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# Towards a New Reading of the Patriarchal Narratives

by
Debbie Shelton Stiel

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## Dedication

This thesis is lovingly dedicated to my parents, Mollie Rosenbaum Shelton and Philip Shelton, whose love continues to give me strength and whose commitment to Judaism inspired my own, and to my husband, Steven Kirke Stiel, whose love and friendship bless my life daily and whose patience and support have enabled this work to come to fruition.

# Table of Contents

## Acknowledgment

I would like to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to Dr. Alan Cooper for the immense time and effort he put into helping me with this thesis. Without his advice and insights this endeavor would not have been possible.

# Digest

In the last one hundred years, biblical scholarship has delved into the mysteries of the Bible. Since the Bible does not give much explicit information on its origins, its formation, or its purpose, scholars have largely had to arrive at their own explanations. They often start with dissimilar assumptions and end with quite different conclusions. This thesis examines two distinct scholarly approaches to the patriarchal narratives (Genesis 12-50) of the Bible. In particular, where the information is available, it will focus on how scholars of these two methods understand the religious practices of the patriarchs.

Chapter1 gives an overview of the historical-critical method. Most scholars of this school have assumed or posited that the Israelite world was fairly accurately represented in the biblical account. While almost every biblical historian doubts the historicity of certain parts of the narrative, the majority of the scholars in this school presume that the biblical author was, in general, attempting to be historical. This chapter will examine the work of William-Robertson Smith, Albrecht Alt, and Frank Moore Cross to see how they understood the patriarchal narratives.

In Chapter 2 the thesis presents the perspective of the later, literary-critical method. Scholars of this approach stress the importance of understanding the text on a literary level and of using inner-textual clues to arrive at opinions about the historical background of the text. The chapter begins by delineating some of

the problems raised by the new group of scholars with regard to the methods and assumptions of the historical-critical school. Then it turns to describing the literary-critical rationale and presenting the ideas of several literary-critical scholars: Philip R. Davies, Thomas L. Thompson, R.W.L. Moberly, and Robert Alter.

The last chapter includes a descriptive summary and analysis of the religious practices in the patriarchal narratives. Then selected practices are examined in detail in the light of both the historical-critical and literary-critical approaches. Finally, the author offers her own overall understanding of the material.

# Introduction

Close to three thousand years after most of it was written, the Bible remains the most widely read book in the world. And yet for the most part, the book tells us very little explicitly about its author(s), the circumstances under which it was written, even the time frame in which it was conceived and then committed to writing.

How one understands the Bible depends largely on the assumptions one brings to it. For many hundreds of years, the Bible was read as the revealed word of God. Jews believed that the Torah, in particular, was written by Moses alone at God's instruction. Thus every word in it, every expression, down to the last detail, was understood to be composed as God would have it. The rabbis felt that the Torah could provide an endless amount of instruction on how to live and how to get closer to God. They looked to the text for didactic purposes, and they approached it with the assumption that it preached the perspective of one divine author with one set of goals. The influences of their assumptions can be seen in the lessons they retrieved from the text.

The rabbinic way of examining the text satisfied the Bible's readers for many years. In the wake of the Enlightenment, however, a new field of biblical scholarship emerged which challenged all of the traditional assumptions. These scholars wanted to investigate the Bible's historicity, instead of treating it as a timeless sacred document. They asked questions about the composition and coherency of the document. They plumbed its depths for hints to its age and its sources.

As the field matured, a school emerged, developing methods that seemed to provide answers to many of the Bible's mysteries. The historical-critical school, as it is called, reigned for about a century until another group of scholars, often preferring a literary-critical approach, began to question some of the assumptions and conclusions of the earlier scholars.

This thesis will examine these two different scholarly approaches to the Bible, with particular reference to the patriarchal narratives. I will critically look at the approaches, assumptions, and conclusions of the historical-critical scholars. Then I will discuss some of the more recent alternatives to the historical-critical approach.

In the last part of the thesis, I will take up one particular issue, namely the religious practices described in the patriarchal narratives. First I will summarize and briefly analyze these practices. Then I will focus on one particular problem, contrasting the respective historical-critical and literary-critical approaches to its solution. This specific discussion, finally, will lead to some general conclusions about the nature of the patriarchal narratives.

# Chapter 1

## THE HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHOD

Modern biblical scholars have inherited not only the results of the scholars who preceded them but also their methodology. For most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, biblical historians shared a basic understanding about the questions a historian should bring to the Bible and about what historical information it might contain. Their approach, known as the historical-critical approach, combed the Bible to discern what history could be recovered from it. Historians of this school hoped to be able to distinguish what they saw as the various layers of historical data that were in the Bible. They tended to believe that with the right key they could decode the text or disentangle the strands, and eventually learn a great deal about the biblical period. Although these scholars did not take the Bible literally, they did presume that the Bible authors or editors were concerned with reporting events in what they viewed as accurate accounts. As Alan Cooper writes, "most historians of Israel assume a mimetic relationship between the Bible's narrative flow and an actual sequence of historical events."[1] Thus biblical scholars have largely spent their energy in efforts to discern to what extent ancient history could be retrieved from the Bible's pages.

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[1]Alan Cooper and Bernard R. Goldstein, "Exodus and Maṣṣôt in History and Tradition," *Maarav*, vol. 8, 1992, pp.23-24.

The assumption that the editor of a biblical account wants to portray history in a largely accurate fashion is just one of the premises that the historical critics based their findings on. Another popular theory was that by studying the development of various religions one could ascertain key patterns in the evolutionary process of all religions. Historical-critical scholars who held this viewpoint, often referred to as the "history-of-religions school," sought to separate out the early strands of the Bible from the later with the help of their discoveries about other so-called "primitive religions".

Each school, whether it be the historical-critical or any other school of biblical thought, will have to base its views on certain assumptions. These different suppositions will inevitably bring the scholars of the various schools to varying conclusions. Sometimes the scholars are well aware of the hypotheses they use as they try to reach into the Bible's past. Other times they appear oblivious to the fact that they are making suppositions. This portion of my thesis will look at some of the conclusions that scholars of the historical-critical school have drawn as they examined the patriarchal narratives (Genesis 12- 50) and the underlying assumptions, implicit and explicit, that led them to these theories.

The Historical-Critical Approach and the Patriarchal Narratives

Biblical historians have generally presumed that the Bible's stories, particularly those in Genesis through Deuteronomy, incorporated strands of ancient history that had been orally preserved for centuries. As time went on those ancient traditions were combined with bits of more recent information, and finally the

composite stories were written down in more or less their present form. The patriarchal narratives of Genesis (Gn. 12-50) are a case in point.

Julius Wellhausen, the most influential Bible scholar of the nineteenth century, believed that the religious practices of Abraham represented the most primitive stage in the evolution of Israelite religion. And yet, these earliest remnants were, in his opinion, of such ancient origin as to be unrecoverable. The underlying traditions could not be retrieved from the text in its final form.[2]

In general, historians of religion have concurred with Wellhausen's reading of the patriarchal sagas as highly redacted, but nonetheless authentic, vestiges of the foundation of Israelite religion. Unlike Wellhausen, some of these scholars have not let the conviction that the sagas have been altered by time deter them from delving into this potential source of information about the first Israelites.

Three scholars who have tried to gain access to historical information from the patriarchal stories are William Robertson Smith, Albrecht Alt, and Frank Moore Cross. I will be looking at their views of the Genesis stories as representative of what historians have believed these narratives to be, what they have postulated they could learn from them, and what assumptions led them to these conclusions.

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[2]A.R. Millard, "Abraham," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1992) p.36.

William Robertson Smith

The founder and most important early representative of the history-of-religions approach to ancient near eastern religion was William Robertson Smith. Robertson Smith's view that religions evolve and that the rituals and writings of a developed religion provide clues to its prior stages became fundamental assumptions of later scholars of the historical-critical school.

Robertson Smith based his work on the premise that religions tend to evolve along certain consistent lines of practice and ritual. He held that the primitive mind is only capable of a particular level of abstraction and therefore thinks in a predictable way.[3] Thus one could expect to find numerous common features among all primitive forms of religion.[4] It followed that whatever one learned about one ancient religion might prove instructive about the development and practices of another. In an effort to discover the common stages of the evolution of primitive religions, Robertson Smith studied both ancient texts and what he considered to be primitive peoples.

Robertson Smith's most noted work was his *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, originally published in 1889.[5] He writes that his goal in the lectures is "not the history of the several religions that have a Semitic origin, but Semitic religion as a whole in its common features and general type."[6] Unlike other works that we

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[3]William Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (originally published in 1889, repr. New York: Ktav, 1969), pp.82-83.
[4]James Muilenberg, "Prolegomenon," to the Ktav reprint of Robertson Smith's *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, p.13.
[5]William Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (originally published in 1889, repr. New York: Ktav, 1969).
[6]Ibid., p.1.

will examine, here the ostensible purpose for using the Bible is not to understand the Bible itself, but rather to appropriate it as one witness to Semitic religion. In using the Bible in this way, the author does not seem to recognize any vital difference between the ancient writings discovered in archaeological digs and the Bible's laws and narratives. Stories and legal documents are all taken to be sources from which one can extract information about the history of religion.[7]

Robertson Smith only occasionally mentions the patriarchal narratives explicitly. These references are the most useful for the purposes of this thesis. The author clearly thinks that the narratives contain within them identifiable remnants of an earlier stage of religious development - a pre-Israelite, heathen religion. For example, he writes,

> . . . the original significance of the patriarchal symbols cannot be concluded from the sense put on them by writers who lived many centuries after those ancient sanctuaries were first founded; and at the time when the oldest of the pentateuchal narratives were written, the Canaanites and the great mass of the Hebrews certainly treated the *masseba* as a sort of idol or embodiment of the divine presence. Moreover Jacob's pillar is more than a mere landmark, for it is anointed, just as idols were in antiquity, and the pillar itself, not the spot on which it stood, is called "the house of God," (Gen. 28:22) as if the deity were conceived actually to dwell in the stone, or manifest himself therein to his worshippers. And this is the conception which appears to have been associated with sacred stones everywhere.[8]

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[7]For an example see Robertson Smith, pp.187-188.
[8]Robertson Smith, pp.204-205.

Here we see that Robertson Smith believes that not only do certain parts of the patriarchal narratives retain information from centuries before their final redaction, but he also holds that one can sometimes recognize and separate out the earlier strands which somehow eluded the sanitization attempts of later editors. Thus, in the account above, Robertson Smith reasons that the narrative about Jacob is an old story which has encapsulated within it the primitive practice of worshipping pillars as actual dwelling places of gods.

We will see that this assumption, that one can separate out the early strata of the text, will be accepted and welcomed wholeheartedly by later historians of religion. It will not be until much later that scholars will begin to doubt the validity of this hypothesis.

Not only does Robertson Smith think he can separate out the true early layers of the narratives, but having done so, he feels sure enough about his deductions to use them as evidence for early Semitic religion in general. As mentioned above, Robertson Smith looks to the Bible for an example of Semitic religion. Thus, most of the time the author seems to assert or assume that practices in the patriarchal narratives which he identifies as early/primitive ones can be used as examples of what all early Semites practiced. In his description of the holy places of the early Semites, Robertson Smith explains that,

> The ordinary practices of religion are not dependent on extraordinary manifestations of the divine presence; they proceed on the assumption that there are fixed places where the deity has appeared in the past and may be expected to

> appear again. When Jacob has his dream of a divine apparition at Bethel, he concludes not merely that Jehovah is present there at the moment, but that the place is "the house of God, the gate of heaven" . . . . We are entitled to use these facts as illustrative of Semitic religion in general, and not of the distinctive features of the spiritual religion of the Old Testament; for the worship of Bethel, Shechem, Beersheba, and the other patriarchal holy places, was mingled with Canaanite elements and is regarded as idolatrous by the prophets.[9]

Here again we see that Robertson Smith views the Jacob story as containing old and authentic information. That is, he holds that this account teaches us that Jacob or early Israelites worshipped at various sanctuaries in a way that was at least similar to the way the Bible describes it here. Moreover, he thinks that this information can serve as an example of normative Semitic belief. Yet his only evidence that Israelites or pre-Israelites ever worshipped this way comes from the text itself. When he wants proof that such acts really are idolatrous and primitive he turns to the prophets, thus essentially adopting the developmental view propounded by the Bible itself.

In addition to questioning whether the biblical text can really serve as "proof" that the pre-Israelites practiced in this way, we may also have concerns about Robertson Smith's hypothesis that most early religions developed along similar lines of thought and practice. This assumption allows Robertson Smith to use data from one religion as evidence of the beliefs that another religious group would most likely have had. If this hypothesis is false, or even just unreliable, then many of Robertson Smith's comparisons fail. Given that modern religions are highly diverse, I am not convinced that

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[9]Ibid., p.116.

earlier ones would have been less so. This makes dubious the author's claim that "we are entitled to use these facts [i.e. those gleaned from the Bible] as illustrative of Semitic religion in general, and not of the distinctive features of the spiritual religion of the Old Testament."[10]

Lastly, after reading Robertson Smith, I cannot help but wonder how much the Bible influences his conclusions. Robertson Smith does not state directly the reason for his interest in ancient Semitic religion, but he does tells us that we should be interested in it because, "the matter is not one of mere antiquarian curiosity, but has a direct and important bearing on the great problem of the origins of the spiritual religion of the Bible."[11] From a history-of-religions perspective, to understand any modern religion fully, one must first have an intellectual grasp of not only the revelations which sparked it, but also the antecedent forms of its beliefs and practices. Thus to really appreciate Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Robertson Smith refers to these as the "positive religions"), it is crucial to learn about their primitive origins. As Robertson Smith explains:

> Behind these positive religions lies the old unconscious religious tradition, . . . [which] formed part of the inheritance from the past into which successive generations of the Semitic race grew up as it were instinctively, taking it as a matter of course that they should believe and act as their fathers had done before them. The positive Semitic religions had to establish themselves on ground already occupied by these older beliefs and usages; they had to displace what they could

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[10]Ibid., pp.116.
[11]Ibid., p.2.

> not assimilate, and whether they rejected or absorbed the elements of the older religion, they had at every point to reckon with them and take up a definite attitude towards them. . . .Thus to comprehend a system of positive religion thoroughly, to understand it in its historical origin and form as well as in its abstract principles, we must know the traditional religion that preceded it. [12]

Since our interest in the subject is deemed to stem from our desire to know more about the Bible, it seems logical to surmise that Robertson Smith's own interest in the subject may come from the same source. If so, to what extent does a desire to explain the complexities of the Bible play in this study? Would his understanding of the various elements of the early religions be the same if he had not read the Bible first, or does the Bible's perspective perhaps color his own? The author does not refer to the Bible especially frequently in this volume, and yet his view of the primitive religions that preceded the Israelite religion accords amazingly well with the Bible's own portrayal of them.

One example of such similarity is the understanding each has of the major differences between monotheistic religions and pagan (practically synonymous here with primitive) religions. Robertson Smith believed, in a way that seems almost naive today, that pagans were incapable of having a sophisticated religion. In fact, he writes that:

> Judaism, Christianity and Islam are positive religions, that is, they did not grow up like the systems of ancient heathenism, under the action of unconscious forces operating silently from

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[12]Ibid., pp.1-2.

> age to age, but trace their origin to the teaching of great religious innovators, who spoke as the organs of a divine revelation, and deliberately departed from the traditions of the past.[13]

In this passage Robertson Smith shows his belief that later religions are more advanced than earlier ones. This happens to be in line with the Bible's perspective. Perhaps Robertson Smith simply accepts the Bible's portrayal of "heathens" as unenlightened and callow. While such a perspective may be compatible with the Bible's own polemical purposes, it has not been established on its own merit. As a result, it fosters a simplistic understanding of both the religions that existed prior to monotheism as well as any currently existing polytheistic religions. Although Robertson Smith must have known that there were (and are) many highly developed polytheistic societies, he nevertheless disparages them in favor of supposedly more sophisticated monotheisms.

Robertson Smith sets the stage for such later historians of religion as Alt and Albright. His assumptions that religions evolve recognizably and predictably and that the Bible could be combed for elements of early religion were the basis for their own research. He lent validity to the idea that one could find in the patriarchal narratives evidence of a time much earlier than that of the editor of the narratives. Unlike Robertson Smith, who was mostly concerned with common features of primitive Semitic religion, the later historians of religion whom we will examine were primarily interested in what could be learned about the peculiar characteristics of pre/proto-Israelite religion.

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[13]Ibid., p.1.

Albrecht Alt

G. W. Anderson, in his biographical note on Alt in the English translation of Alt's *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion*,[14] says, "the work of Albrecht Alt must be reckoned among the most far-reaching and fruitful influences in European Old Testament scholarship in the twentieth century."[15] Indeed, Alt's work is referred to by most of the other historical scholars I examined. His perspective is important both in its own right and because it has often served as a stepping stone for the opinions of other historians.

