

THE WORLD OF THE HEBREW PATRIARCHS

THE biblical stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob have inspired, interested and perplexed Christian readers these many centuries. It is inspiring to contemplate the faith of Abraham as his caravan moves away from his country, his kindred and his father's house across the Syrian desert towards an unknown destination. One is absorbed by the charming narrative of Rebecca at the well, perplexed by Jacob's conduct towards Esau. The modern reader of these narratives of Genesis is in a more fortunate position than his Christian predecessor in one respect, namely, knowledge of the patriarchal world. When the stories are read against the colourful background of Mesopotamia and Canaan in the first half of the second millennium, understanding of them is increased perplexity diminished and the inspirational quality heightened.

It is an arduous task to call forth from its sandy tomb the world of the past, and archaeologists merit our admiration and esteem. Theirs is a science requiring great diligence and endless patience. It is only now after some fifty years of scientific digging that the larger rewards of their efforts begin to appear, and archæology is able to present a synthesis. An eminent achievement of this character is the work of Professor W. F. Albright (of Johns Hopkins University, U.S.A.), *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (Baltimore, 2nd ed. 1946). An unexpected and exciting aspect of recent excavations in Mesopotamia and elsewhere is the light they have thrown on the world of the Patriarchs. The data supplied are only partly studied, but it is not altogether premature to bring these things to the attention of the lay-reader.

Of course before one can undertake to draw the picture of the Patriarchal world one must fix the date of the Patriarchs. I take it for granted here that my readers are convinced that the Patriarchal figures are human individuals and not, as some have suggested, the masks of gods or even the signs of the Zodiac. Such vagaries have invaded academic circles but they received little or no hospitality and they have departed. The Patriarchs have also been interpreted as figures of tribes, rather than as individuals. Thus a marriage represents, rather than the union of two individuals, the alliance of two tribes, the male being the stronger tribe, the female, the weaker. There can be no question that certain traits of the narrative indicate tribal history, but it is unlawful to draw from this the conclusion that the Patriarchs are nothing more than figures of tribes. In this ancient literary *genre*, personal and tribal history shade off into each other. That may be disconcerting to us ; it was not so to the ancients.

When did Abraham, Isaac and Jacob live ? We may give a general answer to this question without hesitation : in the first half of the second millenium B.C. However, if you want further precision you will meet with a mass of chronological data and controversy that is rather for-

midable. It may be that you have accepted the identification of Hammurabi with Amraphel of Genesis xiv and placed Hammurabi about 2,000 B.C., and felt satisfied that you were right. However, this identification is practically abandoned today by scholars of competence. Philology does not seem to allow the identification—the biblical Amraphel is probably the equivalent of AMUR-PI-EL which is not obviously Hammurabi. Then the whole question of Hammurabi's date is under question. Recent documents from Mesopotamian excavation indicate that earlier datings were too high. There is general agreement among archæologists and Assyriologists that this is so, although there are differences among them as to the exact chronology. Albright dates the reign of Hammurabi about 1728–1686 B.C. It is hazardous therefore to be dogmatic about the date of Abraham in the present state of research and of learned opinion. Père de Vaux has drawn together the archæological threads of evidence into a pattern in a recent study on Palestine and Transjordan in the second millennium B.C. (See *Zeitschrift Alt-Test. Wissenschaft* lvi [1938] 225–38). He sees Abram the Hebrew (Gen. xiv, 13) as one of the group of Aramaean nomads forming part of the ethnic movements of the early second millennium, and dates his coming to Canaan about 1850 B.C. It comes down to this: archæological evidence points to a date for Abraham some two hundred years nearer the Christian era than used to be supposed.

