving knowledge of her descent is real (cf. Wiseman 1983: 153–58). States or tribes named after ancestors are also attested in the 2d millennium B.C. (e.g., Kassite tribes, *RLA* 5: 464–73). Dynastic lineages are known because kings were involved. Other families preserved their lines, too, as lawsuits about properties reveal (in Egypt, Gaballa 1977; in Babylonia, King 1912: no. 3), but they had little cause to write comprehensive lists. Israel's descent from Abraham, the grandfather of her national eponym, is comparable inasmuch as he received the original promise of the land of Canaan. The ancient King Lists rarely incorporate anecdotal information (e.g., Sumerian King List, Assyrian King List; see *ANET*, 265, 564). However, ancient accounts of the

deeds of heroes are not wholly dissimilar. Sargon of Akkad (ca. 2334–2279 B.C.), a king whose existence was denied when his story was first translated, is firmly placed in histories as the first Semitic emperor, well attested by copies of his own inscriptions made five centuries after his death, and by the records of his sons. Stories about Sargon were popular about 1700 B.C., and are included among the sources of information for his reign from which modern historians reconstruct his career. Other kings have left their own contemporary autobiographies (e.g., Idrimi of Alalakh, *ANET*, 557). All of these ancient texts convey factual information in the style and form considered appropriate by their authors. The analyses of their forms is part of their proper study. Finding a biography in an ancient Near Eastern document that combined concepts drawn from the family-tree form and from narratives about leaders, such as Genesis contains, preserved over centuries, would not lead scholars to assume the long processes of collecting, shaping, revising and editing normally alleged for the stories of Abraham.

2. Abraham's Career and Life-style. Journeys between Babylonia and the Levant were certainly made in the period 2100–1600 B.C. Kings of Ur had links with north Syrian cities and Byblos ca. 2050 B.C., and in Babylonia goods were traded with Turkey and Cyprus ca. 1700 B.C. A detailed itinerary survives for a military expedition from Larsa in southern Babylonia to Emar on the middle Euphrates, and others trace the route from Assyria to central Turkey. If Abraham was linked with the Amorites, as W. F. Albright argued, evidence that the Amorites moved from Upper

Mesopotamia southward during the centuries around 2000 B.C. cannot invalidate the report of Abraham's journey in the opposite direction, as some have jejunely asserted (e.g., van Seters 1975: 23). Where the identifications are fixed and adequate explorations have been made, the towns Abraham visited—Ur, Haran, Shechem, Bethel, Salem (if Jerusalem), Hebron—appear to have been occupied about 2000 B.C. (Middle Bronze I; for a summary of archaeological material, see *IJH*, 70–148). Gerar remains unidentified, nor is there positive evidence for identifying the site now called Tel Beer-sheba with the Beer-sheba of Genesis (Millard 1983: 50). Genesis presents Abraham as a tent dweller, not living in an urban environment after he left Haran (cf. Heb 11:9).

Extensive archives from Mari, ca. 1800 B.C., illustrate the life of seminomadic tribesmen in relationship with that and other towns (see MARI LETTERS). General similarities as well as specific parallels (e.g., treaties between city rulers and tribes) can be seen with respect to Genesis. Some tribes were wealthy and their chieftains powerful men. When they trekked from one pasturage to another, their passage was marked and reported to the king of Mari. Town dwellers and steppe dwellers lived in dependence on each other.

In Canaan, Abraham had sheep and donkeys like the Mari tribes, and cattle as well. This difference does not disqualify the comparison (*pace* van Seters 1975: 16), for the Egyptian Sinuhe owned herds of cattle during his stay in the Levant about 1930 B.C. Like Abraham, Sinuhe spent some of his life in tents, and acquired wealth and high standing among the local people

(*ANET*, 18–22; note that copies of this story were being made as early as 1800 B.C.). To strike camp and migrate for food was the practice of “Asiatics” within reach of Egypt, so much so that a wall or line of forts had to be built to control their influx (ca. 1980 B.C., see *ANET*, 446). The story of Sinuhe relates that the hero met several Egyptians in the Levant at this time (*ANET*, 18–22); the painting from a tomb at Beni Hasan depicts a party of 37 “Asiatics” (*ANEP*, 3), and excavations have revealed a Middle Bronze Age settlement in the Delta with a strong Palestinian presence (Bietak 1979). Military contingents brought together in coalitions traveled over great distances to face rebellious or threatening tribes, as in the affair of Genesis 14 (see below C5). In an era of petty kings, interstate rivalry was common and raids by hostile powers a threat to any settlement. To meet the persistent military threat, many cities throughout the Near East were strongly fortified during the Middle Bronze Age; fortification provided well-built gateways in which citizens could congregate (Gen 23:10, 18).

