

At the Sources of Biblical History

Dr. Igor P. Lipovsky

Jewish history begins with the biblical patriarch Abraham, who lived in legendary Sumer in one of the most ancient cities of the world, Ur. At the time, though, he was called by the slightly simpler-sounding name of ‘Abram’. The Bible does not say how long Abram lived in Ur; however, it does make clear that neither Ur nor southern Mesopotamia as a whole were the patriarch’s native land. His family had come from an entirely different area, the region of Haran, which is very far away in northwestern Mesopotamia. But Sumer was not fated to become Abram’s new homeland. Perhaps there was not enough unoccupied pastureland for the Western Semitic nomads or perhaps conflicts arose with the local rulers; we shall probably never know the truth. But in any case the head of the family, Abram’s father, Terah, took the decision to set off for the land of Canaan (Palestine). However, Mesopotamia and Canaan were separated by the vast Syrian Desert, which became traversable only an entire millennium after Abram’s death, when the desert ship – the camel – was domesticated. In Abram’s time the primary beast of burden was the donkey and for this reason even the hereditary nomads did not dare to venture far into the desert.¹ At that time the journey from Sumer to Canaan involved a round-about route through northwestern Mesopotamia and Haran, the area from which Abram’s family originally came. There, in their initial homeland, they were forced to delay for a considerable time. Terah died and authority over the family passed to his eldest son, Abram. In fulfillment of his father’s wishes, Abram led his family to the southwest, through Syria and into Canaan. His first stopping place was in central Palestine, in the area between Shechem in the north and Bethel in the south. But for some reason he did not remain in the central part of Canaan, where water and fertile land were

¹ Snell, Daniel C, *Life in the Ancient Near East, 3100-332 BCE*, New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1997; Potts, DT, *Mesopotamian Civilization: The Material Foundations*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997; Finkelstein I and Silberman NA, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of its Sacred Texts*, New York: Free Press, 2001.

most abundant, but instead gradually pushed southwards, into the hottest and driest regions bordering the Negev Desert. Here, in the south of Palestine, in the triangle formed by Hebron, Beersheba, and Gerar (near Gaza), Abram and his family lived as nomads. This concluded the Jewish patriarch's first period of traveling. It is a period that raises many questions.

In religious literature the decision to migrate to Canaan has traditionally been ascribed to Abram and has been linked with his new, monotheistic faith. In reality, the fateful decision to leave Ur to go to Canaan was made not by Abram, but by his father, Terah, who did not worship the one God and had no personal relationship with Him. The Bible makes this completely clear: "Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there" (Genesis 11:31). Thus it was not Abram who took his family, but Terah. And it could not have been otherwise: according to the laws and traditions of the time, Abram's father, as the senior member of the family, was the one who was supposed to take decisions while the rest of his family was required to obey him.² But why was Canaan chosen as the destination? After all, Palestine was not at all close. It was a long way from both Ur and southern Mesopotamia in general; in fact, you could say that it lay at the other end of the ancient Near East. How could Terah have known that his family and tribe would find unoccupied land and available water there? All of these questions can only have a single answer: Terah had received exhaustive information from his kinsmen who had already settled in Canaan. These kinsmen were Western Semites, just as he was, and had already left their common fatherland in northwest Mesopotamia; however, unlike Terah and his family, they had gone not to Sumer, but to Canaan. The journey across such large distances and with such a large quantity of livestock involved many difficulties and much risk. The decision to set out could only have been taken given confidence that the family would find a place and security in this new land. It is probable

² Eichler, Barry L, 'Nuzi and the Bible: A Retrospective' in: *Dumu-e-dub-ba-a: Studies in Honor of Ake W. Sjöberg*, ed. Hermann Behrens, Darlene Loding, and Martha T Roth, pp. 107-19, Philadelphia: University Museum, 1989.

that Terah did in fact receive such guarantees: it is significant that, following his father's death, Abram set out not for Canaan in general, but for the southern part of the country specifically. The Bible itself says nothing of the reasons for leaving Canaan, confining itself to reference to God's will: "The Lord had said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you'" (Genesis 12:1). However, the land for which Abram was heading was not unoccupied; the Bible reminds us that, "At that time the Canaanites were in the land" (Genesis 12:6). Having been the first of the Western Semites to arrive in Canaan, the Canaanites were in Abram's time a settled agricultural people. A later wave of Western Semites, the Amorites, had also settled nearby. They had already occupied the best areas of the land that was vacant, in north and central Canaan; in the arid south, however, there still remained large areas of unoccupied pastureland.³ By agreement among the Western Semitic nomads, this southern part was assigned to Abram and his people. In those times, of course, southern Palestine was more pleasant than it is today. Above all, the Dead Sea had not yet formed. In its place was the valley of the River Jordan, of which the Bible says: "the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, toward Zoar. (This was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.)" (Genesis 13:10). According to the Bible, the land which became the bottom of the Dead Sea was previously called the Valley of Siddim (Genesis 14:3) and the River Jordan supplied it with water in abundance. Later, seismic processes resulted in an ecological catastrophe: a significant part of the Jordan valley was transformed into a lifeless, salty sea; flourishing cities perished; and any survivors abandoned this disaster area. As time went on, the climate became increasingly arid and hostile to agriculture; southern Canaan gradually became the undisputed ancestral property of the Western Semitic nomads.

