

# An Examination of Scriptural and Archaeological Evidences for the Historicity of Biblical Patriarchs

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**ABSTRACT----** *The term Patriarch is the designation given to the three major ancestors of the Israelites. The ancestors are: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. However, the twelve sons of Jacob are sometimes refers to as Patriarchs, especially with the significance role played by Joseph for the sustenance of the race. The life and experiences of the Patriarchs are recorded in the book of Genesis. The stories of these Patriarchs were traditional tales which were handed down through many generations before the Old Testament writers collected them in the book of Genesis. The historicity of the Old Testament narratives about the Patriarchs has been a major debate among biblical critics, while archaeological finds has also tends to shed light on some of the events and customs attributed to the Patriarchs in the narratives. Hence, the writer in this paper will present the scriptural positions on the three Patriarchs, the archaeological discoveries that have aid the historicity of the Patriarchal narratives, and hence considered the consonance and the dissonance between the scriptural positions and archaeological discoveries that has shed light on the historicity of the Patriarchs.*

**Keywords---** Patriarch, Archaeology, Customs, Religion, Narratives

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The term Patriarch is the designation given to the three major ancestors of the Israelites. The ancestors are: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. However, the twelve sons of Jacob are sometimes refers to as Patriarchs, especially with the significance role played by Joseph for the sustenance of the race. The life and experiences of the Patriarchs are recorded in the book of Genesis. Genesis has an account of two sets of Patriarchs as claimed by Stephen Andrew: those before the flood (antediluvian) and those after the flood (postdiluvian) but there is a restriction to the well known and recognized three Patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob when speaking about religion and the nation of Israel.<sup>1</sup>

The stories of these Patriarchs were traditional tales which were handed down through many generations before the Old Testament writers collected them in the book of Genesis. Technically, this means of transmission of information from one generation to the other is called oral tradition. Hence, the writer in this paper will present the scriptural positions on the three Patriarchs, the archaeological discoveries that have aid the historicity of the Patriarchal narratives, and hence considered the consonance and the dissonance between the scriptural positions and archaeological discoveries that has shed light on the historicity of the Patriarchs.

## 2. SCRIPTURAL POSITIONS ON THE PATRIARCHS

The Patriarchs originated from the near East of Palestine and they were seen as people who move across a wide range of land: from Mesopotamia to Egypt. Other towns that were important at the time of the Patriarchs were Megiddo, Hazor, Lachish, Gezer and Jericho. They were semi-nomadic shepherds who lived in movable tents. According to Thompson, they lived together and were well organized; there was a good inter-related social unit which comprised of extended families or clans and the father was the head of the family upon whom power had been conferred.<sup>2</sup> The accounts of the three Patriarchs, who are the main focus of this paper, are found in Genesis chapter 12-50. In those accounts, Abraham and Jacob appear to be the principal characters while Isaac's role was more of secondary.<sup>3</sup> The major theme in the Patriarchal narrative is in the call of Abraham who became a childless immigrant but with the promise of a great nation, the promise which was reaffirmed to Isaac in Genesis 26:2-5. Isaac was seen as a subordinate to Abraham

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Stephen J. "Isaac" in *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*. Ed. By Watson E. Mills Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1990, p. 653.

<sup>2</sup> Thompson J.A. *The Bible and Archaeology*, Grand RapidsP: Willliam B. Eerdmann Publishing Company, 1982, p. 13

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Stephen, p.653

because God's promises to Abraham were virtually transferred to Isaac; meaning that the promises will continue to the future generations. Isaac became a major link between Abraham and the future generations of Israel.<sup>4</sup>

The Bible places the home of Abraham at Ur of the Chaldees and suggests two stages of his migration to Palestine. First from the city Ur to Haran, and second, from Haran to Canaan. The city of Ur according to biblical narratives can be found in Lower Mesopotamia (Genesis 11:31).<sup>5</sup> Abraham was a ninth-generation descendant of Sham, son of Noah. Abraham's father Terah was a native of the Ur of Chaldees (Gen. 11:26, 28). The migration of Abraham from Ur to Canaan was explained in the biblical narratives as his obedient response to a divine directive, to which several promises are attached (Gen.12: 1-2). These promises were crowned by possession of the land of Canaan. However, in the face of famine, Abraham abandoned the Promised Land for a greener pasture in Egypt (Gen. 12:10-20). Upon Yahweh intervention between Abraham and the king of Egypt over Sarah, Abraham returned to Canaan, and in chapter 15 and 17, Yahweh reestablished His covenant with Abraham, culminated in covenant ritual. Chapter 16 narrates the story about Hagar-Sarai surrogate motherhood. Chapter 18 portrays Abraham intercession for Sodom and Chapter 19, Lot's deliverance from Sodom. The Promised son was given birth to in Chapter 21, Sarah's death and purchase of Ephron's field in Machpelah in chapter 23, Isaac married Rebekah in Chapter 24, and the death of Abraham recorded in Chapter 25. Thus, the Patriarchal lineage was carried on by Isaac.

