
Introduction

Title

The word Genesis comes from the Greek *genesis*, “birth, origin.” The Hebrews called the book by its first word, *bereshith*, “in the beginning.” Genesis, of course, is about beginnings—specifically the beginning of the earth and the beginning of the people of God. Its purpose is to present the deep roots of Israel’s lineage by recounting those key episodes in the primeval time that set the stage for God’s calling Abraham to become the bearer of the promises. These promises set into motion God’s program for bringing blessing to all peoples. The promises would thus overcome the curses God had placed both on the earth and on aspects of human existence because of human wickedness. The core of Genesis is found in the narratives about Israel’s ancestors Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph. Many other figures, such as Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Leah, Rachel, and Judah also play key roles in the narratives.

Structure and Composition

The book of Genesis contains two major divisions: the first consists of primeval narrative, which provides a global setting for the ancestral narratives by presenting the major events and their consequent curses that have profoundly influenced the course of all human life (1:1–11:26), and the second consists of the ancestral narratives, in which the Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph narratives show the ways God counters the curses (11:27–50:26). In the primeval narrative Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, which leads to their expulsion from the garden; human violence increases, which leads to the great flood; Ham shames Noah, which leads to the curse on Canaan; and numerous peoples plan to build a common culture at Shinar (Babylon), which leads to God’s confusing their speech and scattering them. Then, in the three narratives that make up the ancestral narratives, God counters

these curses. He creates a people who will worship only him and provides a way for all the nations to find blessing through this people. God calls Abraham to leave Haran and go to Canaan and backs up the call with several promises that Abraham's descendants will become a great nation. In Canaan, God promises to give Abraham's descendants that land as their heritage. These descendants move about Canaan believing that God will give this land to their children and that their children will multiply into a nation. The narrative then describes the growth of Abraham's seed into seventy persons who must go to Egypt in order to survive a terrible famine in Canaan. Genesis closes with all the descendants of Abraham's grandson Jacob living in Egypt and looking forward to their return to Canaan and possession of the land God promised to their great ancestor.

Toledoth Formula

Genesis has ten clearly marked sections, five each in the primeval and ancestral narratives. Each section is headed by a *toledoth* passage (in the first section the formula stands at 2:4a, see comments). The *toledoth*, a Hebrew noun from the root *y-l-d* "to bear," often identifies a list of descendants of a person or the lead members of a clan. The genealogy may be short (e.g., 11:27–32), or it may name several generations (e.g., 5:1–32). These lists often were the official record of a family's lineage and frequently function as an introduction to a section. Sometimes notes about births and/or deaths or anecdotes became attached to a genealogy. Given the variety in the material identified by *toledoth*, this Hebrew term is translated by several English words, as "genealogy," "generations," "account," "family history," and "ancestral narrative." Usually this formula heads a section by identifying the father of the major figure in that section.¹

The *toledoth* formulas in Genesis establish the generations from Adam to Joseph, thereby connecting the seed of Abraham to both the primeval generations and the created order. They also locate the seed of Abraham among the nations in general and the peoples of Canaan in particular. Here are the ten formulas:

Primeval Narrative

1. The generations of the heavens and the earth
(1:1–4:26)
2. The generations of Adam (5:1–6:8)

3. The ancestral narrative of Noah (6:9–9:29)
4. The generations of Noah's sons (10:1–11:9)
5. The genealogy of Shem (11:10–26)

Ancestral Narratives

6. The ancestral narrative of Terah (11:27–25:11)
7. The genealogy of Ishmael (25:12–18)
8. The ancestral narrative of Isaac (25:19–35:29)
9. The genealogy of Esau (36:1–43)
10. The ancestral narrative of Jacob (37:1–50:26)

Sometimes a *toledoth* formula heads a genealogy of names (e.g., numbers 5 and 7). Other times it provides a brief family lineage as an introduction to a narrative of that person's son (e.g., number 6). The final editor has placed each *toledoth* strategically as the heading to the following narrative.² These *toledoth* sections tie the book together and place all the narratives into a genealogical framework. They probably had a separate origin from the narrative material.

Like the Mesopotamians, the Israelites zealously preserved genealogies. But while Mesopotamian genealogies established the right of kings to rule, the Israelite genealogies in the primeval narrative of Genesis present the lineage of the natural descendants from Adam to Noah and from Noah to Terah for the purpose of showing the interconnection of all people from the earth's beginning. The primeval narrative gives no emphasis to status or rulership; each descendant has value by bearing the image of God. Because of God's blessing (1:28; 9:1), humans increase rapidly to form clans, tribes, and nations. The genealogies in the ancestral narratives identify the position and inheritance of the members of the seed of Abraham.

The Structures of the Four Narratives of Genesis

Structurally, the two major divisions of Genesis are divided into four narratives. The first division is made up of the primeval narrative (1:1–11:26). The second division, the ancestral narratives, is made up of the Abraham narrative (the *toledoth* sections covering the families of Terah and Ishmael; 11:27–25:18), the Jacob narrative (the *toledoth* sections covering the families of Isaac and Esau; 25:19–36:43), and the Joseph narrative (the *toledoth* section of Jacob's family; 37:1–50:26).³ The material in each of these narratives

has been artfully arranged with balance and symmetry in mind. The organizing principle for the Abraham and Jacob narratives is palistropic (chiasitic). A palistrophe is the arrangement of material in a V-shaped pattern so that material in each step moving in toward the center mirrors material on the corresponding step moving out from the center. For example:

- A The Outer Frame
 - B The Inner Frame
 - C The Core Story
 - B' The Inner Frame
- A' The Outer Frame

The center itself may or may not be mirrored, and there may be as many steps as an author desires.

The Primeval Narrative. The prominent themes in the primeval narrative are human transgression/divine punishment and God's mercy. The primeval narrative has eleven units; the first six are organized in a palistrophe and the remaining six (the middle unit, A*, is shared) are set in two parallel panels of three units each.⁴

Thus the pattern of the primeval narrative is as follows:

- A Creation (1:1–2:4a)
 - B The making of the garden of Eden, human disobedience, and God's judgment (2:4b–3:24)
 - C₁ The genealogy of Cain, fratricide, contributions to culture, and Lamech's boasting of multiple murders (4:1–24)
 - C₂ The genealogy of Seth (ten generations) and the worship of Yahweh (4:25–5:32)
 - B' The increase of wickedness (6:1–8)
- A* The flood (uncreation; 6:9–8:22)
 - B₁* God's covenant of the rainbow (9:1–17)
 - C₁' Noah's genealogy, his contribution to culture, and Ham's transgression (9:18–29)
- A₁' The Table of Nations (re-creation; 10:1–32)
 - B₂ Human rebellion in building the Tower of Babel (11:1–9)
 - C₂' The genealogy of Shem (ten generations; 11:10–26)

In discussing the organizational pattern of each of the four narratives in Genesis, accounts with similar themes standing in parallel position are marked by ' (for example A, A'), accounts with

contrasting themes standing in parallel position, being antithetical, are marked by * (such as in A, A*), and accounts standing in parallel position that treat different topics while sharing a theme or issue in common are noted by a numerical subscript (as in C₁, C₂, C₃).

In this discussion we shall call the palistrophic pattern (1:1–8:22) the first segment and the parallel sequence (6:9–11:26) the second segment. Materials in the second segment modulate themes in the first segment. The fulcrum between the two segments is the account of the flood (A*), since it belongs to both patterns. The whole is united by the movement from creation (A) to chaos or uncreation (A*) to re-creation (A'). Although the earth God creates is very good (A), human society becomes so violent that God has to judge the inhabited earth with a cataclysmic flood (A*), returning the earth to a state of chaos similar to its existence at the beginning (1:2). After the flood the restored earth is repopulated, as attested in the Table of Nations (A'; ch. 10).

In the B position of the first segment are accounts of human rebellion: human disobedience in the garden of Eden (B) and the intolerable increase of wickedness on earth (B'). In the B position of the second segment are God's covenant of peace symbolized by the rainbow (B₁*) and the account of the Tower of Babel (B₂), which expands the theme of human rebellion found in all B positions. In B two people disobey God; in B₂ an entire city-state opposes God's desire. Rather than dispersing, they gather in Shinar and undertake a massive building project to promote their own fame. Their actions bring God's judgment, just as the rapid increase of violence in society in B' move God to bring about the flood. While the account of God's covenant of peace (B₁*) does not recount any deed of human wickedness, it highlights God's covenant relationship with humans and thus expands on the (implied) covenantal relationship between God and humans, which was initiated in the garden of Eden (B). Furthermore, the report of God's covenant of peace (B₁*) is antithetical to the report of the increase in human wickedness (B'); nevertheless, these two accounts share a concern for all humanity. This antithesis, heightened by also being in a B position, lets the picture of God's grace stand out against the dark background of human wickedness.

