

Chapter 10 The Wandering Arameans: The Patriarchs of Israel

Near the year 2,000 B.C. migrations were taking place that were to change the population patterns of the Mideast. Elamites poured into Mesopotamia from the mountainous north, and Amorites drove up from the deserts to the south. The Hurrians, called in the Bible the Horites, moved into the same heartland from their ancestral home in the Caucasian mountains. The Hittites, from Asia Minor (present day Turkey), worked their way down the Mediterranean coast and made their influence felt in Canaan. Remnants of these groups joined forces and became known to the Egyptians as Hyksos; this war-like movement worked its way through Canaan, attacked Egypt, and took Egypt's throne for itself by about 1700 B.C.

Somewhere in the midst of these migrations were the persons later known as the patriarchs of Israel. A "patriarch" was the head of a family or clan, persons considered later to be the founders of a nation. Israel had three such men in their history. Abraham, the first, lived near the beginning of the movement, and the last Jacob, probably entered Egypt during the Hyksos invasion. The period of the patriarchs therefore covered roughly the three hundred years sketched above.

Abraham's travels, chronicled in more vivid detail than those of the others, give a representative portrayal of the migrations of those days. His ancestral home was Ur. His father moved westward along the fertile crescent to the city of Haran. When his father died, Abraham moved his family first to Syria, then to Egypt, after which they returned to Hebron in Canaan. Abraham had a problem: he had no son to carry on his name. It appeared that his sole heir would be a son born to a household slave but then - miracle of miracles - Isaac was born to Sarah in her old age, and God's promise to Abraham was fulfilled: he was to be the father of a great nation in whom all the nations of the world would be blessed. Isaac, the second patriarch, is a more shadowy figure than his father. **Much** of his story seems to be a retelling of that of Abraham, and its point is that from him came twin sons, Esau, the first-born, the founder of Edom, and Jacob, the younger, through whom the saga of Israel continues. Jacob continued the migratory patterns of his fathers by moving from Canaan to Haran and to the delta of the Nile. He wanted to establish his name and fortune, and he was not always high-minded about it. While still young, he cheated Esau out of his rights of inheritance. Fleeing to his relatives in Haran to escape his brother's rightful wrath, he gained a personal fortune through a combination of hard work and downright trickery. With his retinue in tow, he returned to Canaan where he was reconciled with the hearty Esau. When famine struck the land of promise, the family of Jacob went south to Egypt in search of food. They

were saved from their crisis by the rise of Joseph, the favorite son of Jacob, to a position of power in the realm, that of advisor to Pharaoh himself, and under Joseph's protection they were able to establish themselves in the land of Goshen, with lay between Egypt and Canaan. There they lived, first in peace and then in slavery until, at the time of Moses, a portion of their people emerged from Egypt and returned to their ancestral home of Canaan.

It is easy from the perspective of our day to picture these patriarchal clans as little better than landless, rootless, tent-dwelling nomads. That picture is wrong. Their culture had religion, law, accepted forms of writing, commerce that depended not only upon barter but upon extension of credit, and great buildings to house their governments and religion. People of the day had highly developed armies and innovative techniques of warfare, including the use of horse-drawn chariots; and to defend themselves from enemy had medicine, outdoor and indoor plumbing, quasi-scientific farming and husbandry, and effective methods of communication.

The city of Ur is an example of the civilization in which the patriarchs lived. This ancestral home of Abraham has been thoroughly excavated, and our knowledge of it gives insights into ancient urban life.

Ur was located on the delta where the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers flowed into the Persian Gulf. This gave the city access to water, to relatively fertile fields, and to trade routes by which its commerce could be carried out with its neighbors and with regions as distant as Egypt and India. Founded at least seventeen centuries before Abraham was born and inhabited continuously since then, it was a large city for its time. Within its enclosed area of four square miles thirty-four thousand people lived, and a quarter million more resided within walking distance of its walls. The city itself was haphazardly "laid out;" the Sumerians paid little attention to matters of overall city planning and design. Streets were narrow and followed no particular pattern; but individual buildings, however randomly placed, were marvelously designed. Even the individual homes were lavish. Most were two stories high, some even three. The typical home in Ur at the time of Abraham began with an anteroom which led into a central open courtyard, from which emanated the ground floor rooms, guest chambers, kitchen, servants' sleeping rooms and a balcony that circled above the entire central patio. An elaborate storage system often captured rainwater from the roof for the family's use. These cool, airy houses belonged not only to kings and priests but to tradesmen and shopkeepers. It is hard to imagine Abraham as ever having lived in one of these, but his home was Ur and such were the houses in his home city.