In the biblical narratives, the major focus on the life of Isaac was recorded from Genesis 21 to 28. The Isaac stories function as a hinge in the narrative structure of Genesis, looking retrospectively to Abraham and prospectively to Jacob.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Isaac played a significant role in advancing the theme of Patriarchal blessing, providing the link between Abraham and Israel (Jacob). Kloud and Luther further assert<sup>7</sup> that Isaac's marriage and Abraham's death set the stage for the emergence of next generation of Israel. Isaac and Rebekah gave birth to two sons (Esau and Jacob). The sons represent two nations that would be hostile to each other.<sup>8</sup> Isaac died at the age of one hundred and eighty years and was buried beside Rebekah having passed down the Patriarchal blessing to Jacob in his death-bed blessing.

Jacob was the third of the great Hebrew Patriarchs. The narratives concerning him are woven between that of Ishmael and Esau as found in Genesis 25:19-35. The literary pattern of the narratives concerning Jacob has been presented in a chiasmic structure by Fishbane under the following headlines: oracle sought- interlude- deception- encounter-internal cycle opens.<sup>9</sup> In sum, the Patriarch Jacob became the last of what can be term the religious ancestors of the Israelites. Hitherto, these Patriarchs did not live in a vacuum. They lived within a time and culture has reported be in the biblical narratives.

Their Customs: The customs of the Patriarchal period were written on clay tablets and they contained matters that had to do with their everyday life, commerce, religion, private and legal documents such as the Hammurabi code, the code of the town of Eshnuma, the fragmented Sumerian code of the kings of Lipit-Ishtar and Ur-nammi.<sup>10</sup> These documents have been found very important in understanding the customs of the Patriarchal period.

Their Religion: The nature of the religion of the Patriarchs is very complex because of different writings on it.<sup>11</sup> However, against the background of their time, which is marked by polytheistic religion, the bible portrayed the Patriarchs as advocates of one God –monotheistic. The Patriarchs were religious; they built altars, made sacrifices and covenants and they prayed. Circumcision was of paramount importance to them since it was commanded by God. Above all, Yahweh as stated in the biblical narratives introduced Himself as the God of Abraham, God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.

Situated within the biblical narratives regarding the Patriarchs, is the chronological information. It is with Abraham and the other Patriarchs that the biblical story is first reported in the context of a historical setting. While the Bible does not attempt to correlate the Patriarchal narratives with the chronology of any other nation, two passages place the Patriarchs some 400 (Gen 15:13) to 430 years (Ex 12:40-41) prior to the Exodus event.<sup>12</sup> Abraham migration to Canaan has been calculated using the date of Solomon's temple as a premise:

Solomon began to build the temple around 966 B.C.E. According to I King 6:1, the exodus preceded when Solomon began to build the temple by 480yrs. Thus, the exodus can be dated 1446 B.C.E. At the birth of Isaac, Abraham was 100yrs. Isaac was 60yrs when Jacob was born, and Jacob was 130yrs when he went down to Egypt. Hence, from Abraham to Jacob sojourned in Egypt is equal 290yrs. The 1446 plus 290 plus the 430yrs spent in Egypt is equal

<sup>4</sup> Boase, Elizabeth. "Life in the Shadows: The Role and Function of Isaac in Genesis – Synchronic and Diachronic Readings: *Vestus Testamentum*. Vol. 51 Number 3, 2001 p. 312-335

<sup>5</sup> Thompson, Thomas *The Historicity of Patriarchal Narratives: The Quest for the Historical Abraham* Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002, p. 17

<sup>6</sup> Luther A.B. & Klouda S.L. "Patriarchal" in *Dictionary of Old Testament: Pentateuch*

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 447

<sup>8</sup> Young E. J., "Isaac" *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary* Sydney: InterVarsity Press, 1980, p. 698

<sup>9</sup> Fishbane, M. A. *Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts*. New York: Schocken, 1979, p. 40-62.

