

ABRAHAM

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ATTENTION
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ABRAHAM, or, in Hebrew, Avraham; the ancestor of the Hebrews through the line of Isaac and Jacob and of the Arabs through Ishmael.

ABRAHAM IN THE WORLD OF THE NEAR EAST. The ancestors of Israel are portrayed in the Bible as living a nomadic or pastoral life among the older population of Palestine before the time of the Israelite settlement (c. thirteenth century BCE). With the great increase in knowledge about the ancient Near East during the past century, scholars have attempted to fit Abraham and his family into the background of Near Eastern culture in the second millennium BCE. Comparisons are made with the personal names of the ancestors; the names of peoples and places; social customs having to do with marriage, childbearing, and inheritance rights; and types of nomadism in the various stories in order to establish the background and social milieu out of which the ancestors came. The effort to place the patriarchs in the second millennium BCE has been unsuccessful, however, because all of the features in the stories can be attested to in sources of the first millennium BCE, and some of the items in the stories, such as the domestication of the camel or reference to Philistines, Arameans, and Arabs, belong to a much later time. The special effort to fit the war between Abraham and the kings of the east (Genesis 14) into the history of the second millennium by trying to identify the various kings and nations involved has failed to yield plausible proposals. The four eastern kingdoms, Elam, Babylonia, Assyria, and that of the Hittites, referred to cryptically in this text, never formed an alliance, nor did they ever control Palestine either collectively or individually during the second millennium BCE. The whole account is historically impossible, and the story is very likely a late addition to Genesis.

ABRAHAM AND TRADITION-HISTORY. Another method of approaching the Abraham stories is through tradition history, which attempts to identify the individual stories as legends ("sagas") and to regard them as separate units of tradition with their original setting in the nomadic life of the tribes during their earliest contacts with the indigenous population. The common concern of a number of the stories is the quest for land and progeny, which reflects the urge of the land-hungry nomads to gain a foothold in the land where they had temporary pasturage. The stories thus portray a process of gradual peaceful settlement by separate groups, each represented by a different patriarch. The combination of the traditions reflects the subsequent amalgamation of the groups with their traditions, which led to the creation of the genealogical chain of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This whole process of tradition development is viewed as taking place at the oral tradition stage, before it reached the written form.

This approach has not gone unchallenged (Van Seters, 1975). The degree to which the stories of Abraham reflect a long process of oral tradition is debatable. For instance, the tradition of Beersheba as a cult place cannot belong to the pre-monarchy period because the excavations carried out under the direction of Yohanan Aharoni show that the city was a new foundation of the Judean monarchy. While some of the individual stories may reflect traditions of varying degrees of antiquity, the process of collecting and arranging the stories is still best explained as reflecting literary activity.

RELIGION OF ABRAHAM. The tradition-historical approach to the patriarchal stories has led to the view that the tradition reflects a nomadic form of personal religion in which the “god of the fathers” is the patron god of the clan. He is associated with a specific person, such as Abraham, who experiences a theophany and receives the divine promises of land and progeny. Also belonging to this “primitive” level of Israelite religion are the references to sacred trees and stones and the setting up of numerous altars. The frequent references to El in the patriarchal stories reflect either the encounter of the nomadic religion with the Canaanite religion of the land, with its high god El, or the original identity of the “god of the fathers.”

The problem with these reconstructions of Israel's early religion is that the emphasis upon Yahveh as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the identifying of Yahveh with El are attested only in exilic sources. Furthermore, the themes of the divine promise of land and numerous progeny cannot be shown in a single instance to belong to the oral stage of the development of traditions. One must conclude therefore that the religion of Abraham is the religion of the authors of the present form of the tradition.

ABRAHAM IN THE WRITTEN SOURCES. Scholars have long recognized that the story of Abraham is not a unity but combines the works of more than one author. The literary analysis of the Pentateuch, established by Julius Wellhausen and others in the nineteenth century, recognizes three independent sources. The earliest of these, the Yahvist (J), is dated to the united monarchy (c. 950 BCE) and is viewed as using the Abraham tradition to support the claims of the Davidic empire. The Elohist (E) in *Genesis* 20–22 is dated to the time of the prophets (c. eighth century BCE). The Priestly (P) source is of postexilic date (c. 400 BCE) and is found only in the episodes of *Genesis* 17 and 23 and in a few chronological notices.