Disputes arose over grazing rights and water supplies. Abraham’s pact at Gerar is typical, the agreement duly solemnized with an oath and offering of lambs. Abraham was a resident alien (*qēr*), not a citizen (Gen 15:13; 23:4). Concern for the continuing family was normal. Marriage agreements of the time have clauses allowing for the provision of an heir by a slave girl should the wife prove barren (*ANET*, 543, no. 4; cf. Selman 1976: 127–29). The line was also maintained through proper care of the dead, which involved regular ceremonies in Babylonia (see *DEAD, CULT OF*). Burial in the cave at Machpelah gave

Abraham’s family a focus which was valuable when they had no settled dwelling (cf., the expression in Gen 47:30). Comparisons made between Abraham’s purchase of the cave reported in Genesis 23 and Hittite laws (Lehmann 1953) are now seen to be misleading (Hoffner 1969: 33–37). However, the report is not a transcript of a contract, and so cannot be tied in time to the “dialogue document” style fashionable in Babylonia from the 7th to 5th centuries B.C., as Van Seters and others have argued (Van Seters 1975: 98–100), and at least one Babylonian deed settling property rights survives in dialogue form from V 1, p 39 early in the 2 millennium B.C. (Kitchen 1977: 71 gives the reference).

3. **Abraham’s Names.** Abram, “the father is exalted,” is a name of common form, although no example of it is found in the West Semitic onomasticon of the early 2d millennium B.C. The replacement, Abraham, is given the meaning “father of a multitude” (Gen 17:5). That may be a popular etymology or a play on current forms of the name “Abram” in local dialects for the didactic purpose of the context, the inserted *h* having analogies in other West Semitic languages. The name “Aburahana” is found in the Egyptian Execration Texts of the 19th century B.C. (*m* and *n* readily interchange in Egyptian transcriptions of Semitic names [*EHI*, 197–98]). Genesis introduces the longer name as part of the covenant God made with Abram, so the new name confirmed God’s control and marked a stage in the Patriarch’s career (see Wiseman 1983: 158–60). No other person in the OT bears the names “Abram” or “Abraham” (or “Isaac” or “Jacob”); apparently they were names which held a special place in Hebrew tradition (like the

names “David” and “Solomon”).

4. **Abraham’s Faith.** A monotheistic faith followed about 2000 B.C. is, so far as current sources reveal, unique, and therefore uncomfortable for the historian and accordingly reckoned unlikely and treated as a retrojection from much later times. The history of religions undermines that stance; the astonishing impact of Akhenaten’s “heresy” and the explosion of Islam demonstrate the role a single man’s vision may play, both imposing a monotheism upon a polytheistic society. Abraham’s faith, quietly held and handed down in his family until its formulation under Moses, is equally credible.

Contextual research helps a little. Further study has traced the “gods of the fathers” concept far beyond Alt’s Nabatean inscriptions to the early 2d millennium B.C., when the term referred to named deities, and the god El could be known as *Il-aba* “El is father” (Lambert 1981). Discussion of the various names and epithets for God in the Abraham narratives continues, revolving around the question whether they all refer to one deity or not (see Cross 1973; Wenham 1983). Some ancient texts which apply one or two of these epithets to separate gods (e.g., the pair ʾl “God” and ʾlywn “Most High,” in an 8th-century Aramaic treaty, *ANET*, 659), may reflect later or different traditions; the religious patterns of the ancient Levant are so varied that it is dangerous to harmonize details from one time and place with those from another. The OT seems to equivocate over the antiquity of the divine name *yhwh*. Despite Exod 6:3, the Abraham narratives include the name often. Apart from the (unacceptable) documentary analysis, explanations range from retrojection of a (post-) Mosaic