<sup>10</sup> Thompson J.A. p. 1162

<sup>11</sup> Martin-Achard, Robert. "Isaac" *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Vol. 3 H-J ED. BY David Noel Freedman. New York: DoubleDay Dell Publishing Group, 1992, p. 468

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Browning, "The Patriarchal Period: Middle Bronze Age" [belinarchaeology.files.wordpress.com](http://belinarchaeology.files.wordpress.com)

2166B.C.E.<sup>13</sup> This date has been situated by William Albright as the Middle Bronze Age I, although there were different positions from other Archaeologists.

### 3. ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES AND PATRIARCHAL NARRATIVES

The process of unraveling the literary structure of the Hebrew Bible and assigning its parts to a long historical trajectory has underline the intimate connection between the Bible and the literary collection of the history of the Jewish people.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, historical critics set their task to recover additional information about the history of biblical community and its personalities. Archaeological discovery of ancient remains in relation to biblical history has aided greatly in the historicity of the biblical narratives. Although, some of this discovery are not directly mentioned in the biblical narratives, but they shed lights to the events recorded in the biblical narratives. Of significant discoveries to the patriarchal narratives are: the city of Ur, the Nuzi tablets, The Mari tablets, Sumerian tablets, and Ebla tablets.<sup>15</sup>

In 1922, Leonard Woolley excavated the city of Ur in southern Iraq and found it had been a thriving metropolis around 2000 B.C.E, precisely around the time of Abraham, has dated by Archaeologist. That is, the Middle Bronze Age. According to Thompson, classrooms were excavated that yielded schoolchildren's tablets with lessons on grammar and arithmetic, variations on the name of Abraham were found, streets, two-story building, receipts used for commercial purposes, trade routes and many other evidences of a highly developed civilization.<sup>16</sup> Although, there are still arguments on the exact Ur of the Chaldees recorded in the biblical narratives, it is thus evident that there existed a city of Ur in the time of the patriarch Abraham.

The most interesting discovery thus far that lends credence to the patriarchal narratives is the Nuzi tablets, uncovered between 1925 and 1941. The tablets which are in Akkadian, reveal much about ancient laws and customs. Nearly 5000 tablets were found in the excavation at Nuzi, mostly business and legal documents, and they were found in both palace and private residences. When Abraham mentioned the adoption of his slave, Eliezer of Damascus (Gen. 15:2), when Sarah encouraged Abraham to bear children through Hagar, they were just practicing the customs of their time.<sup>17</sup> According to Gordon, the Nuzi tablets have significant parallels with the patriarchal customs. The Nuzi tablets show it was normal for childless couple to adopt a servant as son; he would serve them until they died and became their heir. In case of a childless couple, the wife could locate another woman for her husband. One of the tablets reads, "If Gilimnimu (the wife) will not bear children, Gilimnimu shall take a woman of Lulluland as a wife for Shannma (the husband)"<sup>18</sup> Hence, the traditions of the Patriarchal Age, preserved in the book of Genesis reflect with remarkable accuracy the actual conditions of the Middle Bronze Age.

Mari (also known as Tell-el Harari) was first excavated in 1925 by. Among the finds were the famous Mari letters from the Royal archive. In these tablets, mentioned were made of cities name found in the patriarchal narratives: Nahor, Hazor, Haran and Lacish. The mention of tribes of pastoral nomads, known as Amorites has proved particularly relevant. An important question which has not yet been satisfactorily answered is whether the patriarchs were part of the Amorites mentioned in these tablets. The excavation by Margueron in 1979 also led to discovery of legal documents, of exceptional interest is an adoption contract which ensured the 'primogeniture' of the eldest (i.e., first adopted) son, stipulating that he receive a double portion of the inheritance; this is in full accord with biblical law (Deut. 21:15-17).<sup>19</sup> The Patriarchs passing down of the covenant blessing from one to another alludes to this discovery. This is glaring seen in the adoption of Joseph sons by the patriarch Jacob.

Major in the patriarchal discourse is the domestication of camel as argued by Van Seter. He stated that camels were not used in the East as at the time of the Patriarchs. This assertion cannot be maintained any longer. Thompson asserts that, "it is probably true that camels had not come into very general use in the Patriarchal time. It was more likely around 1300 B.C.E before the beast of burden became popular." However, Free assert that there is clear evidence that camels was used somewhat in earlier times. Small clay figures, carvings, and some pieces of camel bone and camel hair are discovered from graves in both Egypt and Mesopotamia that dated before 2000 B.C.E.<sup>20</sup> If the dating of Abraham to the Middle Bronze Age is assumed appropriate, hence, there is no need to regard the reference to the usage of camel in patriarchal narratives as anachronisms.