In biblical literature you may encounter the mistaken view that Abram's monotheistic faith had already taken root before he came to Canaan and that the Lord who prompted him to set out for a new homeland was the same God to whom Abram's descendants prayed.⁴ However, the Bible makes no distinction between the god of Terah

³ John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 4th edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001; William F Albright, *The Biblical Period from Abraham to Ezra*, 1963.

⁴ Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, 2nd ed., 1973.

and the God of Abram. The break with the old gods in fact happened much later, when Abram was already in Canaan. In recent years it has become common to hypothesize that Ur and Haran were both centers of worship of the god Sin (the Moon God) and that Abram's family were priests in this cult. Certainly, the Moon cult was popular in both cities, but this by no means implies that members of the patriarch's family were priests in the cult and left Ur for Haran for this reason.

The origins of patriarch Abraham and his family

Who was Abram in actual fact and to which people did he and his family belong? The names of the biblical family members, and in particular, the time at which they appeared in Mesopotamia, Canaan, and later in Egypt too are signs not only of their Western Semitic origin, but also of the fact that they belonged to the Amorites or a related people. We have no information on the ethnic origins of Abram's family up until his arrival in Canaan. It is only in the episode involving the captivity of Lot, his nephew, that the Bible identifies the patriarch himself for the first time: "One who had escaped came and reported this to Abram the Hebrew [Ivri]." (Genesis 14:13). Today the word 'Hebrew' (Ivri) is translated from the biblical Hebrew as 'Jew'. 4000 years ago, however, this word had a different meaning and was pronounced differently – 'Habiru' or 'Apiru'. This was the name for semi-nomadic Western Semites who did not have their own permanent tribal territory. Even if we assume that the Habiru were not actually Amorites, they were certainly their close relatives. To begin with, this term was more social than ethnic; it signified nomads who were freshly arrived. From an ethnic and linguistic point of view, the Habiru hardly differed from the settled Western Semitic peoples of Syria and Canaan who surrounded them.⁵ They all had common roots and the same provenance; in terms of life style, however, there were important differences. The Habiru remained nomads and did not settle on the land until the 12th century BC. In Abram's time the

⁵ A Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East c. 3000-330 BC*, 2 vols, London: Routledge, 1995, pp. 1-320; N.P. Lemche, 'Habiru, Hapiru', *ABD*, pp. 3-7; M. Greenberg, *The Hab/piru*, New Haven, Conn, 1955; O. Loretz, *Habiru-Hebraer: Eine sozial-ling. Studie*, Berlin, 1984; N. Na'aman, 'Habiru and Hebrews: The Transfer of a Social Term to the Literary Sphere', *JNES* 45, no. 4 (1986): pp. 271-88.

Habiru were a large group of tribes scattered throughout Syria, Canaan, and Mesopotamia. They were to be found in all corners of the Semitic world of that time, but especially in Canaan and southern Syria, where they were a serious military and political power.

It is possible that from the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC southern and central Canaan was already considered to be the land of the Western Semitic nomads (Habiru). It is significant that, when he found himself in Egypt, Joseph said of himself: “For I was forcibly carried off from the land of the Hebrews” (Genesis 40:15). Today this phrase means ‘from the land of the Jews’. But at the time it sounded and was understood differently, namely as ‘from the land of the Semitic nomads’. The Habiru were warriors; dignitaries among the local rulers; artisans; and hired hands. Most, however, lived a pastoral life, wandering nomadically with their herds over the entire territory of the Fertile Crescent. Relations between the Habiru tribes and the settled agricultural population were very much reminiscent of the relations between Bedouin and fellahs (peasants) in Arab countries. Each side distrusted the other; however, periods of hostility alternated with peaceful and even friendly coexistence – and all the more so since both sides needed to barter foodstuffs and goods. From the cultural point of view, the Habiru very quickly assimilated with the environment in which they lived, adopting the traditions, customs, religious beliefs, and professional skills of the local peoples. The Hebrews constituted only a small part of the Habiru who were in Canaan and southern Syria. As time went by, the term ‘Habiru’ increasingly took on an ethnic meaning and finally came to signify two groups of Hebrew tribes – the northern and southern. Thus Abram and his family were nomadic Western Semites or Habiru. The Bible speaks only of Abram’s family; however, the episode describing the liberation of Abram’s nephew Lot makes clear that the patriarch was leading, at the very least, his entire tribe. “When Abram heard that his relative had been taken captive, he called out the 318 trained men born in his household and went in pursuit as far as Dan. During the night Abram divided his men to attack them and he routed them, pursuing them as far as Hobah, north of Damascus. He recovered all the goods and brought back his relative Lot and his possessions, together with the women and the other people” (Genesis 14:14-16). In order to assemble a force of 318 warriors, Abram’s family must have numbered at least 6000 -