While this literary analysis has long held sway, some scholars have begun to dispute the dates given to the sources and to understand their relationship to each other in quite a different way. In this view some of the early J stories (*Genesis* 12:10–20, 16, 18 verse 1, 18 verses 10–14, 21 verse 2, 21 verses 6–7) and the so-called E source were used by the J author along with his own material to shape the biblical story of Abraham as a major national tradition in the exilic period. The Priestly writer made a few additions to this tradition in the postexilic period, while the story about the kings of the east in *Genesis* 14 was the latest addition in the Hellenistic period.

THE ABRAHAM TRADITION IN GENESIS. A distinctive feature of the Abraham tradition is that it contains a number of short stories that are not linked in a continuous narrative. This has fostered the view that they reflect a stage of oral tradition before their collection into a literary work. Furthermore, the fact that a number of stories appear as doublets has suggested that tradition variants found their way into separate literary sources. The doublets, however, are actually carefully composed literary modifications of the earlier stories meant to put forward the authors own point of view and religious concerns.

The twice-told tales. There are two stories about how the patriarch's wife was passed off as his sister in order to protect himself in a foreign land. The first one (*Genesis* 12:10–20) is simply an entertaining folktale whereby Abraham appears to outsmart the Egyptians and come away with both wealth and wife. The second version (chapter 20) seeks to exonerate the patriarch of any moral wrongdoing. Abraham did not lie, because Sarah actually was his half-sister, and God was not unjust in his treatment of the king but actually recognized his innocence and provided him with a way out of his dilemma. The whole matter is resolved amicably. Yet a third version of the story is found in the Isaac tradition (26:1–11), which makes use of elements from both of the earlier stories but with the emphasis here on God's guidance and providence. The account of Hagar's flight (chap. 16) and her later expulsion with Ishmael (21:8–21) are also doublets. The first is an ethnographic etiology on the origin and nature of the Ishmaelites, while the second transforms this theme into an aspect of the divine promises to Abraham, since Ishmael is also his offspring.

In none of these cases does the later version constitute an independent variant of the tradition. Instead, it is an attempt by a later author to modify the way one understands the earlier story in terms of a later attitude on morals and piety, as in the case of Genesis 20, or a later use of the Abraham tradition to emphasize ethnic identity and destiny.

Abraham and Lot. The inclusion of Lot in the Abraham tradition affords a contrast between the forefather of the Ammonites and the Moabites and the forefather of the Hebrews. When they go their separate ways (*Genesis* 13), Lot appears to gain the better territory by his choice of the fertile valley in the region of Sodom, while Abraham is left with the land of Canaan. But this merely anticipates the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (chapters 18–19) and Lots ultimate location in the eastern highlands.

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah follows a familiar classical theme, as in the story of Baucis and Philemon (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 8.616ff.), in which the gods send emissaries in the guise of strangers to investigate violence and corruption on earth. The strangers are ill-treated by the population, except for an old couple who offer them hospitality and are rewarded while the rest of the population is destroyed. In the Bible, Abrahams hospitality is rewarded by the promise of Isaacs birth (18:1–15). Lot also entertains the two angels and protects them from the cities inhabitants, who try to abuse them. This leads to the judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, but Lot and his family are rescued, except for Lots wife, who looks back and becomes a pillar of salt. The story also serves as the context for a discussion of the possible fate of the righteous along with sinners when God makes a judgment upon the wicked (18:16–33).

Abraham and Isaac. The account of Isaacs birth (*Genesis* 18 verse 1, 18 verses 10–14, 21 verse 2, 21 verses 6–7) was originally told as a single story quite separate from the story of Sodom and Gomorrah with which it is now combined. It emphasized the wonder of the birth of the child to the aged couple and played upon the meaning of Isaacs name, “laughter.” The Aqedah, or “binding,” of Isaac (chapter 22) became very important in the later development of the tradition. The frequent suggestion that the story arose as a protest against child sacrifice is speculative and has little support in the present text. The author makes clear at the outset that the command to sacrifice Isaac is a divine testing.

While the sacrifice is stayed by divine intervention and a ram substituted in Isaacs place, Abrahams obedience is commended and the divine promises renewed. The matchmaking of chapter 24 recounts how Abraham sent his servant to Haran, the land of his kinsmen, to find a wife for Isaac, and how through divine guidance the servant was led to the house of Rebecca. The story stresses the providence of God in the destiny of Abrahams descendants. It also raises the theme of ethnic purity—a matter of some concern in the exilic period.