Ancient Near Eastern scholarship has continued to vindicate the patriarchal narratives. One particularly interesting piece of archaeological data comes from the modern village of Beni Hasan, which lies 160 miles south of Cairo in Egypt. It is home to 39 monumental tombs of Egyptian officials from the Middle Kingdom Period (2050-1650 B.C.), in addition

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.truthnet.org/biblicalarchaeology> Accessed 25/8/2014

<sup>14</sup> Gottwald, Norman K. *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmann, 1984, p. 15

<sup>15</sup> William Albright *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1955, p.176

<sup>16</sup> Thompson, J.A. *The Bible and Archaeology* Grand Rapids: William Eerdmann Publishing Company, 1982, p.17-18.

<sup>17</sup> Unger Merill F. *Archaeology and the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973, p. 122.

<sup>18</sup> Gordon, C.H. "Marriage in the Ancient Near East, *The Biblical Archaeologist* Vol. 3 No.1, 1940.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/judaica/eju> Accessed 14/5/2013.

<sup>20</sup> Free, J. P. *Archaeology and Bible History* Wheaton: Scripture Press, 1950, p. 187.

to a few tombs from the Old Kingdom Period (2686-2186 B.C.). The tomb of a nomarch (governor) named Khnumhotep II is particularly interesting for the study of the patriarchs.

The walls of Khnumhotep's tomb contain paintings portraying scenes from his life. The most famous, however, is a depiction of a caravan from Canaan. The accompanying hieroglyphic inscription indicates that there were 37 members of this caravan. The exact purpose of their visit is debated among scholars, but most agree that it was some kind of commercial venture.<sup>21</sup> The differences between the Egyptians and the Canaanite merchants depicted in the paintings are very obvious. While the Egyptians wear their customary white linen kilts, the merchants wear multi-colored garments. The clothing worn by the men is a sign of their wealth. This calls to mind the *passim* of Joseph that sparked jealousy in his brothers.<sup>22</sup>

The Beni Hasan tomb painting recalls two important details about the patriarchal narratives in Genesis. First, each of the patriarchs spent time in Egypt. The fact that they traveled in groups—as in the case of Jacob prior to his encounter with Esau (Genesis 33), as well as his move to Egypt with the extended family (Genesis 46)—also fits the biblical text.<sup>23</sup>

Among the cities mentioned in the biblical narratives was Hebron. According to Unger, Hebron was not founded until seven years before Zoan in Egypt (Num. 13:32) which is about 1700 B.C. Mamre was mentioned to the name of the city earlier before it was called Hebron.<sup>24</sup> This claim portrayed Hebron as Mamre. In Gold's world, "the tradition is supported by the patriarchal narrative in which the references are to Mamre, just north of Hebron with latter serving chiefly as a location point for the hearers (and readers) in a later date"<sup>25</sup> Hence, Mamre and Hebron refer to the same city. This city was excavated in the summer of 1963 by Philip Hammond of Princeton Theological Seminary. In this Tell, Stern asserts that one seal impression with words (*mlh hbrm*) was found. The acceptable translation of this inscription is an ongoing debate, but in Stern words, it best translated 'King Abraham'.<sup>26</sup> This idea best suite Abraham as a clan head as designated by scholars.

From the foregoing, it is evident that archeological research has situates the patriarchal narratives within its historical, cultural and social settings that are parallel to its time, although, the study of the total cultural background of the Near East is yet to be exhausted. However, only against the background of the Ancient Near East can the patriarchal narratives be situated. This does not assert accuracy, but brings to bare that patriarchal narrative; the events and personalities are not product of creative imagination, rather, existential figures. Therefore, the contrast and the similarity between the biblical narratives and archaeological evidences will be discussed below.

#### 4. COMPARATIVE EXAMINATION OF SCRIPTURAL POSITIONS ON THE PATRIARCHS AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, archaeology has been a major external source for getting at the historical claims of the Bible. However, this does not assert a total par with the biblical narratives. The reason being that many of these discoveries cannot be pointed as the exact one recorded in the biblical narratives.