Perhaps the most striking light on the Patriarchal narrative has come from the tablets found in the excavations at ancient Nuzu in Mesopotamia. The tablets, dating from the middle of the fifteenth century B.C., give us a picture of social and legal custom in northern Mesopotamia in the first half of the second millenium. The customary law reflected in the Patriarchal stories bears striking analogy to Nuzu practice and points to an early association of the Hebrews with that region. Now Genesis places Abraham's home in Harran, and Abraham's descendants, Isaac and Jacob, take wives from that locality. The Nuzu tablets therefore offer interesting confirmation of the narratives in Genesis, respecting the Mesopotamian origin of the Hebrews. An illustration may serve to bring out this point more clearly. It is well known that not a small part of the drama of the Abraham story lies in the fact that he is given a promise of numerous posterity and has taken a wife who proves to be barren. In the development of the story Sarai suggests to Abram that he take her handmaid, Hagar in the hope of having children by her. Such children, physically of Hagar, would be legally of Sarai. In like manner a tablet from Nuzu reads: "If Gilimninu (the bride) will not bear children, Gilimninu shall take a woman of N. Lullu-land (whence the choicest slaves were obtained) as a wife of Shenimma (the bridegroom)."¹ It is obvious that the custom is identical.

¹ Cf. C. H. Gordon, *The Biblical Archaeologist*, iii (1940) 1, 3. For additional material see R. O'Callaghan "Historical Parallels to Patriarchal Social Custom," C.B.Q. 1944, 391–405.

Evidence of another sort has come from the excavations at Mari, modern Tell el-Hariri, on the Middle Euphrates. If one is fortunate enough to get to Paris these days one may see splendid examples of the findings at Mari arranged in a most attractive and scientific manner at the Louvre. The excavations at Mari mark the latest of many illustrious achievements of the French archæologists. In a series of six campaigns M. André Parrot unearthed remains of a remarkable civilization.¹ It appears from these discoveries that Mari was the most important state of Western Asia before its conquest by Hammurabi of Babylon about 1700 B.C. It covered an area extending over 300 miles in length. The evidence points to a high degree of culture and of administrative efficiency, to programmes of public welfare, and methods of defence. The Palace of Mari is one of the finest examples of ancient oriental architecture, and fortunately was found to be in an extremely good state of preservation. Its murals are of prime importance for the history of art, but the special delights of the archaeologist and the historian arises from the 20,000 tablets unearthed. They comprise commercial and diplomatic correspondence and religious and literary texts. In these texts we find mentioned cities of the Patriarchal narrative, such as Harran and Nahor. Some of the names have affinity with the names of Abraham's ancestors; thus Til-Turakhi with Terah (Thare in the Douay Bible). The name Benjamin also appears in the texts. This is not of course to be identified with the biblical Benjamin, but it is the same name. As the customary law in the Patriarchal stories, seen in the light of the Nuzu discoveries, leads us to northern Mesopotamia, so the names of Genesis viewed in the light of Mari draw us in the same direction.

Much additional light on the Old Testament has been thrown by the discoveries at Ras Shamra, the ancient Ugarit, on the coast of Syria. The religious texts found there provide first-hand source-material on the religion of the Canaanites. This had previously been known only indirectly through incomplete or uncertain data from Greek sources, such as fragments of Philo of Byblos, preserved in Eusebius. Some sensational theories were earlier proposed, proclaiming parallels to the history of the Patriarchs, t-r-h, the letters of a word occurring in the tablets, were pointed to as the equivalent of Terah, the father of Abraham. However, more sober scholarship rejected this and kindred ideas on philological grounds. Ras Shamra's importance lies rather in the fact that it confirms the possibility of written records in the period of the Patriarchs, and in the light thrown upon the religious and cultural environment into which the Patriarchs came.

The name Abraham has been found in documents from Mesopotamia of the first half of the second millennium, at Dilbat. It is well known that many of the old Testament names are theophoric, that is, are names in which the name of God is an element. Thus El and Yahweh (or its

¹ Cf. A. Parrot, *Mari, une ville perdue*, Paris, 1936.

shorter forms Yo, Yau and Yahu) by which names God is known in the Old Testament, can easily be recognized as forming part of other names even in an English version, e.g. Nathani-el and Elias (*Elijah*). Some of the names that were once theophoric no longer show the element of the divine name. There is no doubt about such names being theophoric since the remaining element is often a verb supposing a subject, as, for example, the name Jacob, which if written ya'qobh will be recognized as a verb form. If we add the missing *el* we get *ya'qobh-el* meaning (very likely) "May El (God) protect." Now this name appears as a personal name in north-western Mesopotamia in the eighteenth century B.C., in tablets from Chagar Bazar. The name Jacob appears also in Egypt. The ruins of the Karnak Temple still amaze us with their size and grandeur, but their chief interest for us at the moment is a piece of evidence they contain on the pylon of the Temple. In the list of places in Palestine captured by the Pharaoh Tutmosis III in the middle of the fifteenth century B.C. is the name Jacob-el. There is nothing unreal therefore, about the names of the Patriarchs. The personal names fit perfectly into the picture of the first half of the second millennium as do the place names and the social customs.