7000, which made them not even a clan but what at the time must have been a large tribe. Given that, according to estimates by archeologists, the entire population of Palestine at the time amounted to no more than 150,000 people,⁶ Abram's tribe was a force of no small strength – and that is in spite of the fact that on the eve of these events some of their number left to follow Lot to the east. In order to pursue the enemy from today's Dead Sea to Damascus, you would have needed not just a large number of people, but also well-trained and experienced warriors. From the biblical narrative it follows that the local Amorites – Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre – entered into an alliance with Abram. As a rule, families did not conclude alliances among themselves, so what we have here, evidently, is an alliance between the local Amorite rulers and Abram as the head of one of the Habiru tribes. One should, of course, treat the numbers given in the Bible, especially in its earliest texts, with the utmost caution. And yet, even if the number 318 is for some reason unreliable, it still remains an eloquent fact that Abram and his allies were able to put to rout the entire coalition of southern Syrian rulers who had invaded Canaan. This testifies to the fact that Abram's 'family' was in fact an entire nomadic tribe or tribes – an alliance with whom would have been a desirable objective for many rulers in southern Palestine.

At the very beginning of the biblical narrative concerning Abram's stay in the land of Canaan, we encounter a new fact confirming the supposition that 'Abram's family' was in fact not only a tribe, but a group of tribes:

Now Lot, who was moving about with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents. But the land could not support them while they stayed together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to stay together. And quarrelling arose between Abram's herdsmen and the herdsmen of Lot... So Abram said to Lot, 'Let's not have any quarrelling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left' ...So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out

⁶ Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible. 10,000-586 BCE*, New York: Doubleday, 1992, p. 112.

toward the east. The two men parted company: Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom. (Genesis 13: 5-9, 11-12)

The very description of the places where Lot settled – a region extending for more than 100 km – is evidence that what we have here is not families, but tribes. Lot's separation from Abram was only the first division among the numerous tribes of nomadic Amorites who had come to southern Canaan. Those who went east with Lot came to be known as the 'Sutu'. Some scholars suppose that the ethnonym 'Sutu' derived from 'Sutum', the name for the biblical Sheth, son of the primogenitor Adam. Sheth was thought to be the ancestor of all the Western Semitic nomadic tribes covering the area from Canaan to Mesopotamia.⁷ It is possible that 'Habiru' was established as the name for the Hebrews later, when they were already in Canaan, and that, when they lived in Mesopotamia and up until their arrival in Canaan, they had been known as Sutu. Be that as it may, those who remained with Abram to the west of the Jordan River became known as Habiru and those who left for the east of the Jordan River were called Sutu, even though during Abram's time there was almost no difference between the former and the latter. However, the Habiru were even then drawn to the settled population and lived right in their midst while the Sutu preserved a purely nomadic way of life. The Egyptians were very familiar with the nomadic Sutu and had their own name for them – 'Shasu'. Later, the Sutu who lived in Transjordan experienced further divisions, with some of their number forming the origins of peoples such as the Moabites and the Ammonites.

Not only was Abram the leader of the group of Habiru tribes, but he was also their high priest. Upon his arrival in Canaan, he built sacrificial altars and conducted services at Elon-More near Shechem, at Bethel, and at Elonei Mamre near Hebron. "... 'You are a mighty prince [of God] among us,'" the Hittite men of Hebron told him" (Genesis 23:6). It was quite common in Canaan in those times for someone to combine the functions of supreme ruler and high priest. The Bible tells of Melchizedek, king of the city of Shalem (Jerusalem), who was simultaneously a priest of the Almighty God (Genesis 14:18). Thus

⁷ Diakonov, IM, 'Starovavilonskiy period v Dvurechye' in: *Istoriya Drevnego Vostoka*, ed. I.M. Diakonov, Moscow: Glavnaya redaktsiya vostochnoy literatury, 1983, p. 319.

there was nothing surprising in Abram initiating the adoption of a new religious faith within his family and tribe. The famous covenant between Abram and the Lord was concluded in the tribal sanctuary of Elonei Mamre in the region of Hebron:

“I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless...You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham...I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come...The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you...Every male among you shall be circumcised...and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you...As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I...will surely give you a son by her...kings of peoples will come from her.”
(Genesis 17:1, 4-5, 7-8, 10-11, 15-16)

The change of names and the rite of circumcision were signs not of the religious reform of an already existing cult, but of the adoption of a new faith and a union with a new God. At Elonei Mamre a true revolution occurred in the religious beliefs of Abraham and his tribe. Abraham rejected the old gods whom he and his tribe had worshipped in both their homeland of Haran and in Ur. Their new homeland brought a new god – most probably, the supreme Canaanite god El.⁸ It is also possible that this was the cult of the Most High God (El Elyon), the lord of heaven and earth who ruled in the neighboring city of Shalem and whose king/high-priest, Melchizedek, was an ally of Abraham. It is interesting to compare how each called their god. Melchizedek “blessed Abraham, saying, ‘Blessed be Abraham by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth’” (Genesis 14:19). However, Abraham turned to the king of Sodom and named his God: “But Abraham said to the king of Sodom, ‘I have raised my hand to the Lord, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth...’” (Genesis 14:22). The similarity in the way that this god

⁸ Cross, Frank Moore, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1973; Coogan, Michael David, ed. and trans. *Stories from Ancient Canaan*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978.

is characterized is striking. It is safe to assume that the similarity was not confined to external characteristics, but was also a matter of the essence of the religious cult itself. The new religion clearly already comprised elements of spontaneous monotheism and became the foundation on which Moses later built his monotheistic faith. It is very difficult today to reconstruct the prototype of the faith which Abraham professed given that all events from this period were recorded only 1000 years later and were subsequently heavily edited by the compilers of the Pentateuch.⁹ Naturally, the editors of the Old Testament would have tried to impart to Abraham's new religion a distinctly monotheistic character that would have been true of a much later period, thereby creating the appearance of complete continuity from Abraham to Moses.

The land to which Abraham led his group of tribes differed substantially from both Ur and Haran. Here there were no deep rivers such as the Tigris and Euphrates, and there was not as much rain as in north-west Mesopotamia. Life in Canaan completely depended on how much rain fell.¹⁰ But there were years when rainfall was almost non-existent and the whole country was therefore seized by the most severe drought and, as a result, famine. The nearest place where there was always water in abundance was the Nile Delta in Egypt. And it was to the Nile Delta that the nomadic Amorites went when dry periods occurred in Canaan. We have sufficient evidence to suggest that as early as the 18th century BC there were large communities of Western Semites who had come from Canaan and were living permanently in the eastern part of the Nile Delta.¹¹ Most likely, they were the same semi-nomadic Amorites/Habiru who had occupied Canaan; in dry periods they saved themselves from hunger by leaving for the Nile Delta. It may be supposed that the Amorites appeared in the Nile Delta even earlier, in the 20th-19th

⁹ Richard E. Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997.

¹⁰ Bar-Yosef, Ofer, 'Prehistoric Palestine' in: *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, ed. Eric M. Meyers, 4.207-12, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997; Orni, Ephraim, and E Ephrat, *Geography of Israel*. 4th ed., Jerusalem: Israel Universities Press, 1980.

¹¹ Donald B Redford, *Egypt, Canaan and Israel in Ancient Times*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, pp. 103-111; Stephen Quirke, *The Administration of Egypt in the Late Middle Kingdom*, New Malden, 1990; Kim Ryholt, *The Political Situation in Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period*, Copenhagen, 1997.

centuries BC.¹² The greatest obstacle impeding their migration to these parts was the fact that Egypt was such a powerful military force. However, as Egypt gradually weakened, the stream of Amorite nomads evidently increased. The migrants no longer returned to Canaan, preferring to stay in the Nile Delta, where there was always sufficient water and pastureland. When the great drought took place in Abraham's time, he, like many Habiru, left southern Canaan for the Nile Delta: "Now there was a famine in the land, and Abraham went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe" (Genesis 12:10). In fact, it was not only Abraham's group of tribes that left for Egypt, but also their closest kinsmen, the tribes of Lot, ancestors of the Moabites and the Ammonites who were also living as nomads in southern Canaan. The Bible calls those who met Abraham there 'Egyptians'. In reality, they were Western Semites who had settled there earlier. It is even more likely that the people mentioned by the Bible were another group of Habiru tribes who had come to Canaan, and then to Egypt, much earlier than Abraham and had had time to establish themselves. Most likely, the slave woman Hagar was not Egyptian at all, but a woman from those semi-nomadic Amorites who had settled in the Nile Delta. The same applies to the wife of her son Ishmael. The enormous interval – 1000 years – that elapsed between the moment these events occurred and the time they were set down turned everyone who was from Egypt into Egyptians, although from an ethnic point of view they were the same Western Semites as Abraham and his fellow tribesmen.