Covenant of Abraham. The Yahvist who brought together the diverse elements of the Abraham tradition created a sense of unity in the collection by means of the themes of the divine promises of numerous progeny and the gift of the land of Canaan. J begins with Gods call to Abraham to leave his homeland for a new land and his promise of nationhood and divine blessing (*Genesis* 12:1–3). As soon as Abraham reaches the land of Canaan, God gives it to him as an inheritance (12:7). The promises are again repeated after Abrahams separation from Lot (13:14–17). The promise theme reaches its climax in chapter 15, in which God assures Abraham again of numerous descendants and makes a covenant with him according to which he gives him the region from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates. Thereafter the promises are again mentioned in a number of other stories about Abraham (16 verse 10, 18 verse 18, 21:13, 21 verse 18, 22 verses 15–18, 24 verse 7) as well as in those of Isaac and Jacob. Unlike the covenant of Sinai, the Abrahamic covenant is not conditioned by law since the promises have already been guaranteed by Abrahams obedience (22 verses 15–18, 26 verses 3–5).

The Priestly writers treatment of the covenant (chapter 17) builds directly upon Js version but introduces a number of modifications. First, God appears to Abraham as El Shaddai (17:1) instead of as Yahveh (15:7). This change is explained by P in *Exodus* 6:2–3 in the suggestion that the patriarchs knew God only by the name El Shaddai, whereas the name Yahveh was first revealed to Moses. Second, the writer marks the covenant by a change of names from Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah and modifies the tradition accordingly. Third, the covenant with its promises includes the sign of circumcision. Only through this rite may Israelites of a later day be participants in the destiny of the covenant community. This is an ecclesial conception of identity most appropriate to those living in the Diaspora communities.

Burial of Sarah. In the account of Sarahs burial in chapter 23 (P), Abraham is portrayed as striking a bargain with the inhabitants of Hebron to purchase a piece of land and a cave in which to bury his wife. This becomes the special burial site for Abraham himself and for most of the other patriarchs. What is remarkable about the account is its lack of any religious treatment of the burial or of any reference to the deity in the story. The authors intention may have been to frustrate any ancestral veneration by such a “secular” account, but if so, it was not successful since the supposed location of the burial site in Hebron is regarded as a holy place by Jews, Christians, and Muslims down to the present day.

ABRAHAM IN OTHER BOOKS OF THE BIBLE. In the Pentateuch and the historical books mention is made of the promises to the patriarchs as the basis for Gods mercy toward Israel in his rescue of the people from Egypt, in his forgiveness of their disobedience in the wilderness, in his gift to them of the land of Canaan, and finally in his rescue of Israel from Aramean domination. Abraham is not mentioned in preexilic prophecy. It is only with the crisis of the exile that the figure of Abraham becomes a paradigm of hope for the restoration of nationhood and Israels return to the land of its forefathers. It is especially in “Second Isaiah” (*Isaiah* 41:8–10, 51:1–2) that Abraham is the focus of Israelite identity and destiny. So too in the exilic Psalm 105 Israels identity is based upon the election and covenant of Abraham. The Sinai covenant is passed over in silence.

ABRAHAM IN POSTBIBLICAL JUDAISM. One use of the Abraham tradition in postbiblical times can be seen in the anti-Hellenistic work of the Maccabean period known as Jubilees, or the Little Genesis (chapters 12–23). There Abraham becomes the model of appropriate Jewish piety. The book tells how Abraham, while still in Chaldea, came to a knowledge of the true God, learned the divine language of Hebrew, and repudiated the idolatry of his native land. After receiving the divine call he went to the land of Canaan. One significant amplification of the biblical tradition of Abraham is the emphasis on Abrahams observance of many of the Mosaic laws and of his giving instruction in these laws to Isaac his son and even to his grandson Jacob. Special emphasis is also given to the covenant of Abraham as the covenant of circumcision and a warning to those Jews who neglect this practice (see 15 verses 9–14, 15 verses 25–34, 16 verse 14). The theme of Abrahams testing by God is more nearly paralleled to that of Job by including in the Abraham story the figure of Mastema (Satan), who becomes responsible for instigating the trials. Abraham endures ten trials, the climax of which is the divine command to sacrifice Isaac (17 verses 15–18, 18 verses 1–13; see also *Avot* 5.3, *Judith* 8:25f.).