Alt differs most significantly from Robertson Smith and Wellhausen in the extent to which he believes that information about the earliest part of Israelite development may still be recoverable. All three scholars, and most historians of religion, would probably agree with Alt's statement that the patriarchal narratives include remnants of "all that the Israelites were conscious of as memories preserved from the time of their earliest ancestors."[16] They felt that the Israelites carried certain historical information with them in oral sagas for generations or centuries until it was finally written down. The question is, is this information retrievable today given later editors' reworking of the material? Alt was one of the first to suspect that the answer is 'yes.' Previous scholars, in his opinion, had erred by presuming the answer to be 'no,' with the result that they paid insufficient attention to the forms

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[14]Albrecht Alt, *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion*, trans. R. H. Wilson (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1967).
[15]G.W. Anderson, in the Alt volume cited in the previous note, p.v.
[16]Ibid., p.5.

of tradition which include evidence for this ancient religion.[17] Even Robertson Smith, who occasionally used the patriarchal narratives as proof of the primitive mindset, probably would not presume, as did Alt, that one could reconstruct early Israelite religion from its remains in Genesis.

Alt's major work on the Genesis narratives is an essay entitled "The God of the Fathers." Here he sets out to show methodically what, in his opinion, can be learned about pre-Israelite religion(s) from these stories. Alt begins with the belief that:

> Historically, the people of Israel came into existence because their tribes united in the worship of the god Yahweh. The tribes, or at least particular groups of them, may very well have considered themselves to be related even earlier than this, but not until they were so united were they all conscious of being one people. This awareness provided the indispensable spiritual foundation for their history as a nation.[18]

Given this view, that it was the belief in Yahweh which caused the tribes to unite, Alt's goal for this essay becomes to determine, "was there anything in the existing religious inheritance of the tribes that paved the way for what was to come so that what happened did not appear as a radical break with the past, destroying what already existed, but, in part at least, continued and developed it?" [19]

Several points are worth noting here. Alt seems to hold that there must have been one major strand of pre-Israelite development. Something caused the people to unite into one Israel, not many different groups coming to Yahwism at different times or

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[17]Ibid., p.13.
[18]Ibid., p.3.
[19]Ibid., p.5.

many different events leading the group to the religion, but one group and one process or event which led to a time in which Israel, as such, came into existence. Therefore, Alt begins his search by looking not for "histories" but only "the history." Similarly, he presumes that after this event there existed in reality one unified group known as the Israelite people. Alt assumes that the people we refer to in the Bible as the Israelites ( a very distinct group) correspond almost exactly to a people who existed at a certain time and space in ancient Canaan. Philip R. Davies challenges this assumption and makes it evident how unlikely it is that the literary Israelites and the historical people had as much in common as Alt suggests here.[20] And while Alt clearly believes that the Bible cannot always be taken as accurate, he does tend to presume that the Bible is accurate on many points which are unsubstantiated outside of the Bible - such as, in the quote above, the existence of the tribes.

On the other hand, Alt's sophistication in his understanding of both the history of Israel and of the editor's reworking of the stories should not be underestimated. He admits that "the process by which the Israelite tribes were united in the worship of Yahweh was undoubtedly very complicated, and from the very nature of these sagas we cannot expect them to provide a complete picture."[21] He does not expect the sagas to be exact rewritings of actual events. In fact, he says,

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[20]Philip R. Davies, *In Search of 'Ancient Israel'* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992) p.12. Also see pp.37-38 of this thesis.
[21]Alt, p.4.

> they isolate incidents that can only be properly evaluated in the context of the events leading up to and following them, and they weave together what in reality ought to remain separate. They collect around the figure of one hero what came about by the combined efforts of many. [22]

Still, he assumes that the original saga was actually simple, with tensions within it developing later.[23] And he apparently feels that the sagas contain enough kernels of historical fact to provide collectible data that can be sorted and sifted to produce a theory about the pre-Israelite religion.

Alt looks for these early kernels in the patriarchal sagas. As he explains,

> . . . the sagas of Moses and Joshua yield very little information; they attribute everything to the establishment of the bond with Yahweh as the God of Israel. But is it not possible that reminiscences of the earlier stages in the religion of the tribes were preserved in the sagas of the Book of Genesis, from Abraham to the sons of Jacob, which are far less dominated by Yahwist tendencies?[24]

With this hypothesis in hand, Alt begins to delve into the Genesis sagas. He is particularly interested in the many different names for deity that exist in Genesis 12-50, and how these names are linked together. He sees these names as the key to the earliest stratum of identifiable pre-Israelite religion.

Alt examines the many references to *'elim* and concludes that these are traces of early deities worshipped by pre-Israelites and others. He says "there is no difficulty in supposing that the Israelite tribes took part . . . in the worship of the gods whose titles appear

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[22]Ibid., p.4.
[23]Ibid., p.15.
[24]Ibid., p.5.

here and there in the sagas of the patriarchs in Genesis, and which we may take with Gressmann and others to be originally quite distinct numina, even though in the more recent forms of the tradition, which are all we possess, they are throughout identified with Yahweh as the God of Israel."[25] He concludes that these deities are not part of a belief system that led to the worship of Yahweh, but rather they represent "a loose association with the religious practice of other peoples and not the characteristic religion of the forefathers of Israel."[26]

Alt differentiates between the *'elim* worship and the worship of the God of the Fathers:

> It does not need to be shown that the tradition of the God of the Fathers has been developed and elaborated in a completely different way from that, for example, of the 'Elim of the Palestine sanctuaries. The latter always appear on the scene for a brief moment only, and never seem to have any permanent effect on the group of stories they occur in. On the other hand, the God of the Fathers is mentioned again and again both in the Yahwist and Elohist works, and not only occurs more often, but has a much greater influence on the content of the works as a whole than all the 'Elim put together: speeches of revelation, prayers, blessings, oaths, confessions of faith, sacrifices, in short virtually every form of religious activity that could occur in historical writings is found somewhere or other applied to the *theos patroos* [god of one's father].[27]

Here we see the blinders of the historical-critical point-of-view. Because the biblical editor concentrates on the God of the Fathers, Alt infers that the God of the Fathers was actually more important to the

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[25]Ibid., p.10.
[26]Ibid., p.12.
[27]Ibid., p.26.

historical people. He assumes that the final form of the narratives indicates the actual degree of affinity that the "Israelites" would have towards the *'elim* and the God of the Fathers. Alt, consciously or unconsciously, rejects the idea that the editor could have altered the accounts to have made one form of worship appear more popular than it was. If the *'elim* are only mentioned in passing, this must mean that they were only worshipped 'in passing,' so to speak. Alt further infers that the editor, while dutifully including the *'elim* passages, is not actually interested in them. This leads him to conclude that:

> when an *El* occurs, it is practically always in the context of an individual saga, with clear traces of its origin in the pre-literary tradition, and the *'Elim* can therefore be assigned automatically to the original matter of the sagas. On the other hand, in many cases where the God of the fathers is mentioned, . . . this was due to the literary editor of the traditional material composing the account himself.[28]

Alt believes that the God of the Fathers was crucial to the development of the Israelites, not the *'elim* . Therefore, he focuses on this figure, and its development. He sees the patriarchal sagas as developing in two distinct stages: the first in the wilderness before the entry and the second in Palestine itself.[29]

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob become important in the tradition of the Israelite sagas principally because of their receiving a revelation from a god and founding his cult.[30] The very names of these numina, the God of Abraham, etc., emphasize the fact that their

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[28]Ibid., pp.26-27.
[29]Ibid., pp.63-64.
[30]Ibid., p.61.

characteristic feature was the association they entered into, by their own free choice, with certain men, and which they maintained with groups descended from or owing allegiance to these men.[31]

Originally these would have been three distinct cults with their own followers. From references made in Genesis, Alt believes these three cults were originally those of the God of Abraham, the Fear of Isaac, and the Mighty One of Jacob.[32] He also holds that it is crucial that each of these cults, unlike those of the *'elim*, were more attached to a people than to a place. This characteristic allowed for mobility, both inside and outside of the land, and a more evolving identity.[33]

After the entrance into the land of Palestine, the traditions of the cults began to change and attain the form in which the Yahwist and the Elohist preserve them for us, according to Alt:[34]

> For it was then that these cults became attached to sanctuaries in Palestine. . . .In this completely different setting, the new life taken on by the figures of the patriarchs made its own demands on them - everything that was no longer of use died out. From the period before the entry, only the cults of the gods themselves remained, and with them the names of the founders of the cult. . . . It is easy to understand, therefore, why when the literary editors afterwards sought to fit the memories that were still alive of the God of Abraham, etc., to a new purpose within the framework of the patriarchal sagas, they found very few individual stories available among the existing material. In most cases they had to compose their own, as for example the Yahwist did in the case of the theophanies before Isaac and Jacob [35]

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[31]Ibid., p.82.
[32]Ibid., p.60.
[33]Ibid., p.29.
[34]Ibid., p.63.
[35]Ibid., p.64.

Alt's explanation continues as follows:

> In the tradition, the taking over of the sanctuaries of Palestine was expressed by bringing the ancestors of Israel into the *hieroi logoi* [sacred words] of each place and representing them as receiving revelations from the numina who had always been worshipped there, and as the founders of their cult. It is this type of cultic saga which is predominant in the patriarchal history of Genesis. The Yahwist was not able to alter this, the Elohist still less. But when these writers wished to reintroduce the tradition of the God of Abraham, etc., into the cult sagas, the result is that the two different kinds of god and divine title are simply placed side by side without being in any way related.[36]

Alt here shows a predilection for believing that the editors were limited in what they could do to emphasize what they saw as important in the religion of Israel. In his view, the editors had to abide largely by what history had handed down to them. Their hands were tied; they could not alter the tradition. Yet the editors could emphasize one element over another. This is just one example of how Alt's description of the powers of the editors seems to me to be internally inconsistent. At times, as Alt suggests in the quote above, the editors' powers are clearly limited, but at other times the editors are free to emphasize one form of worship over another or even to bind the three patriarchal cults into one cult of the God of the Fathers.

Alt continues his analysis by looking in the narratives for evidence of which cult became associated with which sanctuary. Thus, for example, since cultic and secular elements of Isaac's saga are restricted to Beersheba and its immediate neighborhood, this

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[36]Ibid., p.65.

suggests that there was only a single sanctuary that maintained the cult of the "Fear of Isaac."[37] Abraham, on the other hand, is linked to a sanctuary at the tree of Mamre. This suggests that this cult was localized there and probably worshipped by the nearby tribe of Judah.[38] While Abraham, unlike Isaac, is not limited to one small geographic area in the tradition, Alt does not see this as bringing into question the priority of Mamre for Abraham's cult. It simply suggests that later Abraham was also associated with other sanctuaries. "Thus," according to Alt, "the figures of the three patriarchs, and the cults connected with them stood on the whole side by side with each other in separate sites and districts."[39] The gods were originally numina which had nothing to do with each other, even though each represented for its worshippers the same type of deity.[40]

With time, according to Alt, the figures of the patriarchs were brought into contact with one another. Slowly, the three cults were combined into one:

> The attraction of a few great sanctuaries for groups living a considerable distance away gave rise to overlapping between the worshippers at several sanctuaries, and thus permitted the equation, or at least the interchange, of the peculiar religious features of each. . . . The incorporation of these figures into a single genealogy was simply the consummation of the whole process.[41]

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[37]Ibid., p.67.
[38]Ibid., pp.68 - 69.
[39]Ibid., p.70.
[40]Ibid., p.70.
[41]Ibid., pp.71-72.

The Yahwist and the Elohist are particularly interested, in Alt's opinion, in emphasizing the joining of these three cults into one: the God of the Fathers. Alt says, "it was obviously they [editors] who took the step of emphasizing the connection between each of Israel's ancestors, apart from their family tree, by tracing their religion in an unbroken line from Abraham, through Isaac to Jacob and his sons."[42]

The cult of Abraham is attached to Isaac's cult not only by Isaac becoming Abraham's son, but also by Abraham's God becoming Isaac's God and protector. Thus, in a theophany to Isaac, God says 'I am the God of your father Abraham' (Gn. 26:24). Alt notes, "it is for Abraham's sake that Isaac is to be blessed. This very bare account concludes with the erection of an altar by Isaac - to the God of Abraham."[43] In Alt's view, this story is used to connect Abraham and Isaac, and is therefore not part of an older, independent saga. In all likelihood it was created by the Yahwist himself.[44]

Alt sees the hand of the Yahwist in the theophany to Jacob as well. Here once again, the purpose of the patriarchal story is to bind one patriarch, its cult and its deity to another patriarch, cult and deity:

> The Yahwist introduces the God of Isaac with like solemnity, in the revelation made to Jacob at Bethel as he fled from Esau. . . . In the overall plan of the Yahwist history of the patriarchs this scene obviously has the same function as the appearance to Isaac discussed above: it links Jacob with Isaac as the appearance to Isaac links him with Abraham.[45]

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[42]Ibid., p.27.
[43]Ibid., p.20.
[44]Ibid., pp.20-21.
[45]Ibid., p.21.

Alt goes on to say:

> The rest of the saga of Jacob contains only one further mention of the God of the Fathers, at the beginning of a prayer which the Yahwist puts into the mouth of Jacob before his meeting with Esau: 'O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, Yahweh. . .' This is clearly reminiscent of the Yahwist theophany at Bethel. . . Our verdict [is] . . . the whole prayer obviously has no older tradition behind it.[46]

Thus Alt believes he can separate authentic ancient sagas from the newer creations of the editors partially on the basis of which stories seem to connect one patriarch to another. Each of these narratives is deemed to be a later editorial addition.

Alt sees the editor largely as a preserver of traditions, although he does leave open the possibility that the editor also created some of the sagas. The editor's role is mainly to choose which bits of tradition to emphasize. In fact, he says:

> It is not very likely that he (the editor) invented so freely. For it is not usual for Israelite historians (editors) to develop their theories without any reference to factors supplied by tradition; their procedure is normally to isolate from the traditional material current at the time the single features that seem particularly important to them, at the expense of others and to make these chosen elements express their own views.[47]

And Alt believes the editor wanted to stress the relationship between Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their god(s).

We have seen how, in Alt's view, three distinct cults became one cult devoted to the God of the Fathers. The question now has to be asked how the existence of the religion of the God of the Fathers is

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[46]Ibid., p.24.
[47]Ibid., p.17.

connected to the worship of Yahweh. Alt claims that while the religion of Yahweh always displayed an exclusive tendency, in the earliest period this related only to the people as a whole and not to individual tribes. Therefore, the tribes, in their narrow sphere, could worship other gods.[48] "The religion of Yahweh. . . . was carried out by the nation as it came to act more and more as one, and not by tribes and lesser groups."[49] Alt explains that:

> To date the beginning of the worship of Yahweh by the Israelites in the period immediately before the entry, as is required by the Moses saga, as well as other sources, is not to contradict the view that the cult of the gods of the Fathers, still developing independently of the national religion of Yahweh, established itself in certain localities in Palestine and was therefore drawn into association with the existing cults.[50]

Eventually Yahweh worship spread and even imposed itself as the newest stratum upon the previous forms of worship. The national cult encroached upon the local sanctuaries of the Israelite tribes. All of this happened before the patriarchal sagas took the form they did in the works of the Elohist and Yahwist.[51] For an example of a saga in which one can see the various stages of development, Alt uses the saga of Mamre in the Yahwist version (Genesis18). In Alt's opinion, the story of the three divine beings who revealed themselves in the sacred grove is from the pre-Israelite stage. The man who receives their first revelation is Abraham. This represents the first Israelite stage, based on the introduction of the God of Abraham. And finally,

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[48]Ibid., pp.74-75.
[49]Ibid., p.76.
[50]Ibid., p.76.
[51]Ibid., pp.77-78.

out of the trinity Yahweh emerges as the one and only God - the second Israelite stage.[52]

At the beginning of Alt's essay, he asks whether or not there was anything in the religious inheritance of the Israelite tribes, before they adopted the worship of Yahweh, which made the people as a whole - and not just a few prominent leaders - ready to unite in a single nation in covenant with Yahweh. Alt believes the answer to this question lies in the similarity that exists, in spite of the difference in their relative importance, between the character of the gods of the Fathers and that of the God of Israel. His contention is that in the God of Abraham and the other gods of the same type the tribes possessed, even in the period when they lived independently of each other, a religion which had one essential mark of the later religion of Yahweh. For it stressed above all the relationship between God and man, and between God and whole groups of men, without any fixed association with one place. In Alt's view, "this provides a satisfactory answer to the problem of how it was psychologically possible for the tribes to unite in the worship of Yahweh."[53]

While Alt tries to show evidence for his suppositions, as one would expect a critical scholar to do, he also writes of the "advantages" of such a belief. He says:

> So Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob must be understood as those who received revelations from, and founded the cult of, each particular numen; and this brings us at once to the origin of the tradition concerning them. The great advantage of such a view seems to me to be that it places the figures of the patriarchs

[52]Ibid., p.77.
[53]Ibid., pp.79-80.

> from the very first in an organic relationship to the whole religious and cultic practice of the Israelite tribes, and allows it a proper part both in the constant and in the developing features of their religious history.[54]

Talk of such "advantages" sounds out of place coming from the mouth of a historian. If this text were any other than the Bible, would a scholar care whether his hypothesis was more or less in line with what the text's editor/writer wanted us to believe? The very idea that there could be advantages other than a greater understanding of the text and its history, suggests that Alt has interests other than purely scholarly ones that may influence how he explains that history. We may wonder if these interests could cloud his view.