Genealogies stand at the center of both segments, all in C position: Cain's (C₁) and Seth's (C₂) are in the first segment; Noah's (C₁') and Shem's (C₂') are in the second segment. Cain's and Noah's genealogies contain reports of wicked deeds and cultural

achievements. The cultural contributions of Cain's offspring foster the development of civilization; the contribution of Noah's offspring brings humans refreshment and relaxation, corresponding to the meaning of his name, "rest." The second genealogy in both segments has ten generations: from Seth to Noah (C₂) and from Noah to Terah (C₂'). Thus Genesis presents epochs of ten generations on each side of the flood.

There are six accounts of humans disobeying God, and all except the third are followed by the consequential judgment. In B the first human pair eats the fruit that God has forbidden, and God expels them from the garden after pronouncing a curse against an aspect of their being (3:1–24). In C₁ Cain commits fratricide, and God curses him (4:8–12). Lamech boasts of his willingness to kill wantonly (4:23–24). Society becomes characterized by increasing violence, and God brings a great flood to wipe out this wickedness (6:1–7:24). In C₁' Ham acts shamefully toward his father, and Noah curses Canaan (9:20–27). In B₂ humans brazenly go against God's design by assembling in Shinar and setting out to build a city and a tower to promote their own fame, and God confuses their language so that they will disperse throughout the earth (11:1–9).

By contrast, God in four acts of mercy takes steps to make life more tolerable for humans under divine curse. In Eden God gives Adam and Eve garments made from skins to provide them protection against the harsher environment outside the garden (B; 3:21). God puts a mark on Cain's forehead to prevent an avenger from killing him (C₁; 4:15). God gives Noah plans to build an ark in order to deliver his house and representatives of all the animals from the flood (A*; 6:13–21). God puts the rainbow in the sky as a sign that there will never be another cataclysmic flood (B₁*; 9:8–17). These acts of mercy assure us that God cares for the well-being of humans despite their proneness to do wrong.

The Abraham Narrative (Gen. 11:27–25:18). Against the universal background of the primeval narrative (1:1–11:26) stand the patriarchal narratives. The first of these begins with God's calling Abraham to leave his father's household and go to the land that God will show him. God bolsters this call with several promises to work through Abraham's seed to establish his kingdom on earth. Through Abraham's seed God unleashes a blessing that is the antidote to those curses God pronounced as judgments on human

rebellion (chs. 1–11). Through this great nation all the families of the earth (listed in the Table of Nations, ch. 10) may find blessing. In promising to give Abraham a great name (*shem*), God is providing an honorable path to a lasting reputation (*shem*). Lasting fame, therefore, comes from walking with God in faith, rather than from building earthly monuments that are subject to decay and destruction. Abraham’s fame continues to this day: Jews, Arabs, and Christians all celebrate him as their father.

The Abraham narrative is organized as a palistrophe:

- A The family history of Terah (11:27–32)
 - B Abram obeys God by moving to Canaan (12:1–9)
 - C₁ Sarai in Pharaoh’s harem (12:10–20)
 - C₂ Abram’s success and Lot’s separation from Abram (13:1–18)
 - D Abram rescues Lot (14:1–24)
 - E₁ God makes a covenant with Abram (15:1–21)
 - E₂ God informs Hagar of the birth of Ishmael (16:1–16)
 - E₁’ God renews the covenant with Abraham (17:1–27)
 - E₂’ God informs Sarah of the birth of Isaac (18:1–15)
 - D’ Abraham intercedes for Sodom and Lot’s deliverance (18:16–19:38)
 - C₁’ Sarah in Abimelech’s palace (20:1–18)
 - C₂’ Ishmael and Hagar expelled from Abraham’s household and Abraham’s success, leading to a covenant with Abimelech (21:1–34)
 - B’ Abraham obeys God by binding Isaac (22:1–19)
 - A’ Genealogy of Nahor (22:20–24)

Following this palistrophic pattern, five entries bring the Abraham narrative to a close:

- a The burial of Sarah in the Cave of Machpelah (23:1–20)
- b Finding a bride for Isaac (24:1–67)
- c Abraham’s children by Keturah (25:1–6)
- d The death and burial of Abraham (25:7–11)
- e Ishmael’s children (25:12–18)

The core narratives about Abraham are framed by the genealogies of his relatives in Haran—Terah (A) and Nahor (A’). At the center is God’s covenant with Abraham, inaugurated (E₁) and

renewed (E₁'). The key verse positioned just before God enters into covenant with Abraham (E₁) defines Abraham's relationship with God: Abraham believes Yahweh, and Yahweh credits it to him as righteousness (15:6). Closely linked to both covenantal ceremonies are the announcements of the births of Abraham's sons: Ishmael (E₂) and Isaac (E₂').

In the B positions stand two amazing examples of Abraham's complete obedience to God. At God's command Abraham leaves his father's household at Haran and travels to Canaan (B). Near the end of his life he follows God's instructions by binding Isaac and laying him on an altar as proof of his unconditional obedience to God (B').

After Abraham arrives in Canaan, he faces several trials. The accounts of these trials stand in positions C and D. Twice Abraham faces the threat of losing Sarah to a foreign king: to Pharaoh in Egypt (C₁) and to Abimelech in Gerar (C₁'). Twice Abraham's success is acclaimed. After he returns to Canaan from Egypt, there is a description of his wealth and his peaceful movement through the land (C₂). On the other side, there is the account of Abimelech's making a covenant with Abraham because of Abraham's success (C₂'). Twice Abraham suffers the sorrow of separation as the means to overcome intense conflict in his household. In order to end the quarreling between his shepherds and Lot's due to the increasing size of their flocks, he and Lot separate (C₂). After the birth of Isaac, Sarah, impelled by jealousy of Hagar and Ishmael as well as by her desire to protect Isaac, demands that Abraham expel Hagar and Ishmael from the household (C₂'). After Lot settles in Sodom, Abraham has to rescue him from harm on two occasions. The first time he undertakes a military excursion to free Lot, who has been taken captive by the kings of the East (D). The second time, on the basis of Abraham's righteousness, divine messengers deliver Lot from the conflagration of the cities of the plain (D'). Lot is last seen living in a cave as a recluse with his daughters. Thus Lot serves as a foil that emphasizes Abraham's obedient faith all the more.

Two dimensions of the picture of Abraham deserve mention. First, Abraham is portrayed as a sheik or a chief (king). In the second millennium B.C. there were many kings in Canaan, ruling over city-states. While Abraham does not have a city-state, he is portrayed as being on a par with these kings. He has access to and visits the courts of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and Abimelech, king of

Gerar. The settlement Abraham received from the latter places him on the same level as this king. When Abraham goes to the elders of Hebron to buy a plot of land, they receive him with the deference accorded a chief (ch. 23). Abraham's ability to muster a military force (14:14–16) shows that he is in the same league with other princes in Canaan. Thus Abraham is numbered among the leaders or kings of Canaan.

Second, Abraham is portrayed as a prophet. God explicitly identifies Abraham as a prophet to Abimelech (20:7). Abraham exercises that role by praying for Abimelech's household (20:17) and by interceding for Sodom (18:16–33). Psalm 105:12–15 describes the patriarchs as prophets. Also, Abraham is characterized as a prophet in receiving the word of Yahweh. The formula "the word of Yahweh came to . . ." (*hayah debar-yhwh 'el*) in 15:1 (see v. 4) is used by many prophets to give their words authority (e.g., Jer. 1:4, 11, 14; 2:1; Ezek. 1:3; 3:16; 6:1; 11:14). Not long after the word of the Lord comes to Abraham, God causes a deep sleep to fall on him and in that sleep reveals to him the destiny of his people (15:13–16). Even Abraham's response to God's orders in leaving Haran is similar to a prophet's call: after leaving home, he follows God wherever he leads (one may consider the calls of Amos [Amos 7:14–15] and Elisha [1 Kgs. 19:19–21]).