The line of Hagar and her son Ishmael was evidently suppressed by the keepers of the tradition, who were interested in emphasizing their own branch of Isaac and Jacob. Possibly, this line linked Abraham's group of tribes with the even larger tribal group of Amorites in the Nile Delta. The significance of Ishmael inevitably increases if we remember that in concluding the covenant with God Abraham was primarily thinking of Ishmael's well-being: "And Abraham said to God, 'If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!'" (Genesis 17:18) The Bible underlines another fact – that only Isaac and Ishmael, of all Abraham's sons, buried their father. Like Jacob, Ishmael also had twelve sons; they became the fathers of their tribes and lived a nomadic life, moving between

¹² WC Hayes, *A Papyrus of the Late Middle Kingdom in the Brooklyn Museum*, Brooklyn, 1955, pp. 87-109; D Kessler, SAK 14 (1987), pp. 147-166.

Egypt and northern Mesopotamia (Genesis 25:16, 18). The compilers and editors of the Bible relegated the line of Hagar/Ishmael to second place after the Sarah/Isaac branch. Possibly, this was a result not only of the fact they themselves derived from the Sarah/Isaac line, but also of the more important role that Sarah had played in Abraham's family. After all, she was the daughter of his father Terah, although from another woman, while Hagar was unrelated, although she was from a more numerous and stronger group of tribes. It should not be forgotten that there was also a third official line of kinship – the sons of Keturah, Abraham's principal wife after Sarah's death. Many tribes of nomadic Amorites traced their origins to this line – including the Midianites, who played an important part in the early stages of the history of Israel. Finally, there were also less important lines such as the sons of Abraham's concubines, who were the leaders of lower-ranking tribes. Fearing civil strife after his death, Abraham prudently sent all these tribes further to the east. The biblical account of this event is an example of extreme understatement: "Abraham left everything he owned to Isaac. But while he was still living, he gave gifts to the sons of his concubines and sent them away from his son Isaac to the land of the east" (Genesis 25:5-6). Somewhat later, the Bible clarifies which geographic region was signified by the 'the land of the East' – north-west Mesopotamia and north-east Syria (Genesis 29:1).

Thus there were three major branches– Sarah, Hagar, and Keturah – as well as branches of lesser importance deriving from the concubines; together, they made up the hierarchy of Amorite nomadic tribes whom Abraham brought from Haran. The names of Abraham's sons are, without a doubt, patronymics and represent the legendary fathers of all these tribes and clans. Most of these nomadic Amorites who stayed in Canaan came to be known as Habiru, while others who left for the east and the north came increasingly to be known as Sutu. In short, Abraham's family history is actually the family history of the Habiru and Sutu tribes. The role of the Sarah/Isaac branch was emphasized only because the authors of the Bible belonged to this branch. The forefather Abraham was not only the leader and high-priest of his own tribe, but was the nominal supreme head of several tribal groups of nomadic Amorites (Habiru). In addition to their own tribal leaders, the Habiru and Sutu evidently also had supreme leaders in each region to whom they could turn for arbitration in the event of conflict and disagreements among the nomads. These

supreme leaders also acted as coordinators when action had to be taken in order to deal with a serious external threat. It is likely that Abraham was just such a supreme leader of the Habiru in southern Canaan, although usually his power extended no further than the territory of his own tribe. His place of residence, if such a thing exists for a semi-nomadic tribe, was Elonei Mamre, near Hebron. Until they left for Egypt, each Habiru or Sutu tribe set up its nomad camps in a strictly defined area and tried not to violate the borders of its relatives. It was precisely this system of distributing unoccupied land between the nomadic and semi-nomadic Amorites that allowed the group of tribes headed by Abraham to come to Canaan; however it was this same system that limited these tribes to the south only. Northern and central Canaan were occupied by other Habiru tribes who had arrived earlier than Abraham. It was probably from these people that Terah had found out about the unoccupied pastures in the south, prompting his decision to migrate to southern Canaan (although, of course, it was only his son who succeeded in realizing this plan). Judging by the Habiru narrative reflected in the history of Abraham's family, the Jewish patriarch had such great influence on the nomadic Amorites that many of them started considering him their ancestral forefather. At the same time, we should not forget that, as the Bible constantly reminds us, the nomadic Amorites were only a part of the population of Canaan. The remainder was made up of Canaanites and settled Amorites, who had occupied the parts of the country that were the most convenient for living and farming.