editor to explanations of Exod 6:3 allowing the name to be known to Abraham, but not its significance (see Wenham 1983:189–93). The latter opinion may find a partial analogy in the development of the Egyptian word *aten* from “sun disk” to the name of the supreme deity (Gardiner 1961: 216–18). However, the absence of the divine name as an indubitable element in any pre-Mosaic personal name should not be overlooked. Abraham naturally had a similar religious language to those around him, with animal sacrifices, altars, and gifts to his God after a victory. He found in Melchizedek another whose worship he could share, just as Moses found Jethro (Gen 14; Exod 2:15–22; 8), yet he never otherwise joined the cults of Canaan.

5. **Objections to a 2d Millennium Context.** a. **Anachronisms.** The texts about Sargon of Akkad are pertinent to the question of anachronisms in the Abraham stories. In those texts, Sargon is said to have campaigned to Turkey in aid of Mesopotamian merchants oppressed there. Documents from Kanesh in central Turkey attest to the activities of Assyrian merchants in the 19th century B.C., but not much earlier. Therefore the mention of Kanesh in texts about Sargon and his dynasty is considered anachronistic. At the same time, the incidents those texts report are treated as basically authentic and historically valuable (Grayson and Sollberger 1976: 108). The anachronism does not affect the sense of the narrative. In this light, the problem of the Philistines in Gen 21:32, 34 may be viewed as minimal. Naming a place after a people whose presence is only attested there six or seven centuries later than the setting of the story need not falsify it. A scribe may have replaced an out-

dated name, or people of the Philistine group may have resided in the area long before their name is found in other written sources. Certainly some pottery entered Palestine in the Middle Bronze Age from Cyprus, the region whence the Philistines came (Amiran 1969: 121–23). A similar position can be adopted with regard to the commonly cited objection of Abraham’s camels. Although the camel did not come into general use in the Near East until after 1200 B.C., a few signs of its use earlier in the 2d millennium B.C. have been found (see CAMEL). It is as logical to treat the passages in Gen 12:16; 24 as valuable evidence for the presence of camels at that time as to view them as anachronistic. Contrariwise, the absence of horses from the Abraham narratives is to be noted, for horses could be a sign of wealth in the places where he lived (cf. 1 Kgs 5:6); horses are unmentioned in the list of Job’s wealth (Job 1:3). Ancient Near Eastern sources show clearly that horses were known in the 3d millennium B.C., but only began to be widely used in the mid-2d millennium B.C., that is, after the period of Abraham’s lifetime as envisaged here (Millard 1983: 43). Comparisons may be made also with information concerning iron working. A Hittite text tells how King Anitta (ca. 1725 B.C.) received an iron chair from his defeated foe. Recent research dates the tablet about 1600 B.C., yet iron only came into general use in the Near East when the Bronze Age ended and the Iron Age began, ca. 1200 B.C. Were the Anitta text preserved in a copy made a millennium after his time, its iron chair would be dismissed as a later writer’s anachronism. It cannot be so treated; it is one important witness to iron working in the Middle Bronze Age (Mil-

lard 1988). Alleged anachronisms in the Abraham narratives are not compelling obstacles to setting them early in the 2d millennium B.C.

b. Absence of Evidence. Occasionally the absence of any trace of Abraham from extrabiblical sources is raised against belief in his existence soon after 2000 B.C. This is groundless. The proportion of surviving Babylonian and Egyptian documents to those once written is minute. If, for example, Abraham’s treaty with Abimelech of Gerar (Genesis 21) was written, a papyrus manuscript would decay quickly in the ruined palace, or a clay tablet might V 1, p 40 remain, lie buried undamaged, awaiting the spade of an excavator who located Gerar (a problem!), happened upon the palace, and cleared the right room. If Abimelech’s dynasty lasted several generations, old documents might have been discarded, the treaty with them. Egyptian state records are almost nonexistent owing to the perishability of papyrus, so no evidence for Abraham can be expected there.