The Jacob Narrative (Gen. 25:19–36:43). The palistropic pattern in the Jacob narrative is as follows:

- A Births of Jacob and Esau (25:19–34)
 - B Interlude: Isaac's conflicts with the people of the Negev (26:1–35)
 - C Jacob steals Esau's blessing (27:1–28:9)
 - D Jacob's heavenly vision at Bethel (28:10–22)
 - E Jacob joins Laban's house in marriage (29:1–30)
 - F The increase of Jacob's family (29:31–30:24)
 - F' The increase of Jacob's flocks (30:25–43)
 - E' Jacob departs from Laban's house with family and flocks (31:1–55)
 - D' Jacob wrestles with a heavenly "man" at Peniel (32:1–32)
 - C' Jacob's reconciliation with Esau (33:1–16)
 - B' Interlude: Jacob's conflict with the people of Shechem (33:17–34:31)
 - A' Birth of Joseph and Jacob's return to Bethel (35:1–22a)

There follow three supplemental pieces:

- a List of Jacob's sons (35:22b–26)
- b Burial of Isaac (35:27–29)
- c Genealogy of Esau (36:1–43)

Within its overall palistrophic pattern, the Jacob narrative consists of three cycles: Jacob's years at home (25:19–28:9), Jacob's stay in Haran with his uncle Laban (29:1–32:2), and Jacob's settling in Canaan (33:1–35:29). Accounts of Jacob's encounter with God serve as transitions between the cycles (28:10–22 and 32:22–32). In the first two cycles, Jacob's journey is marked by persistent scheming to advance himself. In the third cycle, with a new name (Israel), Jacob places his trust in God instead of deceitful schemes.

Two birth reports frame the Jacob narrative. At the opening Rebekah gives birth to twins, Esau and Jacob (A), and at the close Rachel dies giving birth to Benjamin (A'). Two interludes, in B position, interrupt this narrative and add an element of suspense to its dramatic movement. The first interlude presents vignettes about Isaac's conflicts over wells in the Negev (B). The second recounts the conflict between the people of Shechem and Jacob's children, leading to the pillage of Shechem (B'). Both interludes treat the theme of relations between the promised seed and the local population. In both accounts a Gentile seeks to take a daughter of the elect line as a wife, and the children of Abraham negotiate alliances with the local inhabitants: Isaac with Abimelech of Gerar (B), and Jacob's clan with the citizens of Shechem (B').

Jacob's dealings with Esau stand in C position. In his early manhood he steals his father's blessing from Esau (C). Twenty years later he is reconciled with his brother in the Transjordan (C'). Jacob is full of fear of his brother Esau during his two encounters with God. On the first occasion he flees from home because Esau has sworn to kill him, and he has a dream at Bethel, in which God promises to protect him (D). On his second encounter with God, Jacob is exceedingly apprehensive about the impending meeting with Esau before reentering Canaan. When he is at Peniel Jacob wrestles with "a man," possibly the angel of the Lord, throughout the night (D'). Jacob perseveres in that struggle until God blesses him with a new name, Israel. Jacob's encounters with God (D, D') frame his sojourn in Laban's household (E, F, E', F1'), and his success in gaining numerous children and a large flock

stands at the center (F and F') of the narrative. Despite the efforts of Laban to outwit his son-in-law, Jacob prospers because of God's blessing.

The opening vignette in which Rebekah gives birth to twins sets the tone for the Jacob narrative. The two fetuses struggle so fiercely in her womb that she almost despairs of life. When she gives birth Jacob grabs his brother's heel, trying to prevent him from being the firstborn, but Esau prevails. As a result, his parents give Jacob a name that means, "heel grabber, finagler." As his name indicates, he tends to use deceit to advance his cause. At Peniel, Jacob is transformed from a deceiver to Israel, that is, "one who wrestled with God and prevailed."

Jacob's reconciliation with Esau is symbolic of the change in his character. After Peniel, Jacob faces many setbacks without resorting to deception to advance his own purpose. Rather, he displays patience and forbearance in the face of four tragic situations. (a) Simeon and Levi pillage the city of Shechem, employing such a dishonorable ruse that Jacob is disgraced before the local tribes. (b) Reuben shames Jacob by lying with Bilhah, his concubine. (c) His sons cruelly deceive him by making him believe that his favorite son Joseph has been killed. He mourns the loss of Joseph for years, unaware that his beloved son is really alive. (d) Jacob grieves over Simeon's imprisonment in Egypt when his sons have told the Egyptian overseer too much. Thus Jacob, who inflicted pain by deception in the prime of his life, in his later years suffers great sorrow as the victim of many harsh deceptions. Nevertheless, he earnestly desires to see God's promises to Abraham fulfilled in his children.

Fragments of the last section of the Jacob narrative have been woven into the end of the Joseph narrative. It is clear that this material comes from the Jacob narrative because it contains the sort of dramatic, direct encounters with God that characterize Jacob's meetings with God (46:1-4). These sorts of encounters are not typical of Joseph, who is guided by God's providential control over events in his life.

The Joseph Narrative (Gen. 37:1-50:26). The Joseph narrative differs from the other sections in that it is a coherent story with a well-developed, suspenseful plot, whereas the other major narratives consist of self-standing accounts loosely strung together by a dominant theme; the latter lack a tightly developed plot. The author of the Joseph narrative has artfully constructed the scenes so

that they revolve around the conflict between Joseph and his brothers and build the suspense. The powerful climax is Joseph's revelation of his identity to his brothers. In addition to being the story of Joseph, this last segment of Genesis is also the continuation of the story of Israel's patriarchs.

In this narrative the primary social setting shifts from that of wandering shepherds in the Canaanite hills to the complex urban environment of Egypt's capital. The importance of possessing wisdom also comes to the fore. Wisdom equips Joseph with various skills such as interpreting dreams, providing insightful advice, developing a program to address a national crisis, skillfully administering a high governmental office, and working shrewdly to achieve reconciliation with the estranged members of his own family.

A palisthopic pattern of two levels frames the Joseph narrative.

- A Jacob's favoritism of Joseph and his brothers' increasing hatred (37:1–36)
- B Interlude: Judah settles in Adullam (38:1–30)
- C Joseph's rise and fall in Potiphar's house and imprisonment (39:1–20a)
- D Joseph's anguish in prison (39:20b–40:23)
- E Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams, saving Egypt (41:1–57)
- C' Joseph's brothers purchase grain in Egypt and Simeon is in bondage (42:1–38)
- D' Joseph's brothers' anguish while buying grain in Egypt (43:1–45:28)
- E' Jacob and his family migrate to Egypt, saving the family (46:1–47:12)
- B' Interlude: Joseph's skill in administrating for Egypt (47:13–31)
- A' Jacob blesses Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh (48:1–22)

In the outer frame in A position are accounts of Jacob's favoring Joseph. When Joseph is a young man, Jacob gives him an elegant cloak (A). Then at the end of his life Jacob makes Joseph his principal heir by elevating Ephraim and Manasseh to the level of his own children (A'). Between this outside frame and the core drama are two interludes (B). The first is a story of Judah's settling in Adullam (B).⁵ The second is a description of Joseph's administration of the famine (B'). Each of these interludes pictures one of the chosen seed living among Gentiles.

While a palistrophic pattern frames the core of the Joseph narrative, the central drama (39:1–47:12) consists of two acts, each having three scenes.⁶ In each act the main characters have their hopes shattered, go through a time of agonizing distress, and then experience a dramatic reversal of fortunes under God's guidance. In the first act (C, D, E) Joseph rises in Potiphar's house to chief administrator. He is undermined by Potiphar's wife, who falsely accuses him of attempted rape. This leads to his imprisonment (C). There he spends several months in discouragement (D). God directs a course of events that leads to Joseph being summoned to appear before Pharaoh. He skillfully interprets Pharaoh's dreams, and, taking advantage of the moment, he astutely advises Pharaoh on a strategy that will enable Egypt to survive the coming hard famine (E). In a dramatic move Pharaoh invests Joseph with full authority over his house. From that high post Joseph is able to save Egypt from the devastation of the seven-year famine. In the second act (C', D', E') Joseph's brothers go through several experiences that parallel Joseph's journey at significant points. After several good years in Canaan, the terrible famine forces them to go to Egypt to buy grain. There the head of agriculture harasses them, falsely accusing them of spying. In order for them to take grain back to their families in Canaan they must leave Simeon behind in prison (C'). In the ensuing months there are several heated discussions in Jacob's household about returning to Egypt for more grain. At last Jacob relents, and the brothers leave for Egypt with Benjamin. On this journey they are very apprehensive about the safety of their youngest brother. After they arrive in Egypt, Joseph puts them through a series of perplexing, agonizing incidents (D'). Then, in one of the most dramatic moments in Scripture, Joseph makes known his identity to his brothers. Afterward he has all of his father's house resettle in Egypt in order that he might save them from the hard famine (E').