Alt differs significantly from the historians who preceded him in his assertions that the Israelite pre-Yahwistic history may be recoverable and in his belief that the patriarchs may have actually existed as cult founders. Alt bases his theories largely on the supposition that the foundational experiences are the most likely to be based on historical fact. After Alt, many historians argued over particulars of his theory while accepting his basic suppositions.

Frank Moore Cross

Frank Moore Cross' *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*[55] was published in 1973, long after Alt's essay "The God of the Fathers," but Cross' approach to the Bible does not differ significantly from Alt's. In the time between the writings of Alt and Cross, some changes in the historical-critical scholars' understanding of the Bible had taken

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[54]Ibid., p.60.

[55]Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1973).

place, but they were mostly matters of detail (largely discerned from newly recovered Ugaritic material, which Alt did not have at his disposal) rather than fundamental changes in approach. In fact, Cross looks to Alt's work as a foundation for his own. He writes:

> The modern discussion of Patriarchal religion may be said to begin with the brilliant essay of Albrecht Alt, *Der Gott der Väter,* published first in 1929. Alt proposed to use new means to penetrate into the prehistory of Israel's traditions of the old time. He repudiated the methods of such earlier scholars as Robertson Smith and Julius Wellhausen, who attempted to reconstruct the pre-Yahwistic stage of the tribal forebears of Israel by sifting Israel's early but fully Yahwistic sources for primitive features, primitive in terms of an a priori typology of religious ideas derived largely from nineteenth-century idealism. Such procedures, Alt recognized, yielded merely the superstitious dregs of Israelite religion at any of its stages.[56]

Thus Cross holds that Alt has shown that one can move beyond the fully Yahwistic sources of the Bible and at least make strides toward uncovering an even older layer, a pre-Yahwistic stage, in the Bible narratives.

Cross seems to be in general agreement with Alt's interpretation of how the narratives were composed and how the Israelites came to be. He summarizes these views as follows:

> Even the earliest epic traditions of Israel did not reflect directly the religious milieu of the time of their origin. Rather, by oral transmission over gulfs of time, more or less uncontrolled by written sources, they were shaped even before precipitation into literary form by the events which created the

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[56]Ibid., p.3.

> union of the tribes and the Yahwistic cult which was the primary ground of their unity.[57]

In terms of the narratives, Cross, like Alt, sees the stories as stemming from early traditions that were passed down orally for many years. These traditions then became crucial elements of the Pentateuchal narratives, after they had been altered by both oral telling and the hands of the Yahwist editor.

Cross differs most significantly from Alt in his interpretation of the *'elim* in the narrative stories. He writes:

> One group of epithets in the Patriarchal legends is characterized by the element *'el.* Following Gunkel and especially Gressmann, Alt attributed the *'el* appellations to local numina, local deities tied to Palestinian shrines or localities, encountered by elements of Israel when they entered the land of Canaan. He gave relatively little time to an examination of the "*'el* religion" as he called it, and this part of his monograph now appears wholly unsatisfactory.[58]

Cross relies heavily on archaeological discoveries which had been unearthed since the time of Alt's work as evidence for his hypothesis that *'el*-worship was a significant part of early Israelite religious practice.

He wants, first of all, to suggest that in addition to being a generic term for "god," *'el* can also be the proper name of a particular god. Cross holds that the Ugaritic texts which have been discovered since 1929 remove any doubt that in the Canaanite pantheon *'il* was the proper name of the god par excellence, the head of the

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[57]Ibid., p.3.
[58]Ibid., p.4.

pantheon.[59] Likewise, in East Semitic, he tells us, *'il* was the proper name of a deity. He sums up that, "in view of the fact that *'il* appears as a proper name in the earliest strata of languages belonging to East Semitic, Northwest Semitic, and South Semitic, we may conclude that this denotation of *'il* belongs to Proto-Semitic as well as its uses as a generic appellative."[60] Thus, his argument is that early Israelite usage of *'il/'el* would most likely have paralleled that of the neighboring cultures. *'Il/'el* was probably the name of a particular Israelite god. Only later did Israel differentiate itself from the common pattern and suggest that *'il/'el* was a generic word for "god."

Cross believes that by learning about this deity in the other Semitic pantheons, we can gain information that will probably be extremely relevant to the Israelite *'el* as well. Thus, he looks for key character traits of *'il/'el* as portrayed in various Semitic epithets. Two main elements of this deity's persona are that of father and creator.[61] He is the divine father/creator whose amazing procreative powers are responsible for the populating of heaven and earth.[62] Cross says that:

> Unlike the great gods who represent the powers behind the phenomena of nature, *'el* . . . . is the primordial father of gods and men, sometimes stern, often compassionate, always wise in judgment.[63]

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[59]Ibid., p.13.
[60]Ibid., p.14.
[61]Ibid., p.15.
[62]Ibid., p.43.
[63]Ibid., p.42.

Already, we can see the direction in which Cross is headed. This God does sound strikingly like Yahweh. In addition, in the other religions, *'el* often appears in dreams or visions, or he may be heard. Cross contrasts this with the theophany of the storm god "whose voice is thunder and who goes out to battle riding the cloud chariot."[64] By Cross' reckoning the similarities between *'el* and Yahweh suggest that these two gods may be linked.

To this information on *'el* in the various Semitic pantheons, Cross adds information on the treatment of *'el* in the Bible. According to him, " *'el* is rarely if ever used in the Bible as the proper name of a non-Israelite, Canaanite deity in the full consciousness of a distinction between *'el* and Yahweh, god of Israel." Cross seems to see this datum as evidence of the Bible's desire to connect *'el* and Yahweh. In fact, Cross suggests that in early Israelite poetry, *'el* was used as a proper name for Yahweh.[65]

Cross theorizes that rather than the various *'elim* in the Bible each being a local numina, they may instead be variant cult forms of one god *'el*.[66] Almost every *'el* epithet in the Patriarchal narratives of Genesis is tied to a specific Patriarchal sanctuary or altar. Thus *'el 'olam* is mentioned in reference to Beersheba, *'el 'elyon* to Jerusalem, *'el 'elohe yisrael* to Shechem, and so on. This has usually been interpreted as meaning that a god known as *'el 'olam* was worshipped at Beersheba and a different local god, *'el 'elyon* was worshipped in Jerusalem.

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[64]Ibid., p.43.
[65]Ibid., p.44.
[66]Ibid., p.49.

Cross points out that most of these epithets can be interpreted in a couple of different ways. *'El* can either be a proper name or a generic appellative meaning "god." Additional complexity arises because the second word in the god's name can also be understood as either a proper name or some quality of the god. Thus, *'el 'olam*, can be interpreted as either "the god Olam" or "the god of eternity." Cross claims that there may be only one god, *'el*, rather than different *'elim* who were worshipped at the various locations. This one god just happens to have different liturgical names at each site. Cross believes that this view, that these cultic or liturgical names are really just epithets of one god *'el*, has been given new life by the discovery of new information about the Canaanite and Amorite religions.[67]

Cross now reaches his culminating point. He suggests that originally *'el* was a major part of what eventually became the Israelite cult. When Yahweh became the principal cult name, Yahweh may have been substituted for *'el* in the stories and in the cult. This would explain why both Elohistic and Priestly tradition identify *'el* the god of the Patriarchs with Yahweh.[68] Yahweh, Cross proposes, was originally a cultic name of *'el* - perhaps the epithet of *'el* as patron deity of the Midianite League of the south. This explains why so many of Yahweh's traits, such as being a father and creator and coming to prophets in dreams, are also traits of *'el*.[69]

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[67]Ibid., pp.46-48.
[68]Ibid., p.71.
[69]Ibid., p.72.

He concludes by saying that:

> We have agreed with Alt to this extent, that Patriarchal religion had special features: the tutelary deity or deities entered into an intimate relationship with a social group expressed in terms of kinship or covenant, established its justice, led its battles, guided its destiny. This strain entered Yahwism. Yahweh was judge and war leader of the historical community. . . . There is also the second strain which entered Israel's primitive religion, that of the high and eternal one, *'El* the creator of heaven and earth, father of all.[70]

In other words, Cross believes there were (at least) two significant early influences on what eventually became the cult of Yahweh. Both the Gods of the Fathers and the *'el* god contributed to a final composite identity known as the god Yahweh. Thus, the references to *'el* in the Bible are more significant to the Israelite's origins than Alt would hold. They represent remnants of a religious cult that strongly influenced the personality ascribed to the god Yahweh.

Although Cross' essay concludes with a theory that does not wholly concur with Alt's position, his approach to the text is essentially the same. Both scholars are intent on using linguistic analysis of the patriarchal narratives and archaeology to uncover elements of the earliest Israelite religion. This, they believe, was a period that was pre-Yahwistic but essential to the final make-up of the Yahweh cult.

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[70]Ibid., p.75.

# Chapter 2

## Literary-Critical Methods

### Critique of the Historical-Critical Method

In 1974, when Thomas L. Thompson wrote his doctoral dissertation, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*,[1] he summed up North American biblical scholarship's then-current understanding of the patriarchs by saying:

> Nearly all accept the general claim that the historicity of the biblical traditions about the patriarchs has been substantiated by the archaeological and historical research of the last half-century. Indeed, within the last ten years, the delineation of the "patriarchal period" as a real historical period has been commonly spoken of as one of the major achievements of biblical archaeology. This opinion has become so commonplace that many recent works on Genesis and the patriarchs proceed on the assumption that this historicity has already been substantially proven and might serve as a basis for subsequent interpretation.[2]

It seemed that archaeology had confirmed many of the hypotheses of the historians of religion. It was believed that evidence abounded for the historicity of the patriarchs. W.F. Albright went so far as to say, "it is certain today that the Patriarchs were indeed human beings who were the heroes of stories handed down from the Patriarchal Age."[3] Other scholars understood them as more

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[1]Thomas L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives: The Quest for the Historical Abraham* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1974).
[2]Ibid., pp.1-2.
[3]Ibid., footnote on p.52.

indirectly mirroring historical events, but there was still a general consensus that archaeology had shown that there were reliable and retrievable pieces of historical information at the core of the narratives.[4]

Slowly, in the seventies and eighties, a group of scholars emerged who, though not similar enough in their views to be referred to as a "school," shared an opposition to the historical claims of the old school and looked to the Bible with more of a literary-critical or literary-historical approach. Thomas L. Thompson, R.W. L. Moberly, Philip R. Davies, and Robert Alter represent various aspects of this new approach, and their concerns and findings will give us an overview of the burgeoning opposition to the previous view.

These more recent scholars present numerous objections to the older way of analyzing the text. Thompson dealt a major blow to the historical-critical approach by showing that much of the archaeological evidence for the historicity of the narratives is anything but conclusive. He contended that too often archaeological data were interpreted in the light of the biblical narratives. The archaeological material was dated and evaluated on the basis of the Bible's written texts. Thus, it was no surprise that one substantiated the other.[5]

A telling example of this can be seen in the dating of the name "Avram" from the patriarchal stories. This name was said to fit best into the first half of the Second Millennium based on archaeological finds. Thus the name would point to an early dating for Abraham's

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[4]Ibid., p.52.
[5]Ibid., p.3.

name, and consequently, for some of the other biblical information about him. However, Thompson says that:

> We have seen that names of the same type as אברם are found from the time of the Mari texts down through the Neo-Assyrian period, and that names directly parallel to אברם are found from the second half of the Second Millenium until long after the Genesis traditions had been formed.[6]

Thus Thompson holds that Abraham's name does not help to confirm or establish a Second Millennium dating for the patriarchs. He argues that because it could come from that period, it was used to help substantiate that desired date for the patriarchs. However, names like Abraham were also used much later and could just as easily be used to suggest a later date for the fathers. Thompson contends that in many cases like this one, archaeological evidence was used as proof for the plausibility of the historical-critical theories. Once the data appeared to show that a theory was possible, it soon became accepted as fact. Thompson argues that a theory may be plausible without being right, and while the historians of religion may have shown that some of their theories are plausible, they have not proven conclusively that they are correct.[7]

Thompson also points out that "the argument for historicity is generally not based on literary, internal grounds (i.e. that the stories purport to be historical records); it is rather based on an argument from analogy: that the history of the early Second Millennium is so strikingly similar to the background of the patriarchal narratives that the conclusion, that they must correspond in fact, is seen as

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[6]Ibid., p.35.
[7]Ibid., pp.53-54.

directly following."[8] However, Thompson holds that there is in reality "an enormous lack of data for the history of the early Second Millenium."[9] So the historians of religion draw their conclusions for historicity without anything resembling conclusive proof.

Thompson also highlights some of the particular problems that result from presuming the historicity of the patriarchal narratives. For example, to attach these traditions to real historical events of the early Second Millennium, as Albright sought to do, demands some means of transmitting them intact for over eight hundred years.[10] Even a later dating of the traditions, such as Cross proposes, would still require an accurate transmission of the stories for several hundred years.

In addition, the stories themselves often imply that they are not of a historical nature.[11] Thompson writes, "that Abraham lived 175 years has to be taken seriously, but it is nonsense from an historical-critical perspective."[12] The life span of Abraham obviously cannot be taken to be an accurate historical recounting. There are many other such "facts" in the Bible that we take for granted as larger-than-life or just plain unhistorical. Why then do we expect that other parts of the narratives would have been retold with greater historical accuracy?[13]

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[8]Ibid., p.4.
[9]Ibid., pp.6-7.
[10]Ibid., p.8.
[11]Ibid., p.9.
[12]Ibid., p.13.
[13]Not all modern biblical historians would agree with Thompson that the patriarchal narratives suggest that their author did not intend to be historically accurate. Baruch Halpern, in his book *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), holds that

Philip R. Davies further stresses the differentiation between the literary and the historical in his book *In Search of 'Ancient Israel'*.[14] He holds that one major shortcoming on the part of the older historical scholars was their failure to realize that the Bible, like all written works, must be understood first and foremost as a literary composition. Davies believes that literary criticism has made a significant impact on the field of biblical scholarship in recent years by teaching "the distinction between real and implied authors and real and implied readers" and by demonstrating "the need for a proper and precise terminology in analyzing literary narratives: plot, characterization, point of view, stock scenes, types, and so on."[15]

The subject of Davies' book is the difference between what historical-critical and literary-critical scholars understand to be meant by the term "ancient Israel." Davies argues that up to the present the Israelites were believed to be fairly easy to define. They were the group of people whose history was found in the Bible.

> It has been taken for granted that 'ancient Israel' is there, historically speaking, and that scholarship's business is finding out its when, why and wherefore, dotting its 'i's and crossing its 't's. . .rarely if ever is it asked whether there really ever existed a social and political reality which these concepts

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the biblical authors were trying to write history, as they understood it. He sees the redactors as attempting to preserve the various strands of traditions which had survived. He uses Genesis chapter 37, in which we have both the Midianites and the Ishmaelites carrying Joseph off, as an example. Halpern suggests that the editor conflated two versions of the story into one in order to preserve what had come down to him. See Halpern, pp.197 and 277. Still, most modern historians would probably agree that the intent of the author cannot be taken for granted as being historical, as it was in the past. Now one must look for evidence of this intention on the part of the editor.

[14]Philip R. Davies, *In Search of "Ancient Israel"* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992).

[15]Ibid., pp.11-12.

> reflect, elaborate and 'idealize'. . . .what the biblical scholarship takes for granted and calls 'ancient Israel', is really prescribed and defined only in the biblical literature itself.[16]

Davies argues that the Israel of the Bible, which is often taken to be roughly the same as the Israel of history, cannot in fact be identified with the historical Israel.[17]

Three reasons should suffice to show the pitfalls inherent in using the literary Israel to establish information about the actual Israel. First of all, there is the reductionism that is inevitable in any literary work with the Bible's scope; accuracy must be compromised by the need to simplify and stereotype in order to create a picture of a whole people in a single anthology. As Davies points out, the Israel that biblical scholarship has created from the literary one is a "miraculously homogeneous entity, an embrionic church, thinking religiously, sinning but ultimately justified by its 'faith' in God."[18] This is hardly likely to be an accurate representation of Israelite society.

Second, as Davies makes clear, stories do not neatly reproduce themselves. Each story will bear the stamp of the author's own perspective, values, and political interests. This fact, which was well understood by Wellhausen, is rarely taken into account by most historians of religion.[19] Lastly, Davies argues that we read in the Bible of an Israel that existed long before the historical Israel existed and that inhabited places the historical Israel probably never knew. Therefore, the experiences, values, daily struggles, and political

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[16]Ibid., pp.22-23.
[17]Ibid., p.12.
[18]Ibid., p.46.
[19]Ibid., p.14.

intrigues attributed to them are very different from those known to the real Israel.[20]

All these issues point to the need to separate the literary Israel from the historical. Otherwise, Davies maintains, one begins to envision an Israel which never existed. This may be exactly the effect sought by the biblical author and, for the most part, it is what biblical scholarship has produced. It has created an "Ancient Israel" with archaeological data and biblical stories that is a hybrid composed of part historical Israel and part literary, biblical Israel.[21] Therefore, Davies holds that in analyzing the Bible anew, a special effort must be made a) to recognize that the text is first and foremost a literary work and b) to analyze it first on this literary level.