Not all dwellings were of this quality. Temple slaves and others of the oppressed classes lived in hovels that disgraced their cities as much as our urban ghettos disgrace ours.

At the center of the walled city was its main temple. In Ur, this was a ziggurat, a pyramid-shaped structure whose primary purpose was to raise the temple and its shrine as high as possible over the city itself. The ziggurat of Ur was over two hundred feet long and 150 feet wide and lifted to a height of more than seventy-five feet; along its walls was constructed a path that led to the sacred shrine at the top. Within the temple itself stood a statue of the god, and the main purpose of the organization of the temple was to care for the needs of the god. It was fed, clothed, catered to in every way, and men and women devoted their lives to its care.

The temple was the economic as well as the religious center of the life of the ancient Sumerian city. The temple owned much of the land around it; in Ur as much as twelve percent of the usable land was owned outright by the temple and its hierarchy; and its retainers farmed the fields, tended the stock, did its fishing, manufactured its goods, and kept its records. Grain and clothing were issued monthly to persons attached to the temple; we have access to the actual records of some of those transactions. The remainder of the land was owned by the king, nobility, palace officials, and leading priests; one can imagine the contests that went on among various persons and classes of people for control of this central commodity and center of power. Trade was both local and international, and it was built upon an astonishingly sophisticated financial system supported by capital loans, interest payments, and letters of credit. Governance in Ur was deeply concerned with justice; justice meant protecting the weak against the strong and providing a quick deliverance of the results of justice to the aggrieved. There was a king and he had widespread powers, but his power was balanced by codes of laws and assemblies of elders. People in Ur had an uncontrollable urge to write, and they wrote down everything: business transactions (often in triplicate!), actions of kings and assemblies, personal letters, manuals for medicine and for interpreting of the proper omens, chronicles of the monarchs, epic poetry. Ur had also developed music and enjoyed it so much that they buried the musical instruments in the graves of the nobility. Their instruments included timbrels, wind instruments, curved trumpets, drums, harp and lyre. Mathematics and astronomy played important roles in religion, politics, warfare, and commerce, and the practice of these sciences was highly developed.

Sumerian schools, known as "tablet houses," provided the education needed in this diverse culture. The schools received promising young scholars before they were ten years old, and students remained in the schools until early adulthood. Pupils lived at home but attended classes from sunrise to sunset. Income from the students' tuition payments

supported the teachers. The basic purpose of the schools was to teach the intricate skills necessary for writing the Sumerian language. Graduates of the schools were in demand throughout Sumerian society; they were needed in temples, at court, in the army, at the counting houses of business, and every person of any importance had his own personal secretary to handle his affairs.

It was this ancient and settled city that Abraham left as a boy; he was to carry memories of its traditions with him in his journeys and incorporated salient points into the way of life he sponsored in the new lands to which he went. Yet migrations are shattering experiences for those who participate in them, and the clan of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was setting forth from established homelands and well-proven institutions to enter lands they had never seen and dangers they could not foresee.

II

Straightforward as the presentation of the patriarchs appears to be in Scripture, thought-provoking questions can be raised about these persons and their situation. For instance, were the patriarchal origins of Israel as simple as they appear? Taken at face value, Isaac seems to be the son of Abraham and Jacob the son of Isaac. There are indications, however, that the various accounts of these persons or clans were merged at a later time and that originally each patriarch had his own history and his own clan. The people of Abraham, it seems, were located around the ancient shrine of Hebron and there the stories of Abraham, the ancestor, were remembered and retold. Isaac's shrine seems to have been around the area of Beersheba; Jacob seems to be associated with Bethel. As these shrines became Israelite centers of worship, it is likely that the ancestors associated with the shrines were related to each other in the people's minds, and the accounts as we have them now emerged from that association. It is difficult to tell for certain, but this reading of Scripture seems to stand up best under the tests of both history and archaeology.