Many questions are raised by those places in the Bible where the Bible speaks about Abraham's principal wife, Sarah. In Egypt and Gerar the patriarch passed off his aged wife as his own sister in order that the local rulers, seduced by her beauty, should not kill Abraham himself. From non-biblical sources we know that in the ancient Near East it was indeed the practice for powerful rulers to take into their harems the daughters and sisters of leaders of tribes who were their dependent vassals. Their husbands frequently met with an unenviable fate. For examples one need not look far. Even the legendary King David, of whom the Bible only speaks in superlatives, could not resist the temptation to send to his death the husband of the woman to whom he had taken a fancy. However, this custom only concerned young and, as a rule, attractive women while Sarah, according to the biblical text, was not at all of the age at which she could have

attracted attention of this sort. Seemingly even more inexplicable is the report that at the age of 90, the wife of the patriarch gave birth to their son Isaac. Why did the compilers of the Pentateuch include such absurd tales in the canonical text? Just to show the omnipotence of God? Are not the improbable tales about Sarah's being put into the harems of local rulers and about her extremely late childbearing a penalty that the compilers have been forced to pay as a result of favoring Sarah's branch? It is possible that in the initial versions of the account of the Habiru tribes Sarah's place was taken by a young and beautiful woman, one of Abraham's other wives. Possibly, there were a number of different oral legends concerning the patriarch's wives; or perhaps the same narrative about Abraham featured various different women. Many centuries later, the keepers of the tradition made their ancestor Sarah the main heroine of the narrative about Abraham, writing her into all episodes in the patriarch's life. What we probably have here is a redaction dictated by political considerations. Thus, for the first compilers of the biblical texts, the fight for 'primogeniture' and the status of principal heir to the common patriarch obviously overweighed logic and historical truth. As for later editors of the Pentateuch, although no longer burdened by the considerations that bound the first compilers, they were simply not daring enough to change the ancient texts. Thus Sarah remained the main heroine of all the various events which had occurred to various women at various times.

A similar problem exists regarding the age of the patriarchs. Their unusual longevity – Abraham is recorded as living to the age of 175 and Sarah to 127 – leads us to think that their names conceal the lives of not one but two or even several people. Possibly, there were several famous rulers with the name of Abraham, but in an oral tradition formed over many centuries they fused into one legendary patriarch credited with extreme longevity. In just the same way, had there been no written documentary records, the rule of the several Louis in France might have been taken, many centuries later, as the uninterrupted reign of a single person. Or the reigns of the three Russian emperors called Alexander might have been understood, 1000 years later, as the life of only one of them. Moreover, after such a long interval the oral tradition would almost certainly have forgotten that between the reigns of Alexander I and Alexander II came Nicholas I. Unfortunately, the story of the Habiru tribes was set down in the earliest

biblical texts too late, at least 1000 years after it had occurred. Although writing was already known in Canaan, the nomadic Western Semites made no use of it at this time. Another possibility, at least as far as one of the patriarchs is concerned, is that the change of name from Abram to Abraham ('father of the peoples') led to the name 'Abraham' being established as the title for the supreme leader of the Habiru in Canaan, and that for a period of time this title was handed down from each leader to his heir. Whatever the case may be, there can be no doubt at all that the name of each long-living patriarch in fact stands for the names of several people.

The most enigmatic of all the patriarchs is Isaac. Strangely, we know hardly anything about him, although in length of life (180 years) he surpassed the other Jewish forefathers. We have far more information about his father, Abraham, and his sons, Jacob and Esau. Isaac is mentioned many times, but never acts independently. Everything written about him is merely repetition of stories from Abraham's life. Evidently, the northern and southern Habiru tribes in Canaan had two versions of the same legend about their patriarch's stay in Gerar, in southwest Palestine. According to this legend, the local ruler, Abimelech, King of Gerar, took the wife of the patriarch into his harem. Fearing for his life, the patriarch passed her off as his sister. In the night, the Most High came to Abimelech in a dream and warned him that he and those close to him would die because the woman he had taken into his harem was married. Frightened to death, the ruler immediately returned the woman to the patriarch and asked him to beg for God's forgiveness. Subsequently, despite their disagreement about the wells, Abimelech and his commander Phicol concluded a sworn alliance with the patriarch in the region of Beersheba. The two versions of this legend are almost identical, but the first features Abraham and his wife Sarah, while the second features Isaac and his wife Rebekah. Incidentally, both versions of the legend provide indirect confirmation that the patriarchs were leaders of not a single family or clan but entire tribes who inculcated fear in the local ruler, forcing the latter to enter into an alliance with the newly arrived nomads. Nor does the likeness between Abraham and Isaac end here. Rebekah's protracted inability to bear children and her late childbearing are almost a copy of the legend about Sarah. Finally, the Lord's promise to return the land of Canaan to Isaac's descendants is reminiscent of what was promised to Abraham. In short, everything that the Bible tells us

about Isaac merely replicates legends about Abraham. It is difficult to rid oneself of the feeling that the significance of patriarch Isaac has been deliberately minimized and that he is mentioned only out of necessity, as an intermediary link between Abraham and Jacob.