Davies also maintains that the historians of religion tended to examine the Bible's stories as if they were created in a vacuum (or at least retrievable in their original state), without the taint of a human author/redactor who had his/her own social class, interests, objectives, and point of view. Their objective was to get beyond the editor or writer to the original saga. However, Davies and others would argue that such a goal is probably unattainable because the stories have the indelible stamp of the person(s) who put them in their present form. In fact, Davies argues that one should take the opposite approach. He holds that one has much more to learn from trying to discern the reason a story was recorded than from attempting to escape from this dimension of the tale. Davies says,

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[20]Ibid., p.94.
[21]Ibid., p.17.

"literature is a form of persuasive communication, and it cannot help conveying its author."[22]

> The answer [to why a story is written] can never be 'because what it describes happened,' for not only is that untrue, since stories do not neatly reproduce 'what happened', but the fact of something happening does not of itself provide an adequate reason for telling it.[23]

Rather, stories are told or retold because the author has something that he or she wants to convey. The stories may tell us more about the author than they do about a historical past. And such a perspective allows one to glean information from stories that are more blatantly ahistorical, too. Now, instead of reading the tale of Sodom and Gomorrah and being able to say little more than that it was perhaps a long-retold saga, we can ask 'why would the author include this story (original or not) in his account?' Perhaps it is meant to teach us a lesson about the deity or about sin and retribution. Perhaps it was retold for polemical purposes, or maybe it was a story that helped to form the belief system of the author. Suddenly this story has value to the biblical historian even if it shows no traces of being historically true.[24] However, it can only convey this information if we are open to learning about this level of information. The literary-critical school would argue that the historians of religion missed this crucial information because they viewed it as dispensable.

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[22]Ibid., p.13.
[23]Ibid., p.13.
[24]Ibid., p.12.

Another benefit to trying to learn more about the author is that in doing so one is reminded that each author was a real person with his or her own views, dislikes, prejudices, and preferences. As Davies says, this new approach has "challenged the sense of transcendental reality which has always lain just below the surface of most biblical research," and it has replaced it with a more "human-centred" approach.[25] It reminds us that in all likelihood for many stories there was no one "original" story, but rather most stories grew and developed organically.

R.W.L. Moberly, in his book *The Old Testament of the Old Testament*,[26] points out that much can be gained from switching away from a documentary analysis of the text. The documentary approach divides the text into layers according to the supposed author or editor of each layer. Moberly believes that these divisions do not do justice to the nuances and differentiations between one part of the patriarchal narrative and another. They "obscure possibly significant distinctions within the text" which can only be discerned from a holistic reading.[27]

For all the reasons listed above, the literary-critical scholars rejected the approach of the historical-critical school. They criticized it for being a method that, without significant external evidence, used the Bible to provide a skeletal framework for the history of the Israelites. For all the reasons listed in this section, the feelings of

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[25]Ibid., p.15.
[26]R.W.L. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament: Patriarchal Narratives and Mosaic Yahwism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).
[27]Ibid., p.45.

each literary-critical scholar are probably summed up in these words of Thomas L. Thompson,

> we cannot continue to follow the tradition of German and American historical-critical scholarship in reconstructing the earliest of the Israelite traditions and calling that history. Such a method is self-consciously inconclusive and, objectively, inconsequential.[28]

Instead the scholars turned to a new approach in order to study the text in what they believed to be a more appropriate and productive manner.

The Literary-Critical Approach

The above-noted dissatisfaction with the methods and findings of the historical-critical school grew out of a changing understanding of the way the biblical text should be analyzed. Beginning in the 1960s, dissatisfaction with the conventional paradigms of the historical-critical school began to ferment. With the German and American schools in fierce debates over basics, experts began to question the current methodology and look for new avenues of study.[29] As Moberly points out, "when responsible scholars can disagree about the very existence of pentateuchal sources and can differ by half a millennium over possible dates" one starts to wonder if the best questions are being asked.[30] Scholars like Thompson began to advocate that current biblical scholarship was studying the Bible in the wrong way. He argued that "basic questions have been

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[28]Thomas L. Thompson, *The Origin of Ancient Israel: I. The Literary Formation of Genesis and Exodus 1-23* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), p.27.
[29]Thompson, *The Origin of Ancient Israel*, pp.15-16.
[30]Moberly, pp.176-177.

bypassed in biblical studies which would not and could not be ignored if we were dealing with any other people or folk tradition of the past."[31]

What are these fundamental questions which had been bypassed? David J. A. Clines in his article "Methods in Old Testament Study,"[32] calls them the "first-order" questions. These questions place "understanding" as their chief intention.[33] Clines refers to historical criticism as a second-order method. That is, it uses the biblical text for purposes other than understanding the text. Historical criticism focuses on trying to establish events and historical processes, not on the text itself. Thus, Clines says, the Bible becomes a source-book for history rather than a text to be understood in its own right.[34] As Thompson states, "the dominant interest on both sides of the Atlantic was historical: to discover the events in history which had given rise to and had influenced biblical tradition."[35] We have noted these questions being asked by the historical-critical scholars and seen the answers they reached. Now scholars began to recognize that fundamental questions, those Clines calls first-order questions, had not been raised.

The first-order questions that scholars now began to ask were those that stressed the literary nature of the text. Whatever else the Bible is, they recognized, it is first a literary text. Clines points out

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[31]Thompson, *The Origin of Ancient Israel*, p.27.
[32]John Rogerson, ed., *Beginning Old Testament Study* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982).
[33]Ibid., p.28.
[34]Ibid., pp.38-39.
[35]Thompson, *The Origin of Ancient Israel*, pp.12-13.

two main emphases of the literary approach to the Bible: "(i) that the literary work should be primarily considered as a whole; (ii) that the literary work should be studied for what it is in itself, with relatively minor concentration on the historical circumstances of its composition."[36]

The first emphasis means that the work should, in the first instance, be studied in toto. This opens the text up for the thematic and stylistic interpretations that were missed by the fragmentary nature of the documentary hypothesis. Clines describes the goal of this type of study as being, "the quest for the meaning, essence, message, function, purpose of the work as a whole."[37] This does not mean that one cannot examine the smaller parts as well. Indeed, it requires a fine balance between the study of the individual parts and the work as a whole to understand how the parts fit together and support the whole.[38]

Literary criticism centers around the second emphasis: that the work should be studied primarily for what it is in itself. While one is free to use outside information that may help in analyzing the text, this methodology looks to the text itself first and foremost in an attempt to understand it. The literary critics reason that just as one who wants to understand a poem looks mainly within the poem for this understanding rather than outside of it, so should a student of the Bible concentrate his or her energies on what the text itself says. They look to the text for clues as to how literally the Bible is meant

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[36]Rogerson, p.35.
[37]Ibid., p.35.
[38]Ibid.

to be taken, the way the authors wanted to portray their past and present, possible themes and important variations on these themes.

The work of the literary-critical school broke down the sense of assuredness that had become prevalent in biblical scholarship. It created doubt and opened up new possibilities. Now the field of biblical scholarship is in a state of upheaval and turmoil. Questions that were once believed to be answered - such as who created the text, how was it transmitted, when was it written - have now become open for discussion again. As we shall see, scholars now approach the text from a much wider variety of angles than before and from these different viewpoints they reach quite diverse opinions on what the text has to offer.

Philip R. Davies

Early on in Davies' book, *In Search of "Ancient Israel"*, [39] he points out that from a literary perspective "historical research need have no bearing on the way a critic chooses to read a text."[40] A reader can learn about and from the characters, events, and themes of the Bible without ever asking how or why these literary artifacts were created. Later we will see that to a large extent Thomas L. Thompson, in his book *The Origin Tradition of Ancient Israel*, and Robert Alter, in his book *The Art of Biblical Narrative* do just this. They critically examine the structure of many of the Bible's narratives and suggest theories for what they represent mostly with the aid of literary rather than historical expertise.

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[39]Philip R. Davies, *In Search of "Ancient Israel"* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992).
[40]Davies, p.13.

Davies, however, chooses the literary-historical approach. He recognizes that in addition to highlighting problems with the historical-critical method, the new literary-critical method needs to come up with its own alternative explanations of the Bible's history. He writes,

> Being non-theological, it [literary criticism] can renounce any interest in the historicity or non-historicity of what the literature says and also the literary or ethical value of what is said. It must, however, persuade by offering an alternative way of understanding the literature which is sufficiently inclusive to function as a working hypothesis.[41]

Davies wants to approach the text from a literary perspective and try to discern the possible historical basis for the biblical narratives. His method differs from that of the historical-critical school in the fundamental respect that he is not beginning with the assumption that the biblical narrative is based in historical fact. He will approach the text as a literary work and look for clues in it as to its historical background. Davies wants to combine close reading of the text with extant historical knowledge in order to reach a hypothesis as to the possible motives of the author(s) and the time period of the composition. This is very different from what Davies sees as simply paraphrasing the text and calling the paraphrase "history."

Davies believes that the biblical literature emerged as a political-cultural product of the Jerusalem 'establishment.' The establishment was probably based in the Temple and perhaps in the court of the governor. He suggests that a political decision was

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[41]Ibid., pp.15-16.

probably made to institute this literature as a national archive. Thus the text became fixed and canonized.[42]

Why these beliefs? Davies uses historical and archaeological knowledge in conjunction with the information from the Bible to reach his conclusions. For example, he writes that the siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib is described in Assyrian inscriptions as well as biblical writings. However, the two descriptions do not exactly match. The Assyrian account portrays Sennacherib as extracting a huge tribute from Hezekiah and destroying most of his cities. The Biblical story describes Hezekiah as making a large payment to Sennacherib before the siege (probably to forestall it), and it ends in Sennacherib's defeat. The differences suggest, Davies holds, that neither author was interested in the mere event. Sennacherib's account serves the vanity of this and future Assyrian monarchs, sustains loyalty in the Assyrian nation, and scares would-be rebels. On the other hand, the Biblical account shows that Yahweh can and will rescue his chosen city.[43]

We can learn many crucial aspects of Davies' theory from his understanding of the above account. First, it suggests that Davies believes that the Bible was written largely to instill faith in and loyalty to Yahweh and his servants (who run the government and Temple). Thus the Bible is not to be classified as a history, as we understand the term today, but more as a conglomeration of history, government polemic, and Yahwistic theology. Second, we see here how even a historical event becomes an opportunity to present an

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[42]Ibid., pp.21-22.
[43]Ibid., pp.33-34.

ideological perspective, as might any other event that could be given a Yahwistic bent. When a historical occurrence could be shown to be the work of Yahweh, it is likely that what mattered most was showing the connection between God and the event, not maintaining a historically accurate account of an event. Third, given the way the writers reshaped events, the need to have substantiating evidence (archaeology or extra biblical writings) before taking anything in the Bible to be historical becomes clear. Even that evidence will be faulty, if it is an inscription or relief, since its author will also have had a subjective view and an ideological objective.

Davies believes that most of the Bible was probably written in Yehud in the fifth through third centuries B.C.E. by scribes. He writes,

> A scribal school is a sine qua non of a developed political and economic system, and in Yehud such a school(s) must have existed. The biblical literature is the product of professional writers. . . At issue is not simply the ability to write, but the capacity, motivation, and opportunity to write scrolls and to write literature, not to write business transactions, or letters, or lists of names even, or to scratch abecedaries. The production of scrolls containing histories, cultic poems, wise sayings and oracles is not an individual hobby. Such work requires a professional class with time, resources and motivation to write. In some cases it implies access to official archives. These scribes will have been either employed directly by the Temple or court or perhaps Levites.[44]

Davies here brings up some important points. Only professional writers would have the access to information, and the time, supplies, and skills to write (Davies maintains that the society would have

[44]Ibid., pp.106-107.

been about 95% illiterate[45]). Only the government and/or Temple would be likely to have the resources to employ the scribes, and given the nature of the text, only the government and/or the Temple would have a motive for wanting this information transcribed.

Davies believes that a major motivation for the literary work was the "establishment of a national identity in which the status of the existing rulers, of recent immigration, as the indigenous elite, was secured, for their own satisfaction as much as anyone else's."[46] He also suggests that the endeavor was not so much religious as cultural:

> To describe how one's deity created the universe, gave his adopted people their land, and guided their history does not determine a religion, nor does the historicizing of agricultural festivals betoken a religious tradition. It [is] rather an act of ideological imperialism by which a ruling caste appropriates the native peasant customs and, depriving them of all that is meaningful to the peasant, turns them into celebrations of their own dominant ideology: their acquisition of the law, their deliverance from Egypt, their wanderings in the wilderness.[47]

As mentioned here, Davies does not hold that the events in the Bible are created by the scribes *ex nihilo*. For example, he suggests later on that "the patriarchal stories, the Exodus story and the conquest stories are surely relics of once alternative explanations of land occupation by aliens."[48] Rather Davies holds that the scribes took these various stories and wove them into one narrative. Even then,

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[45]Ibid., p.106.
[46]Ibid., p.114.
[47]Ibid., p.115.
[48]Ibid., p.118.

Davies admits, the scrolls were probably subjected to plenty of rewriting, emending, and patching.[49]

It is worth noting that Davies, like Alt, holds that some of the Bible's material is in fact much older than the redaction date. He writes:

> A certain amount of material, in the form of pieces of written or oral literature - for example, stories about kings, warriors and holy men, songs cultic and non-cultic must have survived in Palestine. Likewise, domestic and social customs, cultic and legal practices will have persisted from the Iron Age into the Persian period. . .[50]

As opposed to Alt, however, Davies does not think that one can ascribe these remnants to ancient Israel. They belonged to societies about which we know very little and which can hardly be described as Israelite. Although there are undoubtedly ancient fragments included in the text, we cannot know what those fragments originally meant or when they originated. It is therefore prudent to concentrate on how they function in the present narrative.[51]

How do the patriarchal narratives fit into Davies' description? Davies says that the 'patriarchal age' is an epoch in the literary, biblical story but not in the history of the ancient world.[52] Its setting is not chronological but rather "genealogical and ideological."[53] The narratives provide an early common ancestry for the Israelites and present a Yahwistic framework. Davies also holds

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[49]Ibid., pp.118, 120.
[50]Ibid., p.94.
[51]Ibid., p.94.
[52]Ibid., p.29.
[53]Ibid., pp.26-27.

that "there is simply no point in seeking out historical dates for Abraham, Isaac or Jacob, any more than for Enoch or Noah or Terach."[54] Still he does suggest, as mentioned earlier, that the patriarchal stories are probably relics of old explanations of how the land was acquired.[55] The narratives may have been around in one form or another for a long time, but this does not mean that they are historical or part of a common history of all Israelites.

Davies' writings provide a good example of one sort of literary-critical view of the Bible, including the patriarchal narratives. We have seen that his views differ from those of the historical school in several fundamental areas. First, he centers his scholarly endeavors on the time of the redactors rather than trying to reach back to the earlier time when some of the stories may have originated. He looks at the stories as we have them and tries to learn from them about the motives and lives of the people who were living when these stories were written in their present form. Second, Davies suggests that the scribes may have written from much more of an ideological and polemical viewpoint than was allowed for by the historians of religion. If this is the case, then we know that we must be much more cautious about using the texts as historical evidence.

Finally, Davies also shows the problems inherent in taking potentially old material, such as the patriarchal narratives, and seeing it as descriptive of an earlier time in the people Israel's existence. There are at least two good reasons not to do this. First, the Israel we know in the Bible is a literary creation, and therefore a

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[54]Ibid., p.27.
[55]Ibid., p.118.

story connected with it is not necessarily a direct witness to the experience of the historical Israelites.[56] Second, remnants that actually do predate the scribes would be from a time when the historical Israel did not even exist, according to Davies. Thus, even if they could be identified as historical, they would tell the story of a different people, not the Israelites.[57]

While Davies provides the broad outlines of a revisionist approach to biblical criticism, he writes very little about the Genesis narratives in particular. He does not explain why these particular stories evolved and survived, nor does he elaborate at any length on what values or lessons they were meant to teach (beyond establishing that a group of resident aliens had a legitimate claim to the land). In addition, he spends almost no time explaining his understanding of the religious practices mentioned in the narratives. Davies concentrates instead on a broad historical overview and on the nature of 'ancient Israel.'

Thomas L. Thompson, whose writing we will next examine, analyzes the text quite differently from the way Davies does, and yet his approach is equally literary (we might call Davies' method literary-historical, and Thompson's literary-critical to distinguish them). This will give us a perspective on the range of textual interpretation that is possible within a literary framework. We will then examine the work of Moberly and Alter, in order to focus more specifically on the patriarchal narratives.

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[56]Ibid., p.49.
[57]Ibid., p.94.