If this is so - that the narratives developed independently but were brought together at a later time - this tells something important about the developing nation of Israel; in its origins the nation was not homogeneous but was constructed out of clans, tribes, and peoples who did not have common ancestors and common values but who instead brought different understandings of life to the one nation. It also shows that Israel was trying to deal with this problem of pluralism by uniting these disparate backgrounds into one stream of tradition: "Jacob is the son of Isaac, who is the son of Abraham, and hence we are not so different from one another as we may seem." This matter of accepting another's traditions as one's own is a creative way of dealing with the question of pluralism. Precisely this has occurred in the United States. Illinois and Colorado were not part of the original Thirteen Colonies who fought the Revolutionary War against England; but that war has become the

possession of citizens of those states as well as of the original states in that it set the form of government that all give allegiance to and determined the political future of the whole nation. If one's family name has a slavish or germanic ring to it, then men like Washington and Lincoln are not blood kinsmen; but nevertheless those men are the spiritual fathers of the nation whom all citizens of the United States accept as their own. In Israel, likewise, separate traditions were united into one national heritage in the conscious process of nation-building that was occurring.

A second major problem of interpretation has to do with the understanding of God in this cycle of patriarchal stories. The understanding given in the finished stories in the book of Genesis is sophisticated indeed. God called Abraham to be the founder of God's people and miraculously supplied him with an heir even when Sarah was beyond the age of childbearing. When the purity of the people was threatened because Isaac might choose a wife from the Canaanites, God sent a servant back to Haran and personally supervised the choice of a wife for Isaac. When Jacob was born as the second and not the first son of Isaac, God saw to it that the inheritance came to him and not to Esau. When famine came to land and people, God had already prepared for the contingency by sending Joseph ahead into Egypt - even though in slavery! - and by raising him to vice-regent of the land so that through him the people might be cared for and fed. Only in a highly developed theology is God said to have taken such initiatives as these.

There is evidence, however, that the understanding of God on the part of the patriarchs themselves may not have been so sophisticated. Curious names for God are imbedded in the chapters of Genesis. God is sometimes called "El Shaddai" or "El Elyon" or "El Olam" or "El Bethel." These are names of God used elsewhere in the Fertile Crescent. In their other usages, they are gods of particular places, particular shrines, particular clans. In other places in Genesis, God is called "The Shield of Abraham," "Tinsman of Isaac," "The Mighty One of Jacob." Are these three names the names of the original gods of the particular clan, or are they three names for the same God? Was Abraham's God more like the Canaanite "El Shaddai" than the Israelite "Yahweh?" Did Abraham center his activities around Hebron because this was the place of residence of his el, his god? The scholarly argument rages in all directions.

I personally am of the opinion that the gods of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were more closely related to other deities of Canaan and the Fertile Crescent than we may suspect. Even as I say that, however, I quickly add that the story as we have it brings with it deep insight: the God who revealed Godself to Moses in that blinding revelation on Sinai was indeed the one who called and guided Abraham and the others. By whatever name he was known to Abraham, God's action in the lives of the patriarchs fits God's character as known to later generations. He who delivered Israel from bondage to Egypt also called Israel into being under the patriarchs. God is "one" - this was the basic Israelite creed - and the "oneness" is moral in character: God who acts one way in one situation acts the same way in others. Israel's understanding of the God with whom they were in relationship was refined and made more precise over the years. As we look at the original el of Abraham and compare him with God who was

described when the account was written six or seven centuries later, we see this process of refinement at work.

Even this brief narration of the patriarchal movement points out that in dealing with this movement in the life of Israel we are not dealing with shadowy or musty history. This movement attempts to bring God into situations of upset and opportunity. It relates God to the urban culture of the day and describes the process of nation-building going on within Israel. It is a movement of God in history to which we need to address ourselves if we would be true to God in our own time.