Abraham’s encounter with the kings of the east (Genesis 14) links the patriarch with international history, but regrettably, the kings of Elam, Shinar, Ellasar, and the nations have not been convincingly identified. R. de Vaux stated that “it is historically impossible for these five sites south of the Dead Sea to have at one time during the second millennium been the vassals of Elam, and that Elam never was at the head of a coalition uniting the four great near eastern powers of that period” (*EHI*, 219). Consequently, the account is explained as a literary invention of the exilic period (Astour 1966; Emerton 1971). At that date, its author would either be imagining a sit-

uation unlike any within his experience, or weaving a story around old traditions. If the former is true, he was surprisingly successful in constructing a scenario appropriate for the early 2d millennium B.C.; if the latter, then it is a matter of preference which components of the chapter are assumed to stem from earlier times. Yet the chapter may still be viewed as an account of events about 2000 B.C., as K. A. Kitchen has demonstrated (Kitchen 1977: 72 with references). A coalition of kings from Elam, Mesopotamia, and Turkey fits well into that time. To rule it “unhistorical” is to claim a far more detailed knowledge of the history of the age than anyone possesses. The span of the events is only fifteen years, and what is known shows how rapidly the political picture could change. Current inability to identify the royal names with recorded kings is frustrating; scribal error is an explanation of last resort; ignorance is the likelier reason, and as continuing discoveries make known more city-states and their rulers, clarification may emerge. (One may compare the amount of information derivable from the Ebla archives for the period about 2300 B.C. with the little available for the city’s history over the next five hundred years.) Gen 14:13 terms Abram “the Hebrew.” This epithet is appropriate in this context, where kings are defined by the states they ruled, for Abram had no state or fatherland. “Hebrew” denoted exactly that circumstance in the Middle Bronze Age (Buccellati 1977).

D. Duplicate Narratives

A major argument for the common literary analysis of the Abraham narratives, and for the merging of separate lines of tradition, is the presence of “duplicate” accounts of some events. Abraham and

Isaac clashed with Abimelech of Gerar, and each represented his wife as his sister, an action Abraham had previously taken in Egypt (Gen 12:10–20; 20; 26). These three stories are interpreted as variations of one original in separate circles. That so strange a tale should have so secure a place in national memory demands a persuasive explanation, whatever weight is attached to it. In the ancient Near East, kings frequently gave their sisters or daughters in marriage to other rulers to cement alliances and demonstrate goodwill (examples abound throughout the 2d millennium B.C.). The actions of Abraham and Isaac may be better understood in this context, neither man having unmarried female relatives to hand. That they were afraid may reflect immediate pressures. For Isaac to repeat his father’s procedure at Gerar is more intelligible as part of a well-established practice of renewing treaties with each generation than as a literary repetition (Hoffmeier *fc.*).

Abraham and Isaac both had trouble with the men of Gerar over water rights at Beer-sheba. Again, the narratives are counted as duplicates of a single tradition (Speiser *Gene i* 202), and again two different episodes in the lives of a father and son living in the same area is as reasonable an explanation in the ancient context. One king might confront and defeat an enemy, the same king or his son having to repeat the action (e.g., Ramesses II and the Hittites, Kitchen 1982 *pa im*). The naming of the wells at Beersheba, usually labeled contradictory, is also open to a straightforward interpretation in the light of Hebrew syntax which removes the conflict (*NBD*, 128).

E. Conclusion

To place Abraham at the beginning of the 2d millennium B.C. is, therefore, sustainable. While the extrabiblical information is not all limited to that era, for much of ancient life followed similar lines for centuries, and does not demand such a date, it certainly allows it, in accord with the biblical data. The advantage this brings is the possibility that Abraham was a real person whose life story, however handed down, has been preserved reliably. This is important for all who take biblical teaching about faith seriously. Faith is informed, not blind. God called Abraham with a promise and showed his faithfulness to him and his descendants. Abraham obeyed that call and experienced that faithfulness. Without Abraham, a major block in the foundations of both Judaism and Christianity is lost; a fictional Abraham might incorporate and illustrate communal beliefs, but could supply no rational evidence for faith because any other community could invent a totally different figure (and communal belief can be very wrong, as the fates of many “witches” recall). Inasmuch as the Bible claims uniqueness, and the absolute of divine revelation, the Abraham narratives deserve a positive, respectful approach; any other risks destroying any evidence they afford.

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A. R. MILLARD