Thomas L. Thompson

Thomas L. Thompson, in his work *The Origin of Ancient Israel*,[58] questions what, if any, information the traditions about early Israel (the pre-monarchic era) have to teach about the real historical past of Israel.[59] He suggests that "Israel's own origin tradition is radically irrelevant" to a valid history of Israel's past. Thompson believes that a history of the Israelites and their religion can be written, but that it must be based primarily on Palestinian archaeology and ancient Near Eastern studies.[60]

Of what use to us then are the narratives? Thompson holds that they give us insight into the way that Israel envisioned itself. He believes that they represent ahistorical folk traditions which seek to explain "who Israel is and what Israel means among the nations of the world."[61] We can discern some of the Israelite beliefs and perhaps some clues as to how they understood the biblical stories if we try to see the text through the eyes of the Israelite reader rather than the modern historian. Therefore, Thompson concentrates on an exegetical approach to the origin tales. He wants to discern what the stories were meant to describe, rather than who wrote them and why. He explains this methodology by saying that "a proper use of exegesis does not really carry us beyond the text itself, but rather it

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[58]Thomas L. Thompson, *The Origin of Ancient Israel: I. The Literary Formation of Genesis and Exodus 1-23* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987). This book, unlike Thompson's dissertation thirteen years earlier, is greatly influenced by the study of folklore. This emphasis can undoubtedly be attributed to Thompson's collaboration with his wife, folklorist Shirley Edith Janke.

[59]Thompson, *The Origin of Ancient Israel*, pp.11, 23.

[60]Ibid., p.41.

[61]Ibid., pp.39-40.

serves to make us familiar with that text."[62] He also says that "given the present crisis of biblical research" (caused by too much guesswork), "it seems necessary to speak from the text itself, in an effort to reduce the abstraction of the argument."[63] So, unlike Davies, who wants to discern the history behind the creation of the narratives, Thompson is primarily interested in the stories themselves.

In *The Origin Tradition of Ancient Israel,* Thompson analyzes the literary formation of Genesis 1 through Exodus 23 for information about the composition of these narratives. He suggests that they are made up of originally small units or tales which were then linked together to form larger units of compound stories. Many of these larger units were then placed into one of the five or six traditional complex-chain narratives (e.g. the chain narratives of Abraham, of Jacob, of Joseph, of Exodus/Passover, and of Torah). Finally, an editor combined these individual chains into what Thompson calls the Toledoth narrative. This refers to the totality of Genesis 1 through Exodus 23 which, taken as a whole, is an account of Israel's origin.[64]

Each unit from the small to the large helps to define Israel. Thompson sees the small units as carrying their own motifs and lessons. For example, he points out that often these smaller units will have recurring themes, such as the wife-sister motif. Rather than explaining these as the result of different editors or authors, as

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[62]Ibid., p.198.
[63]Ibid., p.62.
[64]Ibid., pp.62-64.

the documentary hypothesis would. Thompson holds that the various forms occur because several variations of a story may have existed and been conflated; alternatively, variations on a repeated type scene may have been used to make various points.[65] Thompson suggests that these small units are composed of numerous different sources which had a varied and probably long tradition of literary and oral composition. These were then woven into their final form by the redactor, but the various units may not have originally been connected at all or their original relationship to each other may have been different than what we see in the final text.[66]

Thompson is particularly interested in the complex-chain narratives and the toledoth structure. He holds that the complex-chain narratives were originally independent units. Thus, their relationship to each other is "fragile, artificial, secondary, and circumstantial."[67] He believes that these narrative units co-existed side by side for a long time within the society without being linked to one another. Thompson bases this belief on the fact that each story has a clear beginning, middle, and end, so that it does not need the other stories for it to be complete. He writes that "nowhere, prior to the final bringing of the stories together, can there be observed such linkage as to argue that there was a pre-existent narrative about the origin of Israel which set the basis for the received text's extended tradition." If Thompson is correct, then not until very late, when an editor drew all the tales into one chronological tale, was there a

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[65]Ibid., pp.57-58.
[66]Ibid., p.51.
[67]Ibid., p.61.

unifying historiography which suggested that the patriarchal narratives preceded the Mosaic sagas.[68]

Thompson does say a little more than this about the dating of these narratives. He believes that all six chain narratives must postdate the formation of Israel as a people, "because all of them presuppose such an existence and take their departure therefrom."[69] In saying this, Thompson indicates that he does not believe the narratives were used to draw the people together into "Israel;" rather, he holds that Israel already existed at this time. He also suggests that while some of the chain narratives may have existed substantially earlier, on the whole he is willing to make what he calls a "hypothetical and speculative" conclusion that "the integral centrality of the sabbath and passover festivals marks the tradition as a product of the Josianic reform."[70]

These tales were integrated with one another by the Toledoth unit. This unit, while composed of the other units, has its own theme nonetheless. As Thompson explains,

> its theme is the essence and existence of Israel. Israel is a nation, called into existence by Yahweh to live under the Torah, an existence which finds its source and substance in the Passover and sabbath observances.[71]

This composite story would have been extremely important to the Israelite because just "as a leader of ancient Israel expresses his substance in genealogical terms, and is who he is because of the

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[68]Ibid., p.156-157.
[69]Ibid., p.192.
[70]Ibid., p.196.
[71]Ibid., p.64.

ancestral line which the society maintains for him, so Israel is what it is for the Israelite because of its Toledoth."[72] The toledoth allows the Israelite to orient him or herself in the world; to know what to expect of neighbors; and to understand why Israel exists.

According to Thompson, the patriarchal narratives, like the rest of the origin traditions, help to explain to Israel its place in the world. Thompson believes that Lot, Esau, Laban, and probably Abraham were originally names of folk heroes. With time, however, narratives were woven around them so that they eventually helped to explain the political and social ties between Israel and its neighbors.[73] In fact, he says,

> the patriarchs, especially Abraham, are the means by which the biblical tradition has expressed Israel's political, sociological, and geographic ties with the world surrounding it. This is effected in the tradition through the personification of peoples, tribes, and territories, and their relation to each other by means of genealogies and *Stammessage* [tribal legends].[74]

Many of these stories were probably aetiological (dealing with cause or origin) in intent and were used to create a historiographic relationship between an ancestor or hero and the tribe or village bearing his name.[75] Therefore, while studying this information can tell us about how Israel viewed its heroes and its neighbors, none of it necessarily recounts actual historical events.

Thompson has shown a new way of examining the biblical text on the basis of its literary composition. He understands the

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[72]Ibid., p.40.
[73]Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, p.299.
[74]Ibid., p.298.
[75]Ibid., p.298.

patriarchal narratives, as he understands most of Genesis through 2 Kings, as made up of originally smaller literary units which were combined and changed over time to create a unified historiographical past for the Israelites.[76] Yet he, like Davies, says almost nothing about the religious practices of the patriarchal narratives. We will have to look to other literary scholars for a literary view of what the religious practices of the ancestors mean.

R.W.L. Moberly

R.W.L. Moberly, in his book *The Old Testament of the Old Testament*,[77] makes it clear that he, like Davies and Thompson, believes that the patriarchal narratives are partially constructed from earlier fragments that have been appropriated for new uses. Yet Moberly's "take" on the narratives is different from that of the other writers. He sees the patriarchal narratives as composed of many once non-Yahwistic stories that have been retold by Yahwistic storytellers in a Yahwistic framework.[78] In other words, many of these stories pre-dated the Yahwistic writers. These writers then took the stories and molded them or framed them in order to fit their current society - one that was based on Mosaic Yahwism.

Moberly seems to place more importance on the role the patriarchal narratives play in the Pentateuch than do Davies and Thompson. As we will see, he believes that by describing the

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[76]Thompson, *The Origin of Ancient Israel*, p.40.
[77]R.W.L. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament: Patriarchal Narratives and Mosaic Yahwism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).
[78]Moberly p.70.

patriarchal religion, the Genesis sagas set up a contrast to and typology for the subsequent Mosaic Yahwism.

It is important to note that Moberly does not contend that the Pentateuch's pre-Yahwistic period (or the period of Moses' lifetime, for that matter) is in any way historical. Rather, as he says, he is "interested in Israel's own understanding of its foundational traditions." How did they understand the patriarchal narratives?[79] This is very different from the approach of the historians of religion. Moberly is not asking what we can separate out as historical. Rather he asks a different historical question: how might people of the past have understood this text? What was it meant to say to them?

Although the patriarchal narratives sometimes use the name YHWH for God, Moberly holds that the Pentateuch understands these narratives as representing a pre-Yahwistic time. The writers knew, Moberly maintains, that they could use YHWH for the name of God in the narratives because the readers would recognize that this was an anachronistic use of God's true name. In other words the reader would have reasoned "ah, the text uses YHWH in Genesis because after Exodus 3, we all know that God's real name is YHWH. Of course, the patriarchs would not have known that this was God's name. However, now that we do, we can rewrite these stories saying that YHWH spoke to them. After all, why shouldn't we call God by God's proper name?"[80]

Thus far Moberly has made a couple of basic points. One is that Israelites reading or hearing the Pentateuch would have understood

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[79]Ibid., p.80.
[80]Ibid., pp.77-78.

that God was first known as YHWH in Exodus 3. Second, they would thus have understood the Pentateuch as saying that any time prior to Exodus 3 is a pre-Yahwistic time.[81]

Moberly examines the patriarchal narratives to get a sense of how this pre-Yahwistic period was depicted. How did it differ from Mosaic Yahwism? He points out what he interprets to be a number of important characteristic differences.

First, he says that although the patriarchs worship only one God in the patriarchal narratives, there is no mention of opposition to polytheism. For example, the gods are not depicted as being a threat to the patriarch's religion, as they will be to the Israelites later (when God commands, "you shall have no other gods before me." Ex. 20:3). In Genesis, at no point does God have to urge the patriarchs not to worship the foreign gods. Also, in the patriarchal narratives God speaks freely to the pagans as well as to the patriarchs. For example, God gives revelations to Abimelech (Gen. 20:3ff) and to Pharaoh (Gen. 41).[82]

Moberly does note the one exception to this generally pagan-accepting motif. It occurs when Jacob tells his family to remove their foreign gods (Gen. 35:2). Moberly points out that even here no explanation is given for why they must do this, yet it seems to be a characteristic statement of Yahwistic exclusivism. Moberly suggests that it may mean that in this case the narrator did not preserve the patriarchal perspective.[83]

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[81]Ibid., p.79.
[82]Ibid., pp.87-88.
[83]Ibid., pp.88-89.

A related point that Moberly makes is that the Genesis text generally displays no antagonism towards the practices or characters of non-Israelites. For example, in the cases mentioned above in which both Abimelech and the Pharaoh are told to return a patriarch's wife, they obediently do so. In both of these cases the pagan rulers are portrayed as eager to right the wrong once they know of it; this is not the scathing portrayal of pagans that characterizes Mosaic Yahwism.[84]

The case does become more complicated in regard to intermarriage. While Joseph, Judah and Simeon all take Canaanite wives without any adverse comment being made about their marriages, Isaac and Jacob must marry wives related to their family. With Isaac and Jacob we hear explicitly that they should not marry the local women, and yet no substantial reason is given for this injunction. If this were meant to be a statement against polytheism, it could certainly have been made a lot stronger.[85]

Moberly also points out that the patriarchs' cultic practices differ significantly from those sanctioned in Mosaic Yahwism. In Genesis there is no cultic center for worship, but rather altars are set up in a number of places without any explicit statement of why one place is better for worship than another. This contrasts with the importance given to certain religious centers elsewhere in the Bible.[86] Also, trees and pillars sometimes play a part in the religious practices of the patriarchs, while such practices are explicitly

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[84]Ibid., p.89.
[85]Ibid., p.90.
[86]Ibid., p.91.

prohibited in Mosaic Yahwism (for example, Deut. 16:21-22). Other noteworthy differences in religious practice include the lack of any mention of Shabbat or of the dietary laws in the patriarchal narratives.[87]

Moberly points out other discrepancies as well. Mosaic Yahwism's emphasis on such things as the role of priesthood and prophecy and its strong moral content are all things which are largely missing from the patriarchal narratives.[88] However, without elaborating on these, we can now understand the gist of Moberly's view of patriarchal religion in its literary function as precursor to Mosaic Yahwism.

Now we must ask, how do we understand such a portrayal of the patriarchal period? What does it afford the editors, and why was it included? To begin to answer these question, Moberly looks to a modern day analogy. He suggests:

> if one reflects theologically on the issue that appears to be present in the pentateuchal text - one God who is revealed in two different ways in two different periods - one obvious analogy to this phenomenon readily suggests itself: the Christian understanding of the Old and New Testament as representing two different periods of salvation history in which it is one and the same God who is revealed, albeit in different ways.[89]

In further explaining the comparison, he points out that the Christian approach to the two testaments is twofold. On the one hand, it affirms certain continuities between the two texts, but on the other

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[87]Ibid., pp.92-93.
[88]Ibid., pp.94-98.
[89]Ibid., pp.125-126.

hand, it suggest that there is something new and different in the second.[90]

The adherents to Mosaic Yahwism may have taken a similar approach to the patriarchal narratives. As Moberly notes, the text makes it clear that both the patriarchal religion and Mosaic Yahwism refer to the same God. Yet there are also consistent differences which suggest that the patriarchal religion is meant to portray a religion that existed prior to the Mosaic revelations. Therefore it was not subject to the laws of those revelations and not condemned for not following them.[91]

This explains how one who was in the context of Mosaic Yahwism might understand the patriarchal religion, but of what use was it to them? Moberly contends that many of the patriarchal narrative's basic descriptions about the nature of God's dealings with people and God's priorities could be appropriated by Mosaic Yahwism and used to exemplify its views.[92] This may explain why these traditions were kept and incorporated into the Pentateuch.

Each of the patriarchs is in many ways a paradigmatic (though far from perfect) figure. Abraham is the most obvious. As Moberly points out, he is the quintessential obedient servant. Whatever God commands him to do, Abraham does. No test is too great for him - even sacrificing his own son and heir. Abraham also serves as a paradigm for the life of Israel. Parallels between Abraham's life and the official history of the Israelites include leaving Babylon to settle

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[90]Ibid., pp.126-7.
[91]Ibid., pp.130-131.
[92]Ibid., pp.132.

in Canaan, taking a trip to Egypt, and receiving a divine covenant with God. Joseph and Jacob also served as role models for the Yahwistic context.[93]

Moberly also suggests two hermeneutical functions that the patriarchal narratives may serve for the Mosaic religion as the Old Testament does for the New: the model of promise and fulfillment, and typology. In the first case, as Christians see many of the promises of the Old Testament fulfilled in the New, so too would those living in a context of Mosaic Yahwism be able to look at the patriarchal narratives and see their own lives as the fulfillment of the promises the narratives mention. God's promises to Abraham of descendants, land, and blessing in Genesis 12-25 would be understood by the Yahwists as promises to them as well. Their lives on the land would suggest that God was now carrying through on His original promises to the patriarchs.[94]

Moberly describes the basic assumption of Christian typology as being "that there is a consistency in the way God acts, such that what God has done uniquely and with supreme clarity in Christ can nonetheless be discerned in similar divine actions and adumbrations in the Old Testament."[95] Here Moberly points to several parallels between Abraham and the Israelites in which typology may be at play. For example, the story of Abraham going down to Egypt during a famine and prospering; Pharaoh receiving a plague from God; and Pharoah then sending Abraham out of Egypt with wealth all certainly

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[93]Ibid., pp.135-137.
[94]Ibid., pp.140-141.
[95]Ibid., p.139.

parallel the story of the Israelites' entrance into, sojourn in, and exodus from Egypt.[96]

Also, the language of YHWH's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15 suggests that it was meant to serve as a typology for the way God often presents himself in the rest of the Pentateuch:

Gn.15:7 *'ani yhwh 'aser hotse'tika me'ur kasdim*
Ex. 20:2 *'anoki yhwh 'eloheka 'aser hotse'tika me'eretz mitsrayim*

This seems to be a reminder that this is the same God who functions in both cases as a redeemer for the chosen people. It once again links Abraham with Israel and the Exodus.[97]

Moberly has shown more explicitly than Davies or Thompson how the patriarchal narratives may have played an integral part in Israelite religion. He suggests that though the narratives contain old fragments, they have been reworked and thoughtfully intertwined with some Yahwist beliefs so that they could be instructive to followers of Mosaic Yahwism. Unlike Davies and Thompson, Moberly does not see the patriarchal narratives as essentially a separate document that was tacked on and made to fit chronologically with other narratives. Rather, he believes the fragments were specifically arranged in a way that would complement an extant and current Yahwistic religion that was based on Mosaic Yahwism (as Christianity is based on the New Testament).

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[96]Ibid., p.143.
[97]Ibid.

Robert Alter

The last modern scholar we will look at is Robert Alter. His work, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*,[98] centers around his belief that the Bible is its own narrative art form composed according to distinctive principles. Alter sets out to illuminate some of these principles and to give the reader an appreciation for the Bible's artistic attention to linguistic detail.[99] As he says:

> What role does literary art play in the shaping of biblical narrative? A crucial one, I shall argue, finely modulated from moment to moment, determining in most cases the minute choice of words and reported details, the pace of narration, the small movements of dialogue, and a whole network of ramified interconnections in the text [100]

Alter holds that a thorough study of any biblical narrative must include close attention to such matters as word-choice, sound-plays, and syntax choice, since the authors or editors chose their words so precisely.

Alter also believes that the redactors of the Bible were aware of what was written in the various parts of the Bible and would use one part to comment on another. He writes that "to understand a narrative art so bare of embellishment and explicit commentary, one must be constantly aware of . . . the repeated use of narrative analogy, through which one part of the text provides oblique commentary on another.[101]

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[98]Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1981).
[99]Ibid., p.ix.
[100]Ibid., p.3.
[101]Ibid., p.21.

As an example of such intertextuality, he uses the story of Judah and Tamar and the question of its relationship to the surrounding narrative on Joseph. Alter points out that most biblical scholars consider this to be a completely separate narrative unit that is merely stuck in between two chapters about Joseph. He shows that there are many thematic bridges between the two stories. As Joseph is going down to Egypt, we read that Judah "went down from his brothers" (Gn. 38:1); this seems to be an effort by the editor or author to draw the two stories together or even to suggest a parallel between them. And there is the similarity between Jacob, who at the end of Genesis 37, bemoans the loss of his son, and Judah in chapter 38 who loses two sons in a row. Yet, in another respect Jacob is contrasted with Judah. For Jacob has made it clear that he is inconsolable over his loss, whereas Judah is consolable after the loss of his wife and thus goes to lie with the harlot. Finally, Alter points out that the climax of the Tamar story is a recognition which uses the Hebrew words *hakker-na* and *vayyakker* just as they were used for recognition in the chapter before on Jacob. Alter suggests that the editor or author has intentionally used the same words here to draw an analogy between the stories.[102]

Alter notes, interestingly enough, that the midrashists picked up on the significant repetition of *hakker-na* and *vayyakker* 1500 years ago. As he points out, this "may suggest that in many cases a literary student of the Bible has more to learn from the traditional commentaries than from modern scholarship."[103] This is because the

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[102]Ibid., pp.6-10.
[103]Ibid., pp.10-11.

midrashists assumed, as Alter does, that the text "is an intricately interconnected unity." Thus they were attuned to looking for important linguistic cues. The scholars of the late nineteenth and early-to-mid twentieth century, according to Alter, missed these subtle intertextual nuances and comparisons because of their belief that the Bible was "a patchwork of frequently disparate documents."[104] Alter agrees with these biblical scholars that the Bible is a composite work, but at the same time he holds that one cannot lose sight of how it functions as a whole.

While *The Art of Biblical Narrative* includes many suggestions for how to read and interpret the Bible, I would like to concentrate on Alter's study of type-scenes. This will be relevant to my work in Part III of this thesis. Alter suggests that "reading any body of literature involves a specialized mode of perception in which every culture trains its members from youth."[105] He uses Hollywood Western movies as an example. Certain expectations are set up just by the fact that a movie claims to be a Western. In other words, there is a type-scene for Westerns. A viewer of a Western who was unfamiliar with its conventions would have no idea what to expect from the movie. However, anyone who had grown up watching Westerns would immediately have certain expectations of a movie that called itself a Western.[106]

Many times in the Bible, stories seem to repeat themselves with small variations in plot, characters, or circumstances. Some

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[104]Ibid.
[105]Ibid., p.62.
[106]Ibid., p.48.

scholars hold that these repetitions are the end product of an originally oral story that developed different versions with subsequent oral tellings. Some or all of these versions were then included in the biblical narrative.

Alter takes a different approach. He thinks that these stories may actually represent type-scenes that were the plot formulae of their time. He lists the annunciation of the birth of the hero to his barren mother; the encounter with the future betrothed at a well; the epiphany in the field; the initiatory trial; danger in the desert and the discovery of a well or other source of sustenance; and the testimony of the dying hero as some of the most commonly repeated type-scenes that he has been able to identify in the Bible.[107]

The main problem for us, as Alter notes, is that these type-scenes are no longer familiar to us. We often fail to recognize them, and even when we do notice them, we may not have enough evidence to discern a particular type-scene's conventions. Therefore, he says that "as modern readers of the Bible, we need to relearn something of this mode of perception that was second nature to the original audiences."[108] Only then will we know what is to be understood by the many recountings of and variations on the type-scenes.

Alter's work is significant for the specific literary and linguistic insights that it provides. Yet perhaps even more important than the individual perceptions is the critical and detailed way in which Alter studies the text. He makes a significant point, and one that, I think,

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[107]Ibid., p.51.
[108]Ibid., p.62.

speaks favorably for close literary analysis of the Bible when he says that:

> This sort of critical discussion, I would contend, far from neglecting the Bible's religious character, focuses attention on it in a more nuanced way. The implicit theology of the Hebrew Bible dictates a complex moral and psychological realism in biblical narrative because God's purposes are always entrammeled in history, dependent on the act of individual men and women for their continuing realization.[109]

Later he adds that "what we need to understand better is that the religious vision of the Bible is given depth and subtlety precisely by being conveyed through the most sophisticated resources of prose fiction."[110] Literary analysis of the Bible, far from further isolating the work as a tool for reconstructing the ancient world, allows us to recognize what is unique and special about the Bible in and of itself. By recognizing that the Bible is a highly sophisticated and complex literary work, we bestow on it the recognition that is its due and hopefully also the resources which will allow us to understand it better according to its own literary terms.

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[109]Ibid., p.12.
[110]Ibid., p.22.

# Chapter 3

## RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN THE PATRIARCHAL NARRATIVES

### A Description of the Practices

In this section I will do my own literary analysis in order to illustrate what can be learned from such an approach. I have created a "Chart of the Religious Practices in the Patriarchal Narratives" (see Appendix 1), listing all of the religious practices that I found in the narratives. I also note on the chart who performed the action, whether this person was an Israelite or not, where the action was performed, and the reason for the religious act, if I could discern it.

Here I will take the information from that chart and break it down according to religious practice. By doing this literary study, we will get a sense of how each religious practice is portrayed in the narratives. We will be able to evaluate how often a particular act was performed, if it was done by Israelites and non-Israelites alike, and whether or not it was done only on certain occasions or in certain locations. Were I a historian, I would also try to discern which information tells us something historical about the period of the writers and which data are purely literary devices. As it is, I will limit myself to trying to arrange the information literarily and relating any trends or themes that I notice.

Afterwards, I will examine in more depth one of the recurring motifs. We will look at how the various biblical scholars interpret

this motif (from historical-critical and literary-critical perspectives). Then I will offer my own views, on both the particular issue, and on the patriarchal narratives in general.

It remains to give a coherent literary understanding of the religious practices. As of yet, no one, including Alter, has written a literary account of the religious practices of the patriarchal narratives that can compare to the comprehensive nature of Alt's historical-critical essay, "The God of the Fathers." This thesis only provides a sample of what could and should be done.

Prostrating

The Patriarchal Narratives contain four instances of people prostrating themselves before God or angels; only the first one is by an Israelite. In Genesis18, the editor tells us that the Lord appeared to Abraham by the terebinths of Mamre, in Israel. Abraham saw three men, and he bowed (וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ) to the ground and asked them to rest with him and eat. This results in Abraham learning from them that Sarah will give birth.

One chapter later (Gn. 19:1) Lot, a non-Israelite, spots two angels coming to Sodom as he sits by the gate of this Israelite city. He rises to greet them, bows(וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ) with his face to the ground, and asks them to lodge with him for the night.

The other two instances involve Abraham's servant. This servant is presumably the servant Eliezer mentioned in Gn.15:2. If so, he supposedly hails from Damascus, and would thus be a non-Israelite. Yet since he is taken into Abraham's house, it is difficult to classify him as an Israelite or a non-Israelite. The servant departs

Israel and travels to Abraham's birthplace in search of a wife for Isaac. At a well in this foreign land the servant learns that he has met the daughter of Bethuel. He "bowed low(וַיִּקֹּד) in homage(וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ) before the Lord"[1](Gn.24:26) because "the God of my Master Abraham. . . has not withheld His steadfast kindness from my master. For I have been guided on my errand by the Lord, to the house of my master's kinsmen" (Gn.24:27).

When Laban and Bethuel tell the servant that he may take Rebekah as a wife for Isaac, the servant again prostrates himself(וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ) before the Lord (Gn.24:52). In all four of these cases, we find the same Hebrew word, וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ, used to convey the act of prostrating.

Blessing

We read of seven blessings being offered in the narratives. A non-Israelite extends the first. After Abram triumphs over Malkizedek's enemies and brings back his goods, Malkizedek, king of Shalem and priest of the most high God("El-Elyon"), brings out bread and wine and blesses Abram. He says, "blessed be Abram of God most high, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God most high, who has delivered your foes into your hand" (Gn. 14:19-20).

When Abraham's servant learns that he may take Rebekah as a wife for Isaac, he offers up a blessing to God (Gn. 24:27). In the same chapter, Rebekah's non-Israelite family bless her by saying, "O

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[1]Translations in this section follow the Jewish Publication Society translation as found in W. Gunther Plaut, ed., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981).

sister! /May you grow into /Thousands of myriads; /May your offspring seize /The gates of their foes" (Gen. 24:60).

The next example shows that it is worth going to great lengths to obtain a blessing. In chapter twenty-seven Jacob conspires with his mother so that he and not Esau will receive their father Isaac's dying blessing. Isaac eats the venison that Jacob, disguised as Esau, brings to him. Isaac says, "let me eat of my son's game that I may give you my innermost blessing" (Gn.27:25). Then he asks God on behalf of his son, "May God give you / Of the dew of heaven and the fat of the earth, / Abundance of new grain and wine. / Let peoples serve you, / And nations bow to you; / Be master over your brothers,/ And let your mother's sons bow to you./ Cursed be they who curse you, / Blessed they who bless you" (Gn. 27:28-29). When Esau comes in with the venison and learns that he has missed out on the blessing meant for him, he pleads with his father for a blessing. We are told that he "cried with a great and exceedingly bitter cry," and said to his father, "bless me too, Father" (Gn 27:34). His father grants him a blessing, but it is a less promising blessing (Gn:27: 39-40) since the choicest one has already been given to his brother.

Jacob again seeks a blessing when he wrestles with the superhuman being. Jacob has just re-entered the land after his sojourn with Laban. Knowing that his confrontation with Esau is approaching, Jacob asks God to protect him during that encounter. The night after Jacob prays for providential care, he wrestles with a being. Jacob will not let him go until he offers a blessing for Jacob. We are told that he blessed Jacob and named him Israel (Gn. 32: 29-30).

The fact that this episode occurs immediately upon re-entering the land is probably of some significance. Many of the religious acts we will examine are performed upon entering or leaving the land (or upon entering or leaving a place within the land). Here the supplication at the entrance to the land probably serves to underscore Jacob's hope that God's protection will accompany him as he returns to his ancestral land and his old enemy. The blessing at this same spot allows him to know that God's care will follow him into the land.

The last blessing in Genesis is one that Jacob himself offers after arriving in Egypt. Joseph, knowing that his father is near death, takes his two sons with him to see Jacob. Jacob lays his hands on Joseph's sons and blesses them. He entreats God that they should grow into a multitude(Gn. 48:15-16). We are told that in so doing he also blessed Joseph. Joseph tries to get his father to put his right hand on the eldest son's head, but Jacob refuses saying that the younger brother would be greater. This blessing is to be remembered by later generations when they bless others, for Jacob says "by you shall Israel invoke blessings, saying: God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh" (Gn. 48:20).

Swearing

Instances of swearing or oath-taking occur frequently throughout the Genesis narratives. In each of the cases below in which I use the word "swear" in the English, the Hebrew verb root is שׁבע. We do not witness the first oath firsthand, but only hear it reported. This occurs in Genesis14:22 when Abraham tells

Malkizedek, "I swear to the Lord, God most high, . . . I will not take so much as a thread or a sandle strap [of the war's spoils]." Seven chapters later Abimelech, a non-Israelite, seeing that God is with Abraham, requests that Abraham swear that he will not deal falsely with him or his descendants. Abraham responds, "I swear it" (Gn. 21:24).

In Genesis 24, we get a clear description of at least one form of swearing. Abraham says to his servant, who will be searching for a wife for Isaac, "put your hand under my thigh and I will make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites. . ."(Gn.24:2) Several verses later we read, "so the servant put his hand under the thigh of his master Abraham and swore to him as bidden" (Gn. 24:9).

In the next chapter, when Jacob acquires Esau's birthright, he says, "sell me your birthright"(Gn. 25:31). Esau (usually considered a non-Israelite) agrees, and Jacob then replies, "swear to me first." The text continues, "he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob" (Gn. 25:33). Here selling and swearing appear to be related.

On Jacob's way out of the land, as he journeys to Paddan-aram in search of a wife, he has a dream that God promises to give him the land. When Jacob awakens, he believes that the spot on which he slept is the gate to heaven, so he takes his stone pillow and sets it up as a pillar(מַצֵּבָה). Here he vows a vow (וַיִּדַּר יַעֲקֹב נֶדֶר) that if God will watch over him and see him safely back to his father's house, then "the Lord shall be my God. And this stone, which I have set up

as a pillar, shall be God's abode: and of all that You give me, I will set aside a tithe for You"(Gn. 28:21-22).

When Laban seeks to make a covenant with Jacob, a pillar(מַצֵּבָה) and a cairn(גַּל) are erected. Then Laban asks Jacob to swear that he will not harm Laban. Jacob does so by "the Fear of his father Isaac" (Gn.31:53).

The last two oaths share similar purposes. In both cases, a father lying on his deathbed outside of Israel requests that his progeny promise to carry his bones back to Israel for burial. In the first case, Israel asks Joseph to put his (Joseph's) hand under his (Israel's) thigh and promise to bury him with his fathers in their burial place. Joseph says that he will do so, but these words are not guarantee enough to satisfy Israel. He asks that Joseph swear to do so, and we are told that Joseph complied and swore (Gn. 47:30).

The last oath of Genesis, and almost the last action of the book, involves Joseph taking an oath(וַיִּשָּׁבַע), reminiscent of his father's, of the children of Israel. Joseph says, "when God has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from here" (Gn.50:25).

In the case of each oath and vow mentioned here, we either read that the promise was kept, or there is an implicit assumption that it was. In not one of these instances do we learn that someone swears to something and then breaks the vow.

Sacrificing

Only four sacrifices are described in the narratives, and each sacrifice is carried out by an Israelite. In Genesis 15, God promises to make Abram the father of a great multitude and tells him that he

will inherit the land upon which he dwells. Abram then asks, "how shall I know that I am to possess it"(Gn.15:8). In response to this question, God tells Abram to take a heifer, a goat and a ram, each of which is three years old, and a turtledove and pigeon. The text gives no evidence of God indicating what Abram should do with these. Still, it says that Abram "brought Him all these and cut them in two, placing each half opposite the other; but he did not cut up the bird" (Gn:15:10). In apparent response to this cultic rite, that night Abram receives a revelation in his sleep. It informs him that his seed will be strangers in a strange land for many years but that they will then return to the land. He also envisions a smoking furnace and a burning torch that passes between the sacrificed pieces.

The dramatic telling of the binding of Isaac constitutes the second example of a sacrificial offering in the patriarchal sagas. On Mt. Moriah, Abraham shows his extreme devotion to God by his willingness to sacrifice his son and heir at God's command. At the last moment, an angel stops him from killing his son. In his son's stead, Abraham takes a ram, which happens to be caught by its horns in a thicket, and "offered it up as a burnt offering" (Gn. 22: 13). For this act of devotion on Abraham's part, God again (as happened prior to the first sacrifice) promises to exceedingly multiply Abraham's seed.

Jacob performs the other two sacrifices. In chapter thirty-one, upon re-entering the land, he enters into a covenant with Laban. As witness to the covenant, Jacob sets up a pillar and a cairn. He then swears by the fear of his father Isaac, and offers up a sacrifice. After this, everyone eats, stays the night, and then goes on their way.

Jacob again sacrifices to God on his journey to be reunited with Joseph. This time the sacrifice is offered when leaving the land. Jacob hears that Joseph lives, and he decides to go to see him. The text then tells us, "So Israel set out with all that was his, and he came to Beer-sheba, where he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac" (Gn. 46:1). Apparently the purpose of this act is to encourage God to appear before him and let him know what his future will hold. Indeed that night Jacob has a vision in which God tells him not to fear going into Egypt for the Israelites will become a great nation there and be brought out again.

Each sacrifice, except for that relating to Isaac, occurs as a patriarch is either entering or leaving the land, and each one is connected with divine or human promises. Therefore, it seems that sacrifices are used here both to seal and to invoke promises.

Erecting An Altar

Each patriarch erects at least one altar (מִזְבֵּחַ). The first four religious acts that we read of in the patriarchal narratives involve Abram either erecting an altar to God or worshipping to God at an extant altar. God tells Abram to leave his father's house and to go to the land that God will show him. Abram departs and travels to Shechem to the terebinth of Moreh. There God appears to him and says that Abram's descendants shall inherit that land. After this news, we read that Abram "built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him" (Gn. 12:7). This suggests that this altar was built as an act of thanksgiving. In the very next verse, Abram repeats this religious practice. Abram has now traveled to a mountain east of

Bethel. Here he "pitched his tent . . . and he built there an altar to the Lord, and invoked the Lord by name" (Gn 12:8).

Abram then journeys into Egypt. When he re-emerges, he travels to the Negev and then back to Bethel. It says,

> he proceeded . . . as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been formerly, between Bethel and Ai; the site of the altar which he had built there at the first; and there Abram invoked the Lord by name. (Gn 13:3-4)

He has returned to the land, and he now returns to the altar.

At the end of this chapter, Abram moves his dwelling place to the terebinths of Mamre in Hevron. Here, too, he "built an altar . . . to the Lord"(Gn. 13:18).

We only read of Isaac building one altar. He travels to Be'er-sheba, and the Lord appears to him there and tells him not to fear, for God is with him and will bless him and multiply his seed. Then, as with Abram, we read that "he built an altar there, and invoked the Lord by name" (Gn. 26:25).

In Genesis 33, Jacob comes to the city Shalem, and he pitches his tent before the city. He then buys the piece of land that his tent rests on, and "he set up an altar there, and called it El-elohe-yisrael" (Gn. 33:20).

God tells Jacob to "arise, go up to Bethel and remain there; and build an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother Esau"(Gn. 35:1). In this case, Jacob is explicitly told that he should build an altar to the God with whom he has developed this relationship. Jacob then goes to Bethel, "and he built an altar and named the site El-bethel, for it was there that God

had revealed Himself to him when he was fleeing from his brother"(Gn. 35:7).

In the patriarchal narratives, altars are built only by the patriarchs. They are built when a patriarch moves to a new area, and they are sometimes accompanied by or motivated by a divine vision. The connection between moving to a new place and erecting an altar suggests that building an altar may be (at least literarily) a way of marking one's possession of the land.

Strange Gods

The text mentions the worshipping of other gods among the household of Jacob. In Genesis 31:19, as Jacob and his family prepare to leave Laban, Rachel steals her father's *teraphim*. When Laban overtakes Jacob's family on their way back to Canaan, he asks Jacob, "why did you steal my gods?" (Gn.31:30). Thus we learn that the *teraphim* are gods which Rachel for some reason has chosen to take with her.

This idea of Jacob's family leaving the foreign land but taking with them some of their gods is repeated a few chapters later. After God commands Jacob to go to Bethel and erect an altar, Jacob immediately says to his entourage, "rid yourselves of the alien god in your midst, purify yourselves, and change your clothes" (Gn.35:2). Since the family has just recently left foreign soil, the text seems to be suggesting that Jacob's household has brought these אֱלֹהֵי הַנֵּכָר, strange or foreign gods, into the land with them from their previous land. Jacob's injunction to get rid of the gods makes it clear that such worship is unacceptable among a group that worships יהוה.

Alan Cooper and Bernard Goldstein, building on the work of Karel van der Toorn, comment on the importance of these foreign gods in their essay "The Cult of the Dead and the Theme of Entry into the Land,"

> Laban's teraphim represent his ancestral deities, that is, his *'elohim,* which are going to be branded אֱלֹהֵי הַנֵּכָר, after they enter into Israelite territory. In stealing them, Rachel evidently attempts to retain some stake in her father's household.[2]

Praying

Genesis includes a number of examples of both Israelites and non-Israelites praying to God. Already mentioned are the times when a patriarch erected an altar and then "invoked the Lord by name." In each of these three cases (Gn. 12:8, 13:4, 26:25) the implicit reason for calling upon the name of the Lord is to offer a prayer of thanksgiving. For example in Genesis 12:7-8, Abraham calls upon the name of the Lord shortly after God promises to give Abraham's descendants the land.

In Genesis 20 we read that "Abraham then prayed to God, and God healed Abimelekh and his wife and his slave girls, so that they bore children" (Gn.20:17). Then, in the next chapter, when Hagar thinks that she and her son will die, we read that she lifted up her voice and wept (Gn. 21:16). If we accept Moshe Greenberg's definition of prayer as "nonpsalmic speech to God," Hagar's uplifted

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[2]Alan Cooper and Bernard R. Goldstein, "The Cult of the Dead and the Theme of Entry into the Land," *Biblical Interpretation*, vol.1, no.3, 1993,p.11.

voice may very well be an act of prayer.[3] However, when God answers, we read that it is in response to Ishmael's voice, not Hagar's.

The first words of actual prayer that we hear come from the lips of Abraham's servant, when he is looking for a wife for Isaac. As he reaches the well where the women gather, he says,

> O Lord, God of my master Abraham, grant me good fortune this day, and deal graciously with my master Abraham: Here I stand by the spring as the daughters of the townsmen come out to draw water; let the maiden to whom I say, 'Please, lower your jar that I may drink,' and who replies, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels' - let her be the one whom You have decreed for your servant Isaac. Thereby shall I know that You have dealt graciously with my master. (Gn.24:12-14)

Then, when Rebekah says all the things that the servant has prayed would be said and it becomes clear that she is a relative of Abraham's, the servant prays a prayer of thanksgiving. He prostrates himself and offers these words to God: "Blessed be the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not withheld His steadfast kindness from my master. For I have been guided on my errand by the Lord, to the house of my master's kinsmen" (Gn. 24:27).

The next prayer comes from Isaac after he marries Rebekah. We do not learn the actual content of this prayer, but we read that "Isaac pleaded with the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was barren: and the Lord responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived" (Gn.25:21). In the next verse, it is Rebekah who speaks to

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[3]Moshe Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) p.7.

God. The text only says, "but the children struggled in her womb, and she said, 'if so, why do I exist?' She went to inquire of the Lord" (Gn.25:22), and God explained it to her.

The last prayer is the only one by an Israelite in which we hear the actual content of the prayer. In this prayer, as Isaac prepares to meet Esau again after many years, Isaac entreats God:

> O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord, who said to me, 'Return to your native land and I will deal bountifully with you'! I am unworthy of all the kindness that You have so steadfastly shown Your servant: with my staff alone I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps. Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; else, I fear, he may come and strike me down, mothers and children alike. Yet you have said, 'I will deal bountifully with you and make your offspring as the sands of the sea, which are too numerous to count.' (Gn.32:10-13)

It is worth noting that none of these prayers goes unanswered. In each case, God grants the person his or her request. We might think that Rebekah's prayer is not answered since she does not get relief from suffering. However, we must remember that she only prays to understand why she must live with such a struggle in her womb, not for an end to it. God responds by explaining it to her.

Erecting A Pillar

Jacob is the only person in the patriarchal narratives to erect a pillar (מַצֵּבָה), and he does so on three separate occasions. The first time is in chapter twenty-eight after Isaac has sent Jacob on his way to find a wife in Paddan-aram, in the house of Bethuel. During the journey, Jacob sleeps out in the open one night with a stone for a pillow. As he sleeps he dreams of a ladder with angels on it and God

at the top. God assures him that he will receive providential care. Upon awakening Jacob asserts that "surely the Lord is present in this place; and I did not know it!. . . this is none other than the abode of God" (Gn. 28:16-17). So he takes the stone that he had used for a pillow and sets it upright as a pillar. He anoints the stone with oil and calls the place Bethel.

Then in chapter thirty-one, Laban says to Jacob, "come, then, let us make a pact, you and I, that there may be a witness between you and me" (Gn.31: 44). Seemingly in response to this request, Jacob takes a stone and sets it up as a pillar. This is followed by the gathering of stones to make a heap, and both the pillar and the heap are said to witness to the covenant.

When Jacob emerges from Paddan-aram, God again appears to him and blesses him. Jacob receives the name Israel and assurances that he will father a great nation which will possess the land. Then Jacob

> set up a pillar at the site where He had spoken to him, a pillar of stone, and he offered a libation on it, and poured oil upon it. Jacob gave the site, where God had spoken to him, the name of Bethel. (Gn.35:14-15).

Circumcising

The religious practice of circumcision is only mentioned once in these narratives, and yet it seems to require its own category. God appears to Abram in chapter seventeen and makes a covenant with him. God changes Abram's name to Abraham and Sarai's to Sarah.

In addition, God promises to make Abraham a great nation, to be this people's God, and to make them God's people. Then the text reads,

> Such shall be the covenant between Me and you and your offspring to follow which you shall keep: every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and that shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. (Gn.17:10-11)

This is the only commanded religious act of the patriarchal narratives that is still followed by Jewish worshippers today. It was probably also observed by Yahwists at the time of the Bible's composition. It would be interesting to explore why this one act was described as being commanded during the patriarchal period when so many other observances are only mentioned in the rest of the Pentateuch. However, we are going to turn our attention to a different problem.

Applying the Approaches

Grouping the religious occurrences according to practice has allowed us to note: whether a practice is limited to Israelites; whether the practice occurs inside the land or outside; how pervasive a given act is in the narratives; and in some cases, the implied literary function of a religious practice. Dividing the practices by category, however, also has its drawbacks. For example, it prevents us from discerning any recurring sequences of religious events. In fact, as I examined the religious acts of the patriarchal narratives, I became aware that, more often than not, the religious episodes contain a chain of events rather than a lone religious act, and these chains do sometimes recur.

I would like to examine one pattern in detail. I will try to discern how the earlier and later scholars would explain its occurrence, and then I will offer my own conclusions based on the information contained in this thesis.

The pattern is seen in three similar theophanies (one for each patriarch): Abraham's in Genesis 15, Isaac's in Genesis 26; and Jacob's in Genesis 28. In each case, the pattern begins with the patriarch receiving a vision (or dream) at night. Although each revelation occurs at a different locale, they all happen within the land. In the vision, God identifies Himself (in Isaac and Jacob's dreams God links His name with their fathers) and makes a promise of two things - providential care (such as God's comment to Isaac "I am with you" [Gn. 26:24]), and a multitude of descendants. In Abraham and Jacob's case, God also promises that they shall inherit the land. In all three examples, the patriarch then wakes up and performs a religious act, though each one performs a different act. Abraham sacrifices a heifer, a goat, a ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon (Gn.15:9). Isaac "built an altar there and invoked the Lord by name" (Gn. 26:25). And "early in the morning, Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on the top of it" (Gn. 28:18).

What explanations do our biblical scholars suggest for these three very similar narratives? When they do not comment on them explicitly, I will try to infer their views from their writings.

Robertson-Smith[4] would probably hold that these tales come from a pre-Yahwistic time (before monotheism evolved). Since he believes that primitive minds in diverse times and places think in similar ways, he might theorize that these three similar tales developed separately. If so, he would in all likelihood glean from this that other early religious groups might have stories akin to these. In the case of Jacob's dream and his subsequent declaration that "this is none other than the abode of God" (Gn. 28:17), Robertson Smith felt that this showed an ancient belief. It attested to the primitive view that one should worship gods in places where they had appeared, because they would most likely appear again in the same places.

Alt's view on these three passages is clear. To him, what is most significant here is the use of the divine name Yhwh and the linking of one patriarch to another. Alt felt that these passages evinced three once separate tribes who worshipped three distinct gods. He reasoned that with time the three became closely connected, and the editor of these sagas emphasized that connection by having God affirm in the revelations that "the fear of Isaac" equalled "the God of Abraham" equalled "the mighty one of Jacob" equalled "Yahweh."

The later group of scholars take a very different approach. None of them would agree with the practice of using these selections to try to obtain a glimpse at ancient Israelite or non-Israelite culture. Davies holds that the narratives were written between the fifth and

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[4]The information contained in this section about the biblical scholars' views can be found in fuller detail and with bibliographic information earlier in the thesis.

third centuries B.C.E. Thus he would expect them to tell us the most about that later period's culture. In his view, the patriarchal narratives were written to instill faith in Yhwh. At this time many different people lived in the land and the group in power(the Yahwists) may not have been native to this land. Thus, it would be to the Yahwist government's advantage to write a national history that gives the Yahwists a right to the land. It would also be advantageous for them if they could unite at least some of the main peoples in the land through their "history." The three theophanies we have been examining would do both of these things. Abraham and Jacob's epiphanies assert that the God Yhwh has given the land in perpetuity to the Yahwistic patriarchs' descendants, thus establishing their right to the land. In addition, each theophany could be used to connect a different segment of the population to Yahweh. Thus, if Abraham is a certain group's folk hero, Abraham is now shown to be a worshipper of Yhwh.

Davies would say that some of the fragments of these stories are undoubtedly older than their use by the Yahwist government. However, he is not interested in the "pre-Bible" life of the fragments. He holds that if we could separate these out, return them to their earlier forms (both of which are highly unlikely), and study them, we would no longer be learning about Israel as we know it but rather a pre-Israelite people.

Thompson, like Davies, thinks that these theophanies serve to tie Israel to the land. However, Thompson's theory of the individual chain narratives and the many individually-developed parts of each chain does little to explain why these three narratives are so similar.

He does suggest that motifs may repeat, and perhaps this is how he would explain the commonalities in the three theophanies.

Thompson believes that these stories originated after the formation of Israel, because only after Israel had already become unified would it dream of a unified history. Yet, he seems to hold that individual groups still existed in some form since he says that the site of each revelation was probably the holy site for a particular group and its folk hero (either Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob).

Moberly would hold that the Yahwists who wrote or reformulated (if they were old remnants) these three stories understood them as pre-Yahwistic. Thus it was all right for these ancient folk heroes to perform religious acts that would later be forbidden. Yahwistic readers of these religious practices would perceive them as having been superseded in their more sophisticated time.

As far as I can tell, Moberly does not suggest a reason for the telling of three such stories that are so alike. However, he does suggest that the promises of the land and of the multitude of descendants (and probably also of providential care) were probably understood by the Yahwistic followers as promises that they could count on in their day.

Alter notes the "epiphany in the field" as one of the biblical type-scenes he has recognized. Thus he would hold that each of these three scenes is intentionally very much like the other. Perhaps he would suggest that each folk hero had to be described as having gone through this type-scene in order to be considered one of Yhwh's elect.

My Perspective

I agree with the scholars of the later half of the twentieth century that we cannot use the patriarchal narratives as a skeletal description of early Israelite history. This does not mean that we cannot or should not try to glean historical knowledge from this material (or the rest of the Bible). Rather, we may gain in our understanding of the narratives from an attempt to reconstruct the situation which led to its creation.

I believe that Davies' basic understanding of the formation of the patriarchal narratives is on target. That is, sometime between the fifth through third centuries B.C.E., the government of Israel had the patriarchal narratives and the rest of the Torah (and perhaps more of the Bible) written down by the government scribes as the official Israelite history. Undoubtedly their creation included some new material and some reworked older material.

Davies and others have convinced me that we should concentrate on understanding the material as it was redacted rather than on trying to recreate the original layers. There are several reasons for this approach. First, the scribes would have changed the material they received to make it relevant to and an influence on the people of their time. Thus in trying to get back to the original material we would be up against two near impossibilities: correctly separating out the earlier strands and figuring out what the original said. Second, early material would not necessarily be any more historical than the later material. So, if we are looking for history, the early remnants probably do not help us anyway. Lastly (and

most important to me), the historical Israel that is the precursor to Judaism probably only came into existence around the time of the redaction of the narratives. This means that even if the fragments could provide us with information about an earlier time, they would only tell us about some pre-Israelite people, not the Israelites.

I am inclined to agree with Moberly that the patriarchal material is meant to be viewed as predating Mosaic Yahwism. Thus the religious practices described in the three theophanies that I mentioned before would be understood as acts allowed at a former time in history but now superseded by the government-approved priestly cult. It is possible that at the time of the redaction some people were still performing these unsanctioned practices, and the government chose to portray them in the official history as "primitive" practices (i.e. belonging to our ancient, ancient ancestors) to discourage such acts.[5]

We must still examine the question of why the epiphany pattern is repeated three times. Davies' reasoning probably supplies part of the answer. These stories would tie each of the three folk heroes to the God Yhwh and connect the people Israel with the land. Yet, this does not necessarily explain the similarities among the three examples.

I believe Alter has the other part of the answer in his theory of the type-scene. I think that in one way or another these three stories are part of a type-scene. It may be that the three heroes each had to undergo a similar experience because of a general cultural

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[5]I am indebted to Dr. Alan Cooper for pointing out this possibility to me.

understanding. Perhaps it was believed that God would approach each true religious hero in the night, assure him of his chosenness, declare his right to the land, and promise him that his descendants would be numerous and triumphant.[6] In such a case, the government scribes would need to be sure that each hero was accorded this past in the official record. This may even have been done to show that no favoritism existed on the part of the author.

For the Yahwist living at the time of the redaction, there may be many messages in the theophanies which we do not immediately grasp. For example, they may have been meant to suggest that just as the ancestral heroes sacrificed (or built altars) as was customary in their day and thus attained or retained God's favor, so should latter-day Israelites bring sacrifices to the Temple in order to ensure that they remain part of God's elect people (and receive the promises He promised to the patriarchs). We will probably never understand all the messages that were conveyed by these tales, but the closer we study them the more we will ascertain.

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[6]In fact in Genesis 28, Isaac hopes that God will grant Jacob these very things, perhaps attesting to the importance of having God promise these to you.

# Conclusion

When the historical-critical school was at the height of its influence, its conclusions about the composition of the text seemed completely supported by both textual and extra-textual evidence. Proponents of that school believed that they had made some nearly irrefutable discoveries about the Bible. Yet only a few decades later, many of their suppositions and their "discoveries" were being challenged.

In the last thirty years, the field of biblical scholarship has been in a state of upheaval - having rejected the old scholarly understanding of the Bible without adopting a single alternative. Still, there has been a shift toward a literary approach to the Bible, as I have noted in this thesis. The literary method has provided a fresh perspective on the text. It approached the text with new questions and suppositions. Because of its distinct vantage point, it reached very different conclusions from those of the historical-critical school on almost every issue: who composed the text, when it was composed, the purpose of its composition, and how we should study it.

Thus, one of the most important lessons to be learned from this thesis is that the questions that we bring to the Bible and the suppositions that we start with have a significant influence on the answers we glean from it. The historical-critical school probably erred in believing that they had found the way to study the Bible. This prevented them from looking for new insights which might have

pointed up mistakes in their previous thinking or provided a fresh perspective. Similarly, some of the literary scholars today seem to mistakenly argue for an almost exclusively literary understanding of the text, to the exclusion of its historical dimension.

In truth, however, both the literary and the historical perspectives add to our understanding of the text. What is needed is a balance and interplay between the two. Both viewpoints can contribute to the field. And each school can progress not only by remaining open to knowledge gained from the other, but by keeping abreast of new ways to approach the text as well. The creative synthesis of tradition and innovation, is - as it always has been - the most promising way of approaching the Bible afresh.

# Appendix I

## Chart of the Religious Practices in the Patriarchal Narratives

# CHART OF THE RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN THE PATRIARCHAL NARRATIVES

(This chart uses the Jewish Publication Society translation as found in the Plaut commentary)

| Verse | Person | I/NI* | The Religious Practice | Action Taken | Location | Reason for Religious Act |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gn.12:7 | Abram | I | built an altar to the Lord(Yhwh), who had appeared to him | builds altar | Shechem/ terebinth of Moreh | God appeared & promised Abram land |
| Gn.12:8 | Abram | I | built an altar to the Lord, and called upon the name of the Lord | builds altar | betw. Bethel & Ai | to call upon Lord |
| Gn.13:4 | Abram | I | (went to altar) there Abram called on the name of the Lord | calls on Lord at altar | betw. Bethel & Ai | |
| Gn.13:18 | Abram | I | (dwelt there and) built there an altar to the Lord | builds altar | terebinth of Mamre | God said Abram will get the land & be plentiful |
| Gn.14:18-20 | Malkizedek | NI | brought bread & wine;"blessed be Abram of God most high, Creator of heaven & earth. And blessed be God Most High" | blesses Abram with words | ? | Abram smote enemy kings; brought back goods |
| Gn.14:22 | Abram | I | I swear to the Lord, God Most High Creator of heaven and earth, that I will not take. .(spoils) | swears to God | ? | lest king would say he had made Abram rich |
| Gn.15:8-10 | Abram | I | he takes a heifer, goat, ram, turtle-dove, pigeon & divides all but birds | sacrifices | ? | God commands Abram to do so |
| Gn.17:26-27 | Abraham, et al | I&NI | circumcised all males in Abraham's house | circumcises | | God commanded Abraham to do so |
| Gn.18:2 | Abraham | I | bows to the ground | prostrates self | terebinths of Mamre, tent | three guests arrived |
| Gn.19:1 | Lot | ? | bows low with face to ground | prostrates self | gate of Sodom | saw two angels approaching |
| Gn.20:17-18 | Abraham | I | prays to God | prays | Gerar | wants God to open wombs of king's wife & slave girls |
| Gn.21:16 | Hagar | NI | lifted up her voice and wept | prays? | wilderness Be'er-sheba | |
| Gn.21:24 | Abraham | I | swears by God not to deal falsely with Abimelech | swears | Be'er-sheba(?) | |
| Gn.22:1-14 | Abraham | I | offers son up as a burnt offering; then sacrifices ram instead; | builds altar sacrifices | Mt. Moriah | God tells him to |
| Gn.23:19 | Abraham | I | buries Sarah | buries | cave of Machpelah | |
| Gn.24:9 | Abraham's servant | I | swears to Abraham that he will not take a wife for Isaac from the Canaanites | swears (hand under thigh) | | Abraham asks him to swear to this |

| Verse | Person | I/ NI | The Religious Practice | Action Taken | Location | Reason for Religious Act |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gn24:12-14 | Abraham's servant | I? | prays to God | prays | near well | wants the right woman to do things to identify herself |
| Gn24:26-27 | Abraham's servant | I? | bows head, prostrates himself before Lord, and prays (thanking God) | prostrates self and prays | | God led him to the right woman for Isaac |
| Gn24:52 | Abraham's servant | I? | prostrates himself to earth before the Lord | prostrates self | Bethuel's house | because he is told that Rebekah can be Isaac's wife |
| Gn24:60 | Rebekah's family | NI? | blesses her, may she be fruitful | blesses | Bethuel's house | she is leaving to marry Isaac |
| Gn25:9 | Isaac & Ishmael | I&NI | bury Avraham | buries | cave of Machpelah | |
| Gn25:21 | Isaac | I | entreats Lord for Rebekah | prays | in the land | she is barren |
| Gn25:23 | Rebekah | I | went to inquire of the Lord | prays | in the land | struggle in her womb |
| Gn25:33 | Esau | I ? | swears he transfers birthright to Isaac | swears | in the land | Jacob asks him to |
| Gn26:25 | Isaac | I | builds altar, calls upon the name of the Lord, pitches tent | builds altar, calls upon God | Be'er-sheba | God appeared to him; God will bless him & multiply seed |
| Gn27:27-29 | Isaac | I | blesses Jacob by mistake | blesses | in the land | he wants to bless Esau before he dies |
| Gn27:39-40 | Isaac | I | blesses Esau | blesses | in the land | Esau begs for a blessing |
| Gn.28:18-22 | Jacob | I | took stone, set it up for pillar, poured oil on it; called it Bet-el; vows vow that if God will protect him, God will be his God | sets up pillar, anoints it, vows | Bethel (Luz) | revelation from God, promise of providential care. Jacob says, this spot is God's abode. |
| Gn31:19 | Rachel | I | stole the images(teraphim - called gods by Laban in vs. 30)belonging to Lavan | | | perhaps because she believed they were powerful |
| Gn31:45-54 | Jacob | I | sets up stone pillar, mound, has meal with Laban, swears, sacrifices | sets up pillar, mound, swears, sacrifices | as enters the land | covenant between Jacob and Lavan |
| Gn32:10 | Jacob | I | prays to God: God of my father Abraham . . .deliver me from Esau | prays | upon entering the land | reminds God of promise of providential care, wants deliverance from Esau |
| Gn32:25-31 | Jacob | I | wrestles with man/angel, asks for blessing from the one he wrestles with; receives name Israel, calls the place Peniel | wrestles with angel, receives name, | upon entering the land | |
| Gn33:20 | Jacob | I | erects altar and names it | erects altar | Shalem in the land | settled there |
| Gn35:2 | Jacob | I | tells his household to put away their strange gods | | | |
| Gn35:7 | Jacob | I | builds altar and named the site | builds altar | Bethel | God told him (Gn35:1) to build an altar at Bethel |

| Verse | Person | I/ NI | The Religious Practice | Action Taken | Location | Reason for Religious Act |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gn35:14 | Jacob | I | sets up stone as pillar; offered libation on it and poured oil on it | sets up pillar, anoints it | Bethel | God spoke with Jacob there |
| Gn46:1 | Israel (aka Jacob) | I | offered sacrifices to God of his father Isaac (God then speaks to him) | sacrifices | Be'er-sheba | possibly in thanks that Joseph is still alive or to ask for God's providential care while he is in Egypt |
| Gn47:29-30 | Joseph | I | places his hand under Israel's thigh and swears to bury him with his fathers | swears | Egypt | Israel asks Joseph to swear to bury him with his fathers |
| Gn48:15-20 | Israel | I | blessed Joseph by asking God's blessing for his sons | blesses | Egypt | |
| Gn50:25 | Joseph's brothers | I | swore that they would take Joseph's bones back to their land | swears | Egypt | because Joseph asks them to swear to carry his bones up from Egypt |

*"I" refers to Israelite; "NI" refers to a non-Israelite.

# Appendix II

## A Sample Literary Sermon

I preached the following sermon on October 11, 1993 (parashah Noah) in the Hebrew Union College chapel. My sermon advisor was Dr. Edward Goldman. I included it in the thesis because it exemplifies the practical, in this case homiletical, application of a literary approach.

NOAH - It's Not Just For Children, Anymore!

"God said to Noah - there's gonna be a floody, floody; God said to Noah there's gonna be a floody, floody. Get those children out of the muddy, muddy - Children of the Lord." Did you learn this song growing up? I know I did. This song represents just one manifestation of the flood story's popularity among children. The mention of Noah brings to mind: children's books on Noah, kids' rooms adorned with pictures of the animal-filled ark, ark-shaped toy chests, kids' towels, sheets, blankets - all with the Noah's ark "insignia" on it. However on a larger scale, Noah, his ark, and the flood receive only mixed reviews. They rate high among the six and under set, but their popularity drops off quickly after that. I cannot remember the last adult study I attended on the subject or the last sermon I heard espousing the virtues of the story. Most of the time Noah gets relegated to the kids' corner. Poor Noah . . . and poor us, for our estrangement from Noah says more about our misconceptions of Torah than it does about any shortcomings on the ark owner's part.

Let me share a story with you that illustrates the misconception. A year ago I had dinner with a couple who were new to my student pulpit. The husband was not the shy type. He had no trouble asking me about my personal life, matters at the temple,

even what the temple paid me. Yet as we were about to say our good-byes, he hesitated over a particular question. "So," he tentatively ventured, "I guess you believe that Adam and Eve existed . . . and the flood and all that, right?" His question spoke so many questions. In it, I heard him asking: How can you believe those stories? Yet, I suppose you must, after all, you are becoming a rabbi. Do you expect me to believe those things, too? He seemed to want to accept these stories as factual. Perhaps he sensed that to be a good Jew he needed to have faith in them. Still, as much as he tried to believe, he was having trouble doing so. I wonder how many Jews feel stuck in this same conundrum. I fear that many have long ago lost interest in it, perhaps answering for themselves: the rabbi may believe the Bible's accounts or not - as for me I don't believe in them, and I don't need such fairy tales in my life.

The problem begins with the issue of historicity. We learn early on that the events described in the Bible are part of our people's past. Being young and impressionable, we accept that these events really occurred "once upon a time." As we grow older, however, we begin to realize that some of the stories described in the Bible are . . . well, a little far-fetched. Now we face a dilemma. Do we believe what our religious school teachers taught us - though the teaching seems more and more absurd as we mature, or do we say that the stories lack historicity and that we should follow what reason dictates instead? Most liberal Jews pick the latter path. We decide that at least some of the narratives are not historical, now of what use are they to us? Usually by this point in our search, the religious school class isn't discussing the Bible any more, or we are

out of religious school. So we must find an answer on our own. Most of the time, we quickly assign these stories to the other well-known category for narratives: fiction. Tales like Noah, no longer acceptable as history, are then tossed into a mental waste basket where they gather dust in the company of other fairy tales. Later, we will dig them out to teach to our children, and the cycle will begin anew.

Clearly, two problems develop from transmitting the Bible's larger-than-life stories as history. First, it teaches us that religion imparts *falsehoods*. We learn that we cannot trust Judaism to tell us about the world as it really is. After all, our religious teachers and seemingly the Bible itself lied to us. How, then, can we trust them in the future? We probably won't.

Secondly, we learn to think of the Bible's stories as either true or false depending solely on whether they are historical or not. If a story is not historical, then it cannot be true. This becomes more of a problem the older we grow. At first it may only affect Adam and Eve, Methuselah, and Noah. But with time, if we even still concern ourselves with biblical narratives, we may begin to doubt the veracity of Moses and the patriarchs, as well. Soon, the Torah's narratives become nothing more than a collection of stories. Sure, we can still learn from the ethical teachings in the Torah - "you shall be a kingdom of priests" - things like that, but the narratives which make up a hefty portion of the Torah become reminders of what seems to be fictitious and anachronistic in Judaism.

How can we teach these stories in a way that is intellectually honest but that still inspires awe and devotion? Is it possible to

have both? Must we either accept faith and try to ignore reason, or keep reason and have nothing to revere?

I think we *can* have both. People see Torah as contrary to reason as long as they view it as a historical document. Yet, the Bible was probably never meant to be this type of chronicle. We can stop presenting the Bible in this misleading light and focus instead on its skill at dealing with ultimate issues and at presenting the Jewish theological perspective.

The rabbis of the past seem to have understood the Bible's aims better than we do. For a very religious group, they took unusual freedoms with their holy text. They played with its words, stretched them, even reshaped them. They went so far as to elaborate on events of the past. Yet they must have known that their elaborations could not possibly be accurate. How then could they dare to tamper with their holy text? The answer lies in their recognition of the Bible as primarily a work of instruction, not a conveyor of facts. They could improvise about Abraham's smashing idols in his father's shop, because whether Abraham did so or not, the story teaches a lesson about the kind of people we should be. How often are we reminded that Hillel himself said, "the *whole Torah* exists only to establish that what is hateful to you do not do to any other?" The rabbis knew that the Torah was fundamentally concerned with the issues of life and not with the activities of people who lived hundreds of years before them.

So too, *we* should emphasize the instructive nature these stories have on an *ahistorical* level. We can encourage people to

change their question from "did it happen?" to "what can it teach me," "how can it add meaning to my life?" This change makes a world of difference. Suddenly eyes can be opened to the deeper symbolism of the Torah, to the rich language, and to the subtle allusions of its authors. They may recognize the care that was taken in arranging the complexities of some characters and the "straw person" nature of others. The Bible begins to come alive - with all of its various layers and dimensions. Most important, people may see that this rich tapestry of our people somehow holds within it a very deep level of consciousness and truth that transcends our time. Now, Torah hopefully neither fits into the category of history *nor* that of fiction, but a category of more enduring wisdom.

How do we make this happen with a story like Noah? Noah instructs from the perspective of a quintessential mythic story. Myth asserts that underneath a legendary story may be layers of symbolic truth that teach very real facts about the world.

As E.A. Speiser notes in the *Anchor Bible*, Noah represents primeval history. As such, it "seeks to give a universal setting for what is to be the early history of one particular people." The flood epic speaks of societal history, not natural history. It suggests that society has the potential to be the ideal way of life, but it is also capable of teaching great harm.

Noah is a myth of new beginnings. This is shown on a literary level through parallels between it and the Bible's first Creation myth. As Nahum Sarna points out in his commentary on Genesis, the same two verbs that are used in the original Creation are here used in

reverse order to symbolize a reversal of creation. However, this destruction does not occur so that the world may be destroyed, but so that it may be reborn. Sarna also notes that Noah is the first man to be born after the death of Adam. Thus he becomes in essence a second Adam, a second father to humanity. As our common ancestor, Noah hopefully represents some of what we are each trying to become: a person who is the best he or she can be in a given generation.

Edmund Leach, in his book *Genesis as Myth*, mentions that the omnipresence of flood stories in the ancient Eastern world suggests that the flood speaks to us on a very basic level. Yes, different groups living near each other may have influenced each other's understanding of the world, but this does not explain why certain characteristics of the story were so appealing that they were retained in each of the flood stories.

The most obvious example is the use of water itself. Why was the idea of destruction by water so compelling? The choice of water as the purifying agent is no coincidence. The whole story hints at elements of water's mythic nature: pre-formal, vital, and chaotic. In Judaism and much of the world, immersion in water is a way to dissolve previous attributes. Likewise, emerging from the water symbolizes formation and creation. Thus in the flood story, the world is immersed in water so that it can be cleansed and so that it's evil nature can be diluted into nothingness. Then the world re-emerges newly recreated.

We see the transforming and purifying aspect of water recognized in the practices of going to the mikvah and performing

tashlich. As Reform Jews, we may want to ask ourselves if we should utilize the symbolic effects that water can have. I have certainly known Reform Jews who felt that they needed a little extra help in starting over; maybe we have lost something in abandoning the role of water in our rituals.

Other elements of the Noah myth are more uniquely Jewish, such as the story's portrayal of God. It shows God to be both a punishing and a loving God. As Sarna asserts, "God's chastisement and grace operate simultaneously, so that out of disaster comes renewal." The Bible shows here, as it does repeatedly, that humans need to live up to a certain level of behavior. However, even when our conduct falls very short of what is expected, God will not rid the world of humankind. In the time of Noah, according to the story, people were as bad as they could get, and still God did not totally wipe out humankind. And the flood story tells us that God has promised never again to send such a chastisement. If society again becomes so debase that there is more harm in it than good, we may destroy ourselves, but God will not. God, from the Jewish perspective taught in the myth, has promised us grace. Now, we, and not God, must remove the evil from society.

The layers to the Noah story may be endless, and most of what it has to teach is probably above the heads of the six and under crowd. I hope we will take Noah and other Bible stories out of the mothballs and plunge into their depths with our congregants. When we do so, and we recover the fruit that these stories bear and are nourished by them, then Torah can truly be for us *a tree of life.*

Ken Yehi Ratzon.

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