What reasons did the compilers of the very earliest portions of the Pentateuch have for opting to mention Isaac without actually telling us anything about the man himself? After all, nowhere does Isaac figure as the originator of action, only as the object of acts by other people. Perhaps the more humble place given to Isaac in the lives of the patriarchs is a matter of the fact that his favorite son was Esau, the forefather of the Edomites, and not Jacob, the ancestor of the Hebrews. The Bible does not conceal the fact that Isaac openly preferred Esau – and not so much because Esau was his first-born, but because he found him emotionally more to his liking. Had considerable attention been paid to Isaac, this would inevitably have led to a strong focus on Esau's role among the sons and to Jacob being reprimanded for breaching his father's will. Jacob's flight to his relatives in Haran was due not just to his fear of Esau taking revenge, but also to his father's condemnation of his behavior. Had Isaac taken the side of his younger son by Rebekah, Esau would not have dared to threaten Jacob. But Isaac had no liking for Jacob and did not wish to defend him, so the editors of the Bible – descendants of Jacob – did everything they could to suppress Isaac's role in the genealogy of their forefathers. On the other hand, they gave Rebekah, who was zealous in defending the interests of her beloved son Jacob, incomparably more attention than her husband Isaac, although this was patently against the traditions of the time.

If all the nomadic Western Semites of southern Canaan, Sinai, and Midian considered Abraham to be their patriarch, only two of these groups, namely the Hebrews and the Edomites (Idumeans), traced their family tree through Isaac. Jacob is considered the ancestor of the former and Esau of the latter. It is at this stage in the Habiru's tribal hierarchy that the very earliest compilers of the Bible had to make substantial changes in the narrative that they had inherited. The first difficulty concerned Esau's birthright. The law of the time stipulated that the eldest son or the first son of the principal wife should receive almost all the father's property, in particular his land. The remaining sons had to

find themselves a new place.¹³ This is the origin of the battle between Jacob and Esau over their birthright. Although the brothers were twins born from the same mother, Esau was considered the eldest and, furthermore, was Isaac's favorite son. However, the idea that the Edomites had seniority over the Jews was completely unacceptable to the compilers of the Bible – and all the more so since they were working on the biblical text at the time when Edom was a vassal state and a tributary of the United Monarchy. The compilers therefore included in the biblical canon two legends whose purpose was to establish Jacob's birthright. The first of these was the legend that Esau had sold his birthright for lentil soup; the second was that Jacob obtained the blessing of his father, which was intended for Esau, by an act of deception. Neither legend offers a flattering picture of wily Jacob, although both were clearly trying to put the blame on his mother, Rebekah, and her eagerness to do well by him. If Isaac's seniority over Ishmael seems completely acceptable, given that his mother, Sarah, was the principal wife and a relative of Abraham's, then the birthright obtained by Jacob looks unconvincing. But such was the price of competing for the leadership; after all, the authors of the Bible themselves belonged to this branch.

Of all the tribes led by Abraham from the upper courses of the Euphrates River, it was the house of Jacob which received the best land, suitable not only for cattle breeding but also for arable farming. Jacob's fellow brothers from this large tribal union – the Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites, Ishmaelites, and Midianites – had to content themselves with land that was of significantly inferior quality. With a few exceptions, they settled on the extensive but semi-desert lands of southern and eastern Canaan, north-west Arabia, Sinai, and the regions bordering the Syrian Desert – a place where nomadic cattle-breeding was the only real possibility. The patriarch Abraham led these tribes into Canaan too late; all the more fertile and well-irrigated lands located in the northern and central parts of the country were already occupied either by local settled peoples or by other nomadic Western Semites – for example, the ancestors of the northern Hebrew tribes who had arrived earlier. It is true, though, that the houses of Jacob and Edom also had luck on their side: their founders derived from Isaac, the son of Abraham's principal wife, Sarah and, in accordance with the laws of the time, their father therefore had the

¹³ Andre Parrot, *Abraham and His Times*, 1968, p. 49.