God no longer appears in epiphanies in the Joseph narrative, nor does the angel of Yahweh meet and converse with humans. Rather, God, the distant sovereign and Lord of all nations, directs affairs and situations on earth from the heavenly realm for both Abraham's seed and the Egyptians. When God communicates more directly, it is in dreams.

Dreams are a unifying motif in the Joseph narrative. At the outset Joseph has two dreams, which he describes to his family. These dreams foreshadow Joseph's rise to power, and they also fuel his brothers' hatred toward him. In prison Joseph interprets

the dreams of two high officials from Pharaoh's court. This incident leads to Joseph being summoned to explain to Pharaoh the meaning of his dreams. Joseph's boyhood dreams are fulfilled when Pharaoh appoints him as head of agriculture.

Another motif found throughout the Joseph story is that of clothes; in this story they carry great symbolic force. The robe Jacob gives Joseph expresses his deep love for him and possibly expresses his anticipation that he will be head of the family (37:3). But this outer garment becomes the focus of his brothers' jealousy, and after they sell Joseph it is their means of persuading Jacob, without words, that Joseph has been accidentally killed (37:33). Jacob mourns this loss by tearing his clothes (37:34). In Potiphar's house, when Joseph flees seduction by Potiphar's wife, she catches and keeps his tunic (39:12). She then uses it as evidence of his attempted sexual assault and has Joseph thrown into prison (39:13, 15, 16, 18). When Joseph is taken from the prison to appear before Pharaoh, he is first given a change of clothes (41:14). After elevating Joseph to high office, Pharaoh gives him fine linen garments (41:42). Later, when Joseph introduces himself to his brothers, he gives Benjamin five festival garments to express his joy at being reunited with his full brother (45:22). Thus garments symbolize love, social status, bonding, and authority in the Joseph narrative—as well as betrayal.

Yet another recurring motif is that of going down to Egypt. Joseph is taken to Egypt (A), the brothers go down to Egypt to buy grain twice (C' and D'), and Jacob goes down to Egypt with his entire clan (E').

Accounts of the deaths and burials of Jacob and Joseph bring the ancestral age to an end:

- a Jacob's last testament (49:1–28)
 - b Jacob's elaborate funeral (49:29–50:14)
- a' Full reconciliation of Joseph and his brothers (50:15–21)
 - b' Joseph's death and burial (50:22–26)

These four units stand in an alternating a:b pattern. In position a are Jacob's last testament concerning all twelve of his sons and the account of Joseph's reconciliation with all of his brothers. These two units are about all of Jacob's twelve sons, looking forward to their developing into a tribal league. In position b are the accounts of Jacob's elaborate funeral and Joseph's death. Thus Genesis ends in anticipation of the way that God will fulfill the promises to Abraham by giving the birth to the nation Israel.

This supplementary material plays an important role by explaining how the seed of Abraham ended up in Egypt and by giving the Israelites who lived for centuries as slaves in Egypt hope of their eventual deliverance from this bondage: Jacob's last testament looks to the settlement of the tribes in Canaan; Jacob is buried in Canaan, not Egypt, signaling that the destiny of his seed is to be realized in Canaan; and Joseph gives the clan a symbol that they will return to the promised land by having them swear that they will carry his bones out of Egypt when they leave. Genesis thus concludes with all of Jacob's sons living together in harmony in Egypt.

The Joseph story serves many additional functions. It vividly illustrates the troubles caused by tribal jealousies and proves that a strong leader, one who believes that God orchestrates all events toward fulfilling his promises to Abraham, can overcome such jealousy. Therefore, the twelve tribes must work together to survive the hardships of nature and the political power of the nations. The narrative also teaches that God can influence the mightiest empires like Egypt to support the continuance of Abraham's seed. That is, God directs events so that Gentile nations play a beneficial role in Israel's destiny.

These final chapters of Genesis, furthermore, lay the foundation for the leadership role that the tribe of Judah will play in Israel. Of Jacob's sons Judah is highlighted in the account of his pitching a tent among the Canaanites in the low hills south of Bethlehem (ch. 38), the very area that his descendants will come to inherit. In the crises caused by the terrible famine, Judah emerges as the leader in guiding Jacob's clan. Then Jacob, in his last testament, depicts Judah as a prosperous, strong, victorious, enduring leader who is praised and revered by his brothers (49:8–12). Chapter 38 tells the extraordinary circumstances that led to the birth of the twins, Perez and Zerah, to Judah by Tamar. This is significant in that David was the tenth generation from Judah through Perez (Ruth 4:18–22). Thus, these chapters show that God will fulfill the promises made to Abraham through the tribe of Judah (Gen. 12:1–3).

Composition of the Book

Having reviewed the structure of Genesis, we next consider the way these accounts were assembled to make the book of Genesis. In addressing this topic we enter the arena of speculation.

The distinctive literary features of the various accounts suggest that most of them rose independently,⁷ while the structure of the narratives about each patriarch attests that an editorial hand has skillfully compiled them. The composition of a gospel may serve as a pattern for understanding the formation of Genesis. An author collected the narratives and teachings of Jesus, drawing on both written and oral sources, and then organized them into a gospel (see Luke 1:1–4). It is possible that in a similar way, one or more editors collected the traditions about Abraham and Jacob and organized them into two narratives, according to a palistropic pattern. This pattern was chosen for its artistry, because it makes it easier to memorize the material, and for the additional insights it provides into the spiritual meaning of these stories. Then that editor or another one likely collected and arranged the primeval accounts as a prologue to the ancestral accounts. Finally, an editor worked the Joseph narrative into the Jacob narrative and the account of Judah in the Shephelah (ch. 38).

Who were these editors? Since the text of Genesis does not address this issue, we have to use our imagination. The first candidate is Moses, for he had the training, the interest, and the time—during the years the Israelites were camped near Kadesh Barnea—to do the work. Assuming that the ancestral stories, at least in oral form, go back to the time of the patriarchs, recounting them would have played a major role in giving identity and hope to the Israelites in Egyptian bondage. Moses and the Israelites knew these stories as we can see when God reveals himself to Moses as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exod. 3:6) and when God directs Moses to identify him in this way to the Israelites (Exod. 3:16). This divine self-identification would have no meaning if the Israelites did not know these ancestral accounts. Moses' imprint may be seen in the Abraham narratives. Abraham's first journey through Canaan, including a trip to Egypt because of famine, parallels Israel's coming to Egypt, its bondage, and its release. Moreover, the frequency of the occurrence of the name Yahweh throughout the Abrahamic narrative could have come from Moses. As the person who received that name in its fullness (Exod. 3:13–15), Moses would have been intent on demonstrating that the God Yahweh, who spoke to him at Sinai, was the same God as El Shaddai, who had called and led Abraham.

After Moses, the editorial work may have continued until the finalization of the Pentateuch. Some work may have been done during the time of the judges, as suggested by the materials

in Genesis that foreshadow that time. For example, the sayings about the majority of the tribes in Jacob's testament (ch. 49) correspond with the time of the settlement. Other material in Genesis points to editorial activity during the days of the united monarchy. Editors during the rise of the Davidic dynasty would have been particularly interested in the accounts of Judah's settling in the Shephelah of Judah and of his having children by Canaanite women (ch. 38). The description of Judah's prowess as a warrior and his long-lasting rule over his brothers in Jacob's testament also coincides with David's ascendancy as ruler (49:8–12). Furthermore, the emphasis on the prosperity and success of Joseph and his sons at the end of Genesis (48; 49:22–26) accords with the prominence of the Joseph tribes in northern Israel during the rise of the monarchy. Also the joint prominence given to the Joseph tribes and to Judah in the Joseph story accords well with David's incorporating northern Israel with Judah to form a united monarchy that continued under Solomon. Consequently, the narrative of Joseph may have been edited by the wisdom school at the time of Solomon, for under Solomon there was great interest in international wisdom and diplomacy—indeed, one of his wives was an Egyptian princess. The inclusion of the Joseph narrative finalized the formation of Genesis. It is important to remember that the editors who developed Genesis did not invent these accounts of the patriarchs. Their task was to collect, arrange, and order them into the book known as Genesis, and the result is a masterful document of origins that orients the people of God to God's design in creating the earth and in forming one nation to be his own people.

The Religion of the Patriarchs

The religion of the patriarchs and their understanding of God is reflected in their names for God, their prayer, the sorts of altars, sacrifices, and vows they made, and their covenant relationship with God. These can also be seen in the relationship each patriarch had with God. The variety in these relationships provides various models of faith for those who walk with God.

The God of the Fathers

The names patriarchs used for God are a chief source of our understanding of their relationship to God. These names demonstrate that they had a close relationship with God.

The patriarchs frequently identified God as “the God of one’s father.” Often one of the fathers is named. Only those living after Abraham speak of God in this way; Joshua 24:2–3 tells us that before Abraham left Haran to follow God, he and his family were polytheists. In conversation between family members the title “the God of one’s father” usually occurs without a personal name. Jacob spoke of God in this way to his wives (31:5), and so did Jacob’s sons in a letter to Joseph (50:17). Addressing Jacob, Laban said that during the night he had received a word from the God of “your” father (31:29; see 43:23). In Jacob’s last testament, “your father’s God” occurs among a list of divine titles: the Mighty One of Jacob, Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, and Shaddai (49:24–25).

In other references to the God of one’s father, one or more of the fathers is named. This fuller form appears for the first time in God’s self-identification to Isaac as the God of his father Abraham (26:24). God again used this title when he met Jacob at Beersheba (46:3). In Jacob’s dream at Bethel, however, God used a fuller title, “I am Yahweh, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac” (28:13). Later, in his earnest prayer for help because of his impending meeting with Esau, Jacob addressed God with this title, though without the name Yahweh (32:9). On another occasion Jacob made sacrifices to “the God of his father Isaac” (46:1). When Jacob entered into a border covenant with Laban, he identified God as the God of his father Abraham and the Fear of Isaac (31:42). Laban, however, spoke of God as “the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father” (31:53).

The title “God of the father(s)” meant that God was the personal protector deity of the clan. God was thus attached to the clan, not to a specific shrine, and could then accompany the clan in its migrations. The ancestors praised this God for guiding them and for protecting them (31:42; 32:10; 35:3). In Genesis this title for God was also tied to the surety of the promises God gave to Abraham.

El Shaddai

The primary name for God among the ancestors was El Shaddai, that is, God Almighty or God All Sufficient (17:1). In Genesis, El generally occurs with Shaddai, but Shaddai often occurs alone as in 49:25; in places such as Numbers 24:4, 16; and fre-

quently in Job (e.g., 5:17; 6:4, 14).⁸ These data suggest that Shaddai became a name for God. Besides Yahweh, it is the most common name for God in the ancestral narratives. It occurs always in speech and never in the narrative frame, which tells us that it belongs to the story's oldest oral stage. Otherwise a late editor would have changed the divine name to one commonly used after Israel became a people. God identified himself by this name both to Abraham (17:1) and to Jacob (35:11, confirmed in 48:3). On two occasions a patriarch used this name in a prayer for the safe return of children about to go on a journey to a foreign land: Isaac enjoined El Shaddai to bless Jacob his son (28:3); and Jacob prayed that El Shaddai might bring both Simeon and Benjamin back to him from Egypt (43:14). Shaddai then had the ability to protect the children of promise in a foreign land. This name also occurs in the list of names at the end of Jacob's testament, being parallel to "your father's God" (49:25).

Other Divine Names in Genesis

The other ancient name for God is El. In Genesis various epithets are joined to El: El Elyon ("God Most High"; 14:18–22), El Roi ("God Who Sees [Me]"; 16:13), El Olam ("the Eternal God" or "God of Ancient Days"; 21:33), and El Bethel ("the God, Bethel"; 35:7). In fact, El does not stand without an epithet or a defining clause in Genesis.⁹ Jacob named the altar he erected on the land he bought near Shechem El Elohe Israel, that is, El, who is the God of Israel (33:20). Jacob was identifying El as his own God, the God of Israel.¹⁰ This name thus identifies El as the God of the fathers, making the patron of the clan the highest God.¹¹

The Name Yahweh

An important and controversial question is whether or not the patriarchs knew God by the name Yahweh. The key verse in this debate is Exodus 6:3: "I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as El Shaddai, but by my name Yahweh I did not make myself known to them." Taking this verse literally, many scholars hold that the name Yahweh was introduced to Moses at Sinai. Supporting this position is the remarkable fact that none of the personal names in Genesis include the divine element Yahweh. Furthermore, no god with this name appears in any of the pantheons of the Levant (i.e., those countries bordering the eastern Mediterranean).¹² Other scholars have argued, however, that the

idea of knowing in this verse refers not to factual knowledge but rather to the experience of God in the full significance of that name. From the context of Exodus 6:3–9, it is evident that a definitive element in Yahweh's self-identification is that he is the God who keeps covenant. Since none of the patriarchs ever gained title to the land God promised, they never fully experienced Yahweh as the covenant-keeping God. The coming generations would realize the fulfillment of that promise and thus truly know Yahweh, the one who keeps covenant. Based on the evidence available, the possibility that the patriarchs were acquainted with this name is slight. If they did know it, it was not prominent for them.

Why, then, does the name Yahweh occur so frequently in the ancestral narratives? Its presence may be attributed to the effort of the editor(s) to demonstrate conclusively that the God of the fathers was truly Yahweh, who had revealed himself at Sinai. Since most English versions translate Yahweh as LORD, I have used Yahweh in the commentary in order that readers might have a greater sense of the occurrences of this divine name in Genesis.

Devotion to God

The ancestors showed their devotion to God in many ways, perhaps most notably by addressing God directly in prayer. Abraham, for instance, did not hesitate to put a bold complaint to God. When God appeared to him in a vision and spoke words of encouragement, Abraham took the occasion to express his keen disappointment that he still did not have a son (15:1–3). To lift the curse of infertility brought upon King Abimelech's house when Sarah was taken into his harem, Abraham prayed for the king and his realm (20:7, 17–18). When he learned what God intended to do to Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham earnestly entreated God on behalf of Sodom, asking that it be spared from destruction (18:16–33). God listened patiently to Abraham's repeated petitions, showing that he was open to the pleas of his servant, even though he did not always grant all requests.

Other personages in Genesis also prayed for help and direction in dealing with difficult situations. Abraham's trusted servant displayed great devotion in his search to find a wife for Isaac. During his journey he asked God for specific guidance (24:12–14), and God answered his prayer. He praised God in response, informing others how God had led him (24:26–27, 42–44, 48–49, 52).

When Rebekah, Isaac's wife, continued to be barren after many years of marriage, Isaac petitioned God that she might conceive. God answered his prayer and Rebekah became pregnant (25:21). During her pregnancy Rebekah became so distressed by the continual jostling of the babies in her womb that she took a trip to a shrine to get an explanation from God. There God gave her a specific word about the destiny of the children in her womb.

Leah also prayed for God to give her children and the love of her husband. Her prayers are visible in the reasons she gave for the names of her children—for example, Reuben, because God "has seen my misery" (29:32), and Simeon, because God "heard that I am not loved he gave me this one too" (29:33). The statement that God heard Leah and she became pregnant (30:17) supports this interpretation.

Rachel and Jacob provide additional examples of people praying for help. Rachel prayed for children, and the text says that God heard her and opened her womb (30:22) and she became pregnant with Joseph. Jacob, filled with fear at his impending meeting with Esau, prayed the longest prayer in Genesis (32:9–12).

Another way that the patriarchs expressed their devotion to God was by building altars or erecting pillars. As Abraham traveled through the land he built several altars, bearing witness to his confidence that the promised land would be given to his seed (12:7–8; 13:18). The account of his first journey through Canaan emphasizes the building of these altars (12:7–8, 13:4). Rather than seeking out an established shrine in the vicinity, he established his own place of worship when he built an altar between Bethel and Ai. The manner of identifying this place in the narrative makes it clear that Abraham stayed on the outskirts of local settlements. All that we know of what he did at these altars is that he called on the name of Yahweh at the altar he built near Bethel (12:8; 13:4). Isaac also called on the name of Yahweh at the altar he built at Beersheba (26:25). "Calling" includes praying to God, but it may mean more, possibly offering up one or more animals in sacrifice.

Jacob erected pillars to mark places where he met God. After his dream of the stairway rising to heaven he set up a pillar at Bethel and anointed it (28:18). When he returned to Bethel, God appeared to him; again he set up and anointed a pillar (35:14). Jacob erected or built an altar near Shechem (33:20) and then at Bethel, where he wanted to worship the God who had appeared to him on his flight from Canaan and who had led him safely back to the promised land (35:6–7).

In spite of the fact that there are only a few references to a patriarch making a sacrifice, it may be assumed that the patriarchs regularly offered sacrifices on the altars they set up. In one sacrifice specifically described, God directs Abraham to sacrifice several animals—a heifer, a goat, a ram, a dove, and a young pigeon—for sealing the covenant between them (15:9). Another sacrifice is made on Mount Moriah, when God provides Abraham a ram to offer up as a whole burnt offering in place of his beloved son Isaac (22:13–14). The reference to Jacob stopping at Beersheba on his way to Egypt and making sacrifices (46:1–4) supports the possibility that many more sacrifices occurred than are specifically mentioned. A sacrifice was normally a part of a covenant ceremony, and in the hill country Jacob made a sacrifice for his clan after swearing to the pact between himself and Laban (31:54).

Since the narrator does not tie any of these acts of worship to a specific time, there is no evidence that the patriarchs followed a cultic calendar. There is no emphasis on their keeping the Sabbath or seeking out a priest for making a sacrifice. They displayed their devotion to God either spontaneously or in response to directions from God. Furthermore, there are no references to the patriarchs making pilgrimages. Only Jacob's journey to Bethel in order to worship the God who had appeared to him there years earlier (35:1–7) approximates the idea of a pilgrimage. However, there is no mention of anyone else making a journey to this sanctuary at a particular time.

The patriarchs also made vows and paid tithes. Abraham paid a tithe of the spoil taken from his defeat of the kings of the East to Melchizedek (the priest-king of Salem; 14:20). After receiving a dream at Bethel, Jacob made an elaborate vow that included a commitment to pay a tithe to God on his return to Canaan (28:20–22). Either intuition or tradition taught these men that they needed to honor God's lordship over their possessions by giving a tenth to God.

Covenant Relationship

After Abraham had acted on God's orders by leaving Haran and traveling through Canaan, God came to him and formalized their relationship with a covenant (15:7–21). While Abraham was in a deep sleep, God, symbolized by a smoking fire pot and a blazing torch, passed between the halves of the sacrificed animals (15:17). God was thus making a unilateral covenant with Abra-

ham's seed and committing himself never to break it. This covenant ceremony emphasizes that Abraham's seed will receive the promised land (15:13–16, 18–21). Later God renewed the covenant (ch. 17). On this occasion God stipulated that everyone who identified with Abraham, including servants, had to be circumcised as a sign of the covenant (17:9–14) and that every male of the promised seed was to be circumcised on the eighth day.

These ancestral accounts, therefore, played a vital role in the orientation of Israel as the people of God by recounting their roots and providing the program for their existence in the promises God made to Abraham. As R. Moberly says, "Israel as a nation in its land cannot understand itself simply on its own terms but must relate itself to God's dealings with the patriarchs" (*The Old Testament of the Old Testament: Patriarchal Narratives and Mosaic Yahwism*. [OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994], p. 141).

Furthermore, Abraham's journey served as a paradigm for the early Israelites. The narrator captures this role of Abraham's journey in God's self-introduction to Abraham before the first covenant ceremony. God says, "I am Yahweh, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans" (15:7). This self-introduction is patterned after the one in the Sinaitic covenant: "I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Exod. 20:2). Abraham's leaving Ur parallels Israel's leaving Egypt; each exodus interprets the other. Furthermore, God's covenant with him parallels God's entering into covenant with Israel at Sinai. During the covenant ceremony with Abraham God told him what his seed would experience before entering the promised land. Abraham was able to understand what God told him because of his experiences in Egypt (12:10–20). They would live as strangers in a foreign land; they would become slaves, but God would punish that nation; and they would come out with great possessions (15:13–14). Abraham's experiences in Egypt served as a pattern to help the early Israelites understand how God was leading them.

Jacob's experiences with God also foreshadowed the nation's struggle to serve God. Often Israel as a nation used politically and economically deceitful strategies to advance its position among the nations and to promote its prosperity. When its wealth increased, the nation, like Jacob, erected better pillars (Hos. 10:1). Israel, like Jacob, who wrestled with God until his name was changed to Israel, needed to have an encounter with God in which it would have a change of character (Hos. 12:2–6). Thus

Hosea drew on Jacob's experiences with God in an effort to motivate Israel to repent of its deceptive ways and realign itself with God as did its ancestor.

Joseph's journey was a paradigm of God's guiding Israel through times of success and times of oppressive hardship in order that it might be the leader for bringing salvation to the families of the earth (Gen. 50:20). God's leading is grounded in the covenantal promises made to the patriarchs (12:1–9).

The Historical Witness of the Ancestral Accounts

I wish to argue for the reliability of the patriarchal narratives in reporting the origin of Israel as God's people. First, I shall identify the character and intent of the ancestral accounts. Second, I shall look at correspondences between the customs of the ancestors and those common in Upper Mesopotamia and Canaan in the Middle-Late Bronze Age (ca. 2100–1200 B.C.). Third, I shall make a comparison between these biblical texts and various kinds of literature from the ancient Near East near the beginning of the second millennium B.C. Fourth, I shall assess the character of these narratives in relationship to each other and to the rest of the Pentateuch.

The Character and Intent of the Ancestral Accounts

First, the ancestral accounts in Genesis may be classified as family history, that is, stories about the origin and destiny of Abraham's descendants for four generations. These narratives consist of reports of births, marriages, domestic relationships, travels, and acts of devotion to God. Furthermore, these accounts have been preserved as Scripture and focus on God's role in the lives of those who were the bearers of God's program for bringing blessing to all the families of the earth. This last point is crucial, for it is the primary reason that the record of Abraham's family has survived through the centuries.

The emphasis on God's role in these accounts, however, produces a major tension between the orientation of the ancestral narratives and the type of material accepted by secular historians as history. As a guiding principle, such historians rule out God as a factor because there are no empirical criteria for evaluating claims of divine activity. Thus they quickly discount the worth of these accounts for writing a history of that early age. The highest

purpose of Genesis, however, is to reveal how God worked in affairs on earth from creation to the forming of a special people who worshiped God through the line of Abraham. The significance of this revelation for those who accept it is dependent upon God's actual involvement in the events and lives of Israel's ancestors.

There are other differences between these accounts and a history written according to the current standards of social science. The narratives in Genesis do not seek to explore the social, economic, political, and religious setting; yet such information is at the core of a typical history. Furthermore, when a narrative in Genesis recounts a transaction between one of Abraham's seed and the local inhabitants, it usually does not pursue the repercussions of that transaction. For example, Abraham purchased a field from a Hittite of Hebron; however, Genesis makes no further reference to these Hittites. The reader has no knowledge of how this agreement affected either the citizens of Hebron or the offspring of Abraham. Describing such impact is a central task of a contemporary historian, but it was of no concern to the ancient narrator. Moreover, the editor(s) did not peg these accounts to any historical points of reference that are currently known; thus Genesis cannot be easily tied to the known history of that era. This makes finding external data to confirm the testimony of these patriarchal accounts improbable. However, while the accounts in Genesis were not composed according to the current standards of history as a social science, this difference in approach does not exclude them from serving as reliable witnesses to what they tell us about the patriarchs. Awareness of these differences in approaches alerts us that we should not read these accounts as historical biography, for their intention is far different. On the other hand, A. Millard's insightful comment offers perspective at this point: "Let all who read remember that the patriarchal narratives are our only source for knowledge of the earliest traditions of Israel, that traditions can be correct reflections of ancient events, and that they do not pretend to be textbooks of ancient near-eastern history or archaeology" ("Methods of Studying the Patriarchal Narratives As Ancient Texts," in *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives* [ed. A. Millard and D. Wiseman; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1983], p. 51).

Since Genesis does not establish connections between the patriarchs and other personages and events that we know about from the ancient Near East, scholars have proposed a wide range of dates for the patriarchs, including sometime around the

twenty-sixth century B.C. (Freedman), the nineteenth century B.C. (Albright), and the fourteenth century B.C. (Gordon). Any suggested date for the era of the patriarchs must be a working proposal. I place Abraham roughly at the end of the twenty-first century B.C. based on the time references in four texts: Exodus 12:40, which says that the sojourn of Israel in Egypt lasted 430 years; 1 Kings 6:1, which places the building of the temple 480 years after the exodus; Genesis 25:7, which reports that Abraham lived 175 years; and Genesis 35:28–29, which informs us that Isaac survived his father by a little more than one hundred years. Since many of these numbers have symbolic force, they cannot be used to arrive at a precise date for any figure in Genesis. Taking them in a general sense leads to placing Abraham sometime near the turn of the millennium in the twenty-first century B.C. and to placing the arrival of Jacob's clan in Egypt sometime in the first half of the second millennium B.C.

The Cultural Information in the Ancestral Accounts

Second, in assessing the historical value of these accounts it is important to compare the information found in them with what we know of the cultures of Upper Mesopotamia and Canaan during the Middle Bronze Age. Throughout the twentieth century, the findings of archaeologists have increased immensely our knowledge of the Levant, that is, the area bordering the eastern Mediterranean, in the Middle Bronze Age. The numerous tablets that have been uncovered at sites such as Mari, Nuzi, and Ugarit are especially valuable. Those who were at the forefront of these discoveries, particularly Cyrus H. Gordon, William F. Albright, and E. A. Speiser, pointed out many similarities between customs witnessed to in these texts and the customs of the patriarchs—particularly regarding marriage, adoption, and inheritance—and created reconstructed readings. In the second half of the twentieth century, scholars restudied these parallels and found that many of the reconstructed readings of the ancestral narratives were not accurate. For example, Albright's view that Abraham was a merchant caravaneer traveling between Damascus and Egypt on a donkey has not withstood scrutiny. What later scholars found wanting were the imaginative reconstructions that had forced alien categories on the ancestral narratives, not the content of the biblical texts themselves. Furthermore, in dealing with the cultural setting of the ancestors we need to keep in mind that the

amount of information we possess about the Middle Bronze Age in Upper Mesopotamia, though vastly increased, is still small and fragmented in comparison to the length of that era and the size of Mesopotamia. Even more limiting is the fact that our information about Canaan at this time is minuscule.

Despite these limitations, however, several significant correlations may be made between the ancestral narratives and the customs of the ancient Near East in the centuries around 2000 B.C. Following is a list of eight correlations that support placing the patriarchs in this era:¹³ (a) Many names, including Serug, Nahor, and Jacob-El, have been attested in Mesopotamian documents dated around 2000 B.C. (b) Several names in Terah's lineage are associated with the moon—Terah, Milcah, Sarai, and Laban—suggesting that these ancestors worshiped the moon god. This is in accord with their being associated with Ur of the Chaldeans and Haran, both centers of moon worship. (c) Key names in Genesis, including Ishmael, Isaac, and Jacob, are constructed on the pattern of Amorite personal names of the early second millennium B.C. While names in this pattern also appear later, the preference for this pattern waned considerably after the Bronze Age. (d) The names of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are at home in this era, and they do not occur later in Scripture. (e) The social organization of pastoralists at Mari provides models that illuminate relationships witnessed to in Genesis, especially the dealings of Laban and Jacob. (f) In the nineteenth century B.C. Haran was a vibrant trade center. (g) El was the chief god of the Canaanites during the Middle Bronze Age, but in the Late Bronze Age Baal displaced El as their most popular god. This point becomes more weighty in that there are no references to Baal in Genesis. (h) The ancestors interacted with the inhabitants of several city-states in Canaan, including Shechem, Hebron, Gerar, Salem, Sodom, and the cities of the plain. Such was the political organization in Canaan in the second millennium as attested in sources like the Tell el-Amarna texts. By the first millennium these cities were governed under various central governments, including those of the Philistines, Moabites, and Edomites.

The Joseph narrative contains many details that support its historicity in terms of what is known of Egyptian culture: (a) There are Egyptian terms in the narrative, including *'akhu* ("reeds," 41:2); *ye'or* ("Nile," 41:1); *shesh* ("fine linen," 41:42); *khartom* ("magician," 41:8); and *'abrek* ("make way or bow down," 41:43). (b) Some characters have Egyptian names, including Potiphar,

Potiphera, Asenath, and Zaphenath-Paneah. (c) The imagery in Pharaoh's dreams is typical of Egypt. Egyptians valued cattle very highly. Fat, sleek cattle grazing in the dense reed grass growing along the Nile, especially in the canals of the Delta, is a typical scene from Egyptian art. Egypt was famous for the high quality of grain produced in the fertile soil along the Nile. The height of the Nile's flooding, which both watered and fertilized the land along its banks, varied from year to year and determined the abundance of each harvest. (d) Egyptian documents attest that the chief cupbearer and the chief baker were two officials in Pharaoh's palace. The cupbearer, having close access to the Pharaoh, had higher privileges and was entrusted with special tasks. Although the chief baker was more distant, his position was important, for Egyptians loved baked goods. Ancient records indicate that the Egyptians had dozens of different kinds of breads and cakes. This accords with the baker's describing the basket on his head as containing "all kinds of baked goods" (40:17). (e) The apprehension of the butler and baker after their dreams, increased by their lack of access to an expert interpreter, reflects Egyptian attitudes toward dreams. One of the skills of the learned Egyptian priests was dream interpretation. (f) Joseph's shaving before his meeting with Pharaoh (41:14) is in accord with Egyptians' being clean shaven, whereas most Asiatics had beards. (g) The presence in Egypt of numerous Semitic peoples from Canaan and Syria, known to the Egyptians as Asiatics, is well attested. In some eras they were numerous, especially when the Hyksos rose to power about 1650–1540 B.C. (h) An Egyptian document from the eighteenth century B.C. proves that Asiatics were hired as domestic help and that some rose to high, trusted positions. (i) The description of Pharaoh's installing Joseph in high office corresponds to Egyptian practice; particularly Pharaoh's giving him a signet ring, linen clothes, a gold chain, an Egyptian name, and a chariot with a defined position in the royal procession (41:41–45). Pictures of such investitures have been found in royal tombs. (j) The emphasis on flocks and herds grazing in the Delta agrees with Egyptian practice. (k) Reference to mummification for Jacob and Joseph is decidedly Egyptian. (l) According to his obituary, Joseph died at the age of 110, the ideal length of life for Egyptians. These points indicate a second-millennium B.C. setting, but they do not allow for a closer dating since the Egyptians followed these practices over several centuries.¹⁴

Literary Style of the Ancestral Accounts

Third, we may learn of the character of these narratives by comparing their literary style with the various genres from the ancient Near East of the first half of the second millennium B.C., including chronicles, epics, sagas, legends, historical epics, and short tales. From such a comparison we discover that these narratives stand out as straightforward, concise, cryptic accounts (K. Kitchen, *The Bible in Its World: The Bible and Archaeology Today* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1977], pp. 61–65) whose intent is to report what took place. Outside of references to God, the embellishments in these accounts are few when compared with the literature of that age.

In considering these accounts as having historical value, however, a secular mind chafes before supernatural references such as visions, angels, a human wrestling with a spirit, and fire and brimstone falling from heaven on wicked cities. But these kinds of references do not automatically discount the general accuracy of what an ancient text reports. A comparison with texts of the early second millennium B.C. from Israel's neighbors shows that the claims of the biblical reports are more believable, giving us confidence that they are reports of what took place, rather than literary creations.¹⁵ We must keep in mind that this kind of data has been included because the primary goal of these accounts is to inspire faith in God and give identity to the people of God.

The Character of the Ancestral Accounts Compared to That of the Pentateuch

Three internal arguments support the credibility of these ancestral accounts. First, the distinctive literary styles of the narratives of the three patriarchs suggest that each narrative originated independently. It can also be demonstrated that accounts within a given narrative had independent origins (e.g., the detailed, report style of Gen. 14 is unique to the book). In this light it may be postulated that the editor(s) who put Genesis together took over ancient accounts, many of them perhaps having been passed down from the time of the ancestors. If this is the way Genesis was compiled, then we can assume that these various accounts are fairly accurate—at least for materials composed before the development of modern historical research—since they were written close to the time of the events they describe.

Second, inconsistencies and gaps in information in the three narratives may indicate that the editor(s) did not significantly alter or add to the material they found in the ancient accounts. They did not remove references to the foibles and failures of the main characters. For example, they kept both accounts of Abraham's identifying his wife as his sister, even though it casts Abraham in an unfavorable light. Neither did the editors fill in glaring gaps in information. For example, the lack of any reference in chapter 24 to Abraham after his trusted servant returned to Canaan with Rebekah is puzzling. One way to explain this omission is to postulate that Abraham died while the servant was in Haran. However, the timeline that can be reconstructed for Abraham indicates that he lived thirty-five years after Rebekah came to Canaan. No attempt is made to close this gap in the information, indicating that the editors were reluctant to enhance accounts handed down to them. The editors did not supply highly desirable information that had been lost. For example, they did not compose an account about Abraham's death nor did they even mention Rebekah's, a lacuna made noticeable by the accounts of Sarah's burial (ch. 23) and of Jacob's elaborate funeral (50:1–14). The lack of narratives about Isaac is troubling, but none were made up to fill this gap. These holes and rough edges increase our confidence in their accuracy, for it is the tendency of humans in retelling an incident to inadvertently make contradictions and omit important information. To say it another way, a fully consistent report is likely either a contrived report or a fictional account. Conversely an account with gaps and difficulties is considered more reliable, for it reflects the tendency of a storyteller close to an event to leave out details that a later audience needs for understanding, for that teller assumes that the immediate audience has a certain awareness of the situation being described.

The third internal argument in support of the credibility of these ancestral accounts is the vast differences in the worship practices and moral attitudes of these ancestors from those of the nation Israel, particularly regarding marriage relations, alliances with Canaanites, inheritance practices, and religious customs and beliefs. These differences indicate that the ancestral accounts were composed before these practices developed into those of the nation Israel. For example, the kinds of marriages the patriarchs entered into are at odds with the cultic and legal practices found in Exodus 25 through Deuteronomy 34. Abraham was married to his half-sister, but that kind of relationship was banned according

to the laws in Leviticus 18:9, 11; 20:17. Jacob married sisters (29:21–30), but the law prohibited such practice (Lev. 18:18). Judah, David's ancestor, took a Canaanite wife, but such practice was forbidden in the law (Exod. 34:13–16; Deut. 7:2–3). Even though the law restricted Israelites from making alliances with the peoples of Canaan (Exod. 34:12), Abraham and Isaac both entered into a covenant with Abimelech, king of Gerar (21:22–32; 26:26–33). Jacob honored Joseph by adopting his two sons as his own so that they would be heirs equal to his own children; thus Joseph received a double portion of the inheritance. Jacob also elevated Ephraim, the younger son, over Manasseh, a practice forbidden by Deuteronomy 21:15–17.

Some of the patriarchs' religious practices differed from those of later Israel as well. Jacob set up many pillars. Those pillars, technically known as *matsebot*, were stones of various sizes erected for a variety of reasons, such as to mark sacred places or to commemorate the place where something important happened. Such stones could be unadorned or engraved with a picture, such as hands lifted up to the moon. Because such pillars were used by the Canaanites in their worship of many gods, the law required that the Israelites smash all pillars they found (Exod. 23:24; 34:13; Deut. 7:5; 12:3) and condemned worship sites on hills and under spreading trees (Deut. 12:2). However, Abraham built his first altar near the great tree of Moreh at Shechem (12:6–7), and he lived for many years at the great trees of Mamre, where he also built an altar (13:18). At Beersheba he planted a tamarisk tree and then worshiped El Olam (21:33). Some later traditions were so embarrassed by the accounts of Abraham's worshiping near trees that they altered the reading of some texts to remove this embarrassment. For example, *Targum Onkelos* replaced great tree(s) with "plain, valley" (12:6; 13:18; 14:13; 18:1; also 35:8; R. de Vaux, *The Early History of Israel* [trans. D. Smith; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978], p. 286). Nonetheless, the editor(s) of Genesis left these accounts in, indicating that they were viewed with respect.

The view of God in Genesis differs markedly from that in the rest of the Pentateuch, where God is a holy and jealous God, a devouring fire (Deut. 4:24; Exod. 20:5; 34:14). In Genesis there is little emphasis on the holiness of God, although the idea may appear in the divine title "Fear of Isaac" (31:42). In Genesis God is the intimate guardian of the clan and Lord of the nations. God appears and speaks to the ancestors, giving a word of encouragement or direction. The people in the ancestral narratives have

different encounters with God than do the Israelites who met God at Sinai, and these different experiences shape their differing views of God.

Given these three internal arguments, it is difficult to imagine that one or more authors who lived centuries later would have had the inclination, let alone the skill, to compose stories about Israel's ancestors living and worshiping so differently than prescribed by the Sinaitic law. It is even harder to imagine that such stories would have been so widely accepted as to become part of the canonical tradition if they were first introduced in the exilic or early postexilic eras. Jews at that time, especially those living among Gentiles, were emphasizing their distinctive customs in order to establish their own identity and would have been unlikely to adopt stories in which their ancestors behaved like the Gentiles, had those stories not been genuine and ancient.

The preceding discussion provides a basis for accepting the ancestral accounts in Genesis as reliable witnesses about Israel's ancestors, that is, as an acceptable source of historical information even when there is no collaborating witness. Conclusive external evidence for the existence of any figures in Genesis may never be found, for migratory shepherds living outside urban centers left few traces of their existence. Nevertheless, that these ancestors of Israel did live is vital to those who have faith in the God of Abraham.

These ancestral narratives serve a high theological purpose in teaching that the one true God shows concern for the well-being of all peoples by choosing Abraham as the agent through whom God would bring blessing to all families of the earth. However, if these accounts in Genesis are only literary inventions, the God pictured in them becomes merely the figment of human imagination. If God is no more than a product of human imagination, then humans live devoid of any divine help for dealing with the gigantic issues that potentially threaten their existence. As J. Goldingay says, "While the historicity of the events is not a sufficient evidence of the truth of the narrative's interpretation, it is a necessary evidence of its truth. . . . If they are not fundamentally factual, the ancestral narratives have sense but not reference" ("The Patriarchs in Scripture and History," in *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives*, p. 29). Although the date of Israel's ancestors cannot be precisely assigned, there is sufficient internal and external evidence to believe with confidence that these ancestral narratives recount the experiences of real people.

New Testament Connections

For New Testament believers, both the primeval narrative and the ancestral narratives are crucial. The primeval narrative provides a basis for understanding why Christ's atoning work was effective for all peoples everywhere, not only for the Jews. The patriarchal narratives are also vital to the New Testament, for the promises God gave Abraham are fulfilled in Jesus. That is, Jesus brought to all humanity those blessings God had promised to Abraham, thereby making Abraham the father of all those who believe in Jesus by faith (Gal. 3:29). As a result, the new seed of Abraham also functions as an agent of blessing for all the families of the earth.

These ancestral stories served the early church as a powerful apology for its new ways of worship and for the new thinking about how a person relates to God. Paul supported his radical teaching that God requires only faith, not works, in order to gain salvation by showing how Abraham's righteousness was the result of faith, not works (Gal. 3:6–18; Rom. 4). Furthermore, prior to the giving of the law and the setting up of the tabernacle, Israel's ancestors followed God wholeheartedly and worshiped him directly wherever they chose (Acts 7:2–53). They needed neither a priest nor a shrine for seeking God. In the same way, Christians may worship God anywhere. They no longer have to observe the ancient practices such as circumcision and ritual purity. As the result of the work of Christ, all believers are priests. They pray directly to God and minister God's grace to others. God's presence accompanies them as they move about, just as God was with the patriarchs wherever they went.

The patriarchs are also models of how persons, both Jew and believer in Christ, relate to God. Abraham is the exemplar of those who obey God, trusting God to fulfill what he has promised. Abraham displayed great generosity many times. After the death of his nephew's father, he reared Lot and took him along to Canaan. When the size of their respective herds required that they separate, Abraham deferred to Lot to choose the direction he preferred to go. This is remarkable in that Abraham, the elder, had been Lot's guardian. Abraham declined gaining personal wealth from the spoil taken from the kings of the East. Abraham did not want any human to be able to boast about making him rich (14:22–23).

Abraham trusted God throughout his life, even though his hope that God would give him a legitimate heir through Sarah stretched to the breaking point as they advanced in age. After Isaac was born, Abraham did not hold back his only beloved son from God. Out of obedience he bound Isaac and laid him on the altar in order to offer him up as a whole burnt offering. In this act Abraham displayed his submission to God's will.

Jacob offers a different model. He strove for self-exaltation until God fought with him and his character was changed. He was so zealous to be the chosen one that he used cunning means to make sure that he gained the position of firstborn. Nevertheless, God appeared to Jacob at crucial times, directing his course. These encounters were dramatic for Jacob and caused him to face his vulnerability. Despite his drive to promote himself, Jacob had a deep longing to serve God, as is evidenced by his not asking God for concessions in these encounters. He dealt with God boldly and directly, even bargaining with God. At Peniel he wrestled all night until his opponent gave him a blessing by changing his name (32:22–30).

Joseph is the paradigm of a wise person who trusts God through all circumstances in life—the darkest times and the times of abundance. The only direct communication he had from God were the two simple dreams he had in his youth. Thereafter, he pursued the tasks he was given energetically and skillfully, trusting God to direct the affairs in his life for the highest good.

As a truly wise person Joseph lived by the fear of the Lord (Prov. 1:7; 9:10). He did not yield to folly, nor was he seduced by the pleasures of sexual allurements (Prov. 2:16–19; 7:6–23). When he complained, he did so quietly in hopes of improving his situation. Wisdom equipped Joseph to counsel kings (Prov. 8:14–16). Years later, when Joseph saw his brothers in Egypt, he directed