Josephus Flavius, the Jewish historian of Roman times who was writing for a Gentile audience, presents Abraham in a much more apologetic tone—as a pious philosopher of great learning (*Jewish Antiquities* 1.7–17). He states that Abraham was the first to reason to a knowledge of God, creator of the universe, by his observations of the heavens. Abraham was, however, forced to leave Babylonia because of religious persecution (see also *Judith* 5:8). He took with him the Babylonian sciences of astronomy and mathematics, which he taught to the Egyptians during his sojourn in their country, and in this way the knowledge of such sciences eventually came to the Greeks. (See also the Hellenistic-Jewish fragments in Eusebius’s *Praeparatio evangelica*, 9.17ff., where Abraham teaches the Phoenicians as well.) Josephus places little emphasis upon the

distinctively Jewish features of the Abraham tradition. He even passes rather lightly over the episode of his circumcision and defers to another place a discussion of the law of circumcision.

Philo Judaeus of Alexandria devotes two treatises to Abraham: *On Abraham*, part of his *Exposition of the Law* (directed to Gentiles), and *On the Migration of Abraham*, part of his *Allegory of the Jewish Law* (directed to Jewish readers). The first work is primarily a Hellenistic biography to demonstrate Abrahams piety and wisdom and the Greek virtues of justice, courage, and moderation, to which, in place of prudence, the author adds faith.

Abraham also observes the law, not, however, the Law of Moses (as in *Jubilees*) but the law of nature. The life of Abraham is further interpreted allegorically, especially in the second work, as the mystical journey of the sage who reaches perfection through education. From Chaldean idolatry, astrology, and sense perception the soul progresses through reason and philosophy to a knowledge of God. The outlook here is a form of moral and mystical Greek philosophy.

The rabbinic *aggadah* on Abraham is well represented by the *midrash Genesis Rabbah*, 39–62. For the rabbis, also, Abraham was the first man to recognize the existence of God while in Chaldea amongst the idolatry there. Abrahams call to go to an unknown land was the beginning of his trials of faith, of which the binding of Isaac was the climax and by which his rewards, blessing, and merit on behalf of others would be all the greater. The rabbinic tradition is very insistent that Abraham kept all the Mosaic commandments, both the written and unwritten law (see also BABYLONIAN TALMUD, *Yoma* 28b; BABYLONIAN TALMUD, *Qiddushin* 82a; *Midrash Tehillim* 112; *Numbers Rabbah* 12).

Abraham is also viewed as a prophet, primarily in the sense that he received revelations from God about the future and the unseen world. And Abraham is a priest whose priesthood is somehow linked with that of Melchizedek and whose sacrifice on Mount Moriah was at the site of the future Temple.

ABRAHAM IN CHRISTIANITY. The figure of Abraham plays a special role in the New Testament, especially in the thought of the apostle Paul. In *Romans* 4 Paul argues that Abraham was justified by faith in God prior to his being circumcised and therefore prior to any works of the law, so the law is not necessary for justification—that is, for being considered righteous before God. Abraham becomes the father of the faithful, and the election of Abraham is thus extended to all who have faith. Nevertheless, Paul is not willing to give up Gods special election of the Jews and so argues for their ultimate salvation as well. In *Galatians* 3:6–9 and 3 verses 15–18 Paul uses a somewhat different argument by suggesting that salvation came to the Gentiles through Abrahams blessing; this blessing was transmitted through Abrahams “seed,” which Paul identifies with Jesus.

The Letter to the Hebrews (11 verses 8–12, 11 verses 17–19) uses Abraham as an example of faith, recounting his response to Gods call to sojourn in the land of promise, his belief with Sarah in the promise of offspring, and his testing through the sacrifice of Isaac. All of these are made to reflect faith in God beyond the limitations of this life, a heavenly abode, and the belief in future resurrection of the dead. By contrast, *James* 2:20–24 uses the sacrifice of Isaac as an example of Abrahams being justified by works and not just by faith alone.

ABRAHAM IN ISLAM. Abraham is mentioned more frequently in the Quran than is any other biblical figure. He is regarded as the first prophet because he was the first to convert to the true God and to preach against the idolatry of his people (*surahs* 19:41ff., 21:51ff., 26:69ff., 37:83ff.). He was also the first Muslim because he practiced *Islam*—submission to absolute obedience to God—when he was tested by the command to sacrifice

his son (2:124ff., 37:102ff.). Abraham, with the aid of his son Ishmael, the father of the Arabs, was responsible for the founding of the Ka'bah in Mecca, the first sanctuary of God (2:125, 2:127). Muhammad viewed himself as the reviver of this ancient faith, which he regarded as older than both Judaism and Christianity (3:65). Following Jewish tradition, he also regarded Abraham as the first recipient of the divine revelation of the book (2:129).

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