right to the best part of the inheritance. But of the two twin sons born to Isaac, Esau (Edom) was considered the elder and therefore his tribal group was supposed to inherit the land that subsequently came to be called Judah. The rivalry between Jacob and Esau mirrored the real battle between the closely-related tribes of the southern Habiru for southern Palestine, a territory that was becoming increasingly cramped. Esau's line, later to be called the Edomites, won the first stage in this battle. They ousted some of the Hebrew tribes – most probably, the future Judeans – from their habitual places in southern Canaan. The episode recounting Jacob's escape to his mother's relatives in Haran may be indirect evidence of the temporary departure of several southern Habiru tribes for their old native-land in Haran. It is possible that these were the southern tribes of Judah, Reuben, Simeon, and Levi. But there, in north-western Mesopotamia, there occurred precisely that of which Abraham had been afraid when he had been unwilling to send his son Isaac back to his native Haran – namely a conflict of interests between returning and local Habiru tribes. The land belonging to those who had left for Canaan had already been long since occupied by their kinsmen. Although the latter took the fugitives in, they evidently placed them in a position of dependence. Jacob's fourteen-year service to his uncle Laban testifies to the difficult life of the Habiru upon their return. Inevitably, there were conflicts and disagreements and these were reflected in the dispute between Jacob and Laban. In the end, the southern tribes decided to leave for Canaan once again. This choice was informed by the news that the Habiru from northern and central Canaan had gone to the Nile Delta in Egypt; their land, which had formerly been inaccessible to the southern tribes, was now available for occupation. So Jacob led his tribes back into Canaan. The warm meeting with his brother Esau in the north of Palestine was by no means unexpected. The departure of the northern tribes for Egypt had made continued hostility over land absolutely pointless since there was now land in abundance. Moreover, the departure of a large number of nomadic Western Semites weakened Esau's position in Canaan and made the return of his kinsmen from north-western Mesopotamia extremely desirable. This explains why the chiefs of the two southern tribal groups now met amicably. Admittedly, in distinction to the canonical biblical text, the apocryphal Book of Jubilees asserts that peace between the two brothers

did not last for long and that after the death of their father, Isaac, their dispute over the inheritance led to a war between them. This war was won by the house of Jacob.¹⁴

The Bible tells us that Jacob decided not to hurry to the south but to delay for a considerable time in the central part of Canaan. He lived nomadically for a long period in the Shechem region and his sons pastured livestock in the Dothan Valley – something that had never occurred earlier in the time of Abraham and Isaac. This is incontrovertible confirmation of the fact that in central and northern Palestine pastureland which had previously been occupied when Jacob left for Haran had now become available for the nomads (the area nomadically farmed by the ‘family’ of Abraham-Isaac-Jacob did not, as a rule, extend beyond the borders of Judah’s tribe). Here we encounter yet further evidence that Jacob’s tribes were inferior in strength to the ancestors of the Edomites. Jacob was frightened by the fact that Esau had so many warriors (Genesis 32:6-7). Indeed, in order to field 400 warriors, Esau’s tribes must have contained at least 8000 to 9000 people, which once again makes a poor fit with the idea that Abraham-Isaac-Jacob was a ‘family’ of patriarchs. It should be noted, however, that after the numerous divisions of the Habiru and Sutu tribes during Abraham’s time and following the secession of the Edomites, Jacob’s tribes were small in size. This is confirmed by the slaughter in Shechem, when Jacob, indignant at the behavior of his sons Simon and Levi, reproaches them: “You have brought trouble on me by making me a stench to the Canaanites and Perizzites, the people living in this land. We are few in number, and if they join forces against me and attack me, I and my household will be destroyed” (Genesis 34:30).

Thus the patriarchs were, in fact, leaders of entire tribal unions and the biblical family was nothing less than a group of closely-related peoples. Abraham was not merely the head of his family, but the leader of a large group of tribes which divided up over time into separate and independent peoples. The biblical family’s move from Ur to Haran and from Haran to Canaan, as well as its temporary departure into Egypt, were, in fact, movements of the Western Semitic nomadic peoples. Behind the complex personal lives of Abraham, Lot, Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob, and Esau lies the history of their peoples –

¹⁴ *The Book of Jubilees or the Little Genesis*, trans. RH Charles and GH Box, Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2006.

peoples who variously entered into conflict with one another and united with one another against their common enemies. The separations from one another of Abraham and Lot, then of Isaac and Ishmael, and finally of Jacob and Esau were not the 'splitting up of relatives', but rather the separations of related tribes which had gradually become sufficiently large and numerous to function as separate and independent peoples. Nomadic cattle breeding, the principal occupation of these tribes, did not allow a large group of fellow tribesmen to come together on any one piece of territory, but instead forced them to constantly search for new land with sufficient pasture and sources of water for their cattle. This was the economic background to the biblical family's divisions. Abraham's departure to the south of Palestine was not a result of the high density of population in the central part of the country, but of the lack of available pasture. There, in southern Canaan, Jacob and Esau, his descendants through Isaac, found a new homeland for themselves and their tribes.