Archæology offers additional evidence. The narratives of Genesis portray the Patriarchs as pastoral nomads. They are properly described as semi-nomads. They dwelt in tents, had flocks and herds and did some planting. They negotiated with local princes regarding property rights to wells. Towns are mentioned in the narratives, such as Shechem, Bethel, Hai, Gerar, Dothaim, Beersheba and Jerusalem. Archæological research has established the fact that practically every town mentioned was in fact in existence in the Middle Bronze Age; the archæological period into which the Patriarchal age fits. The authority for this assertion is Professor Albright in his book *The Archaeology of Palestine and the Bible*. He also affirms that the "Cities of the Plain" were inhabited and were particularly prosperous in the centuries preceding 1800 B.C. and that occupation ceased after that time. This would square nicely with the data of the biblical narrative and with the sudden destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The evidence points to a lack of sedentary population in this region for several centuries. It is interesting to recall that as late as the Middle Ages there was a little place called Zoar at the southern end of the Dead Sea.

The punitive expedition of the kings described in Genesis xiv used to be dismissed as fictitious by some critics. The route they took skirted the edge of Gilead and Moab and no adequate reason for their presence there could be assigned. Explorations by Albright and Glueck have shown that about the beginning of the second millennium there was a line of important cities along this route, though not much later, the sedentary population disappeared and Transjordan became again a land of nomads.

West of the Jordan, Palestine during this period was under the domination of the powerful Twelfth Dynasty of Egypt. Surprise may be felt that the Patriarchs could enjoy such freedom of movement in a land dominated by Egypt. There is no need however for surprise when we understand the nature of the rule. The political picture of Palestine is of a group of city-states ruled by petty princes more or less dependent on their Egyptian overlords. The cities were in the plains and valleys, leaving the mountain ranges of Judæa, Samaria and Galilee comparatively free, and these served as pasture lands for nomad tribes. Thus there were at the disposal of the tribes large spaces between Shechem and the cities of the Plain of Esdraelon, between Shechem and Jerusalem and from Jerusalem to Beersheba, together with the interior of the Galilean range. The lines of this picture are drawn from Egyptian texts of the nineteenth century B.C. known as the "Execration Texts."¹ Some idea of the intimate colouring of life in Canaan during that period may be obtained from the *Tale of Sinuhe*, an Egyptian record of the twentieth century B.C., and we may gather what the Hebrew Patriarchs looked like from the wall-painting of the tomb of Beni-Hasan.²

This is a brief sketch of the interesting light and confirmation given to the Patriarchal narratives by archæology. There is evidence from the book itself that points to the reliability of the record. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob appear before us as distinct personalities. Isaac is not Abraham; Jacob is not Isaac. They have all the characteristics of real people. They must struggle for their rights (Gen. xxi, 25), bargain for and buy land (xxiii, 1). Their marriage customs contradict later law (cf. xx, 2 and Lev. xviii, 9-18) as do their cult practices; they have no priesthood, they sacrifice in every place, there are no laws of legal impurity, nor are their ethics those of later Israel. They are not creations of a later age.

These indications all point to one conclusion. The amazing tenacity of the Oriental memory kept alive among the tribes in Egypt the traditions of their ancestors and of their Mesopotamian origins. Oral traditions passed from generation to generation until they were fixed in writing, which was not a substitute for memory but rather an aid to it. The stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob which we read in the inspired pages differ little from the stories the Hebrews listened to centuries ago as they sat about their camp-fires at night under the stars. The ashes of those fires are long since cold, the bones of these Hebrews long ago scattered, but their stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob live on to inspire and to challenge.

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¹ Cf. A. Bea, *Biblica* xxiv (1943) 231-60.

² See the plate and description in the *Westminster Historical Atlas*, fig. 9, p. 23.