##### a. Dissonance

The major dissonance between archaeological discoveries and the biblical positions on the historicity of the Patriarchs has been in the area of chronology. According to the biblical chronology, the Patriarchs were supposedly in Canaan between 2016 and 1868 B.C.E. William Albright has dated the Patriarchs in the Middle Bronze I (2100-1900 B.C.E), because of its richly nonurban culture. Ebla tablets excavated in northern Syria are used to support this claim.<sup>27</sup> However, the discovery of a sanctuary at Schechem, dating to 1800 B.C.E, has been associated with the patriarchal worship site in Gen. 33:18-20.<sup>28</sup> In the light of this, the patriarchs were dated to the Middle Bronze II against I. In all, archaeology fixing of one or another date for the patriarchs has not been convincing. It only portrays the biblical archaeologists reading into the discoveries a date that suite the patriarchal narratives.

Another point of dispersion is the identification of Ur of the Chaldees. According to Saggs, the statue discovered by Leonard Woolley in lower Mesopotamia, with the inscription "Ur of the Chaldees", cannot be dated to second millennium B.C.E, when the Chaldeans had not emerged into the light of recorded history.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, if the Chaldean

<sup>21</sup> Hoffmeier, James L. *Israel in Egypt* Oxford: Oxford University Press.1996, p.61

<sup>22</sup> Dewayne, Bryant "Ben Hani Tomb Inscription and the Patriarch Period" [www.apologeticpress.org](http://www.apologeticpress.org) accessed 19/9/2014.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*

<sup>24</sup> Unger, Merrill F. *Archaeology and the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954, p. 114

<sup>25</sup> Gold, V.B. "Hebron" *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Ed. George Arthur Buttrick. Nashville:Abingdon Press, 1962, p. 570.

<sup>26</sup> Stern, Ephraim. *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible, Vol.II. The Assyrian Babylonian and Persian Periods (732-332 B.C.E)*. New Yor: Doubleday, 2001, p.165.

<sup>27</sup> Gottwald, p. 165.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*

<sup>29</sup> Saggs, W.F. "Ur of the Chaldees: A Problem of Identification" Vol. XXII, 1960, p.206.

were not yet in the known history as at the time of Abraham, the excavated city of Ur may not necessarily be the one referred to in the biblical narratives.

b. Consonance

One of the most archaeological discoveries that parallel the patriarchal customs is the Nuzi tablet. A great range of customary legal practices evidenced in the Nuzi tablets have suggested close affinities with the marriage, family, and inheritance customs of the Patriarchs. Among the parallels between Nuzi and Patriarchal customs are highlighted by Gottwald as follows:

- i. A barren wife must provide her husband a slave girl through whom he may have children (Gen. 16:1-2; 30:9)
- ii. A husband could have the concurrent status of brother by adopting his wife from her natural brother (Gen. 12:11-13; 20:2; 26:7)
- iii. A person could sell a birthright to another (Gen. 25:29-34)
- iv. A childless couple could adopt someone to provide for them who would in the end inherit their property, except that any subsequent naturally born son would automatically inherit the property in place of the adopted son (Gen. 15:1-4)
- v. Possession of household gods was a kind of titles deed to inheritable property (Gen. 31:34)
- vi. A deathbed testament, or blessing, by the head of a family could have a force of law (Gen. 27:35-37; 48:8-22).<sup>30</sup>

However, the above stated customs as portrayed in the Nuzi tablets, are only parallel of the customs in patriarchal narratives, which suggests that patriarchal customs did not occur in a vacuum, rather, they fit into the context of the patriarchal age.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The correlation of Patriarchal customs with the Ancient Near Eastern customs should be recognized. The parallelism represents a supreme example that life events don't happen in a vacuum, they happens within context. However, this does not claim all archaeological discoveries that have shed light on the historicity of the Patriarchs are at total par with the biblical narratives. Archaeological discovery in the Ancient Near East support and illuminate the Scripture. Discoveries continue to fill in the picture of the ancient civilization in which the Patriarchs lived. It may be that archaeology will never prove that the Patriarchs really existed, but what can be proved is that their lives and times existed within a large historical culture. Thus, in expressing Himself to mankind, God uses something that is already understood as the starting point of a relationship. Far from showing the unreliability of the Bible, archaeology has proved to be one of Scripture's strongest allies. However, the issues on the dating of the Patriarchs still remain an open-ended discourse.

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<sup>30</sup> Gottwald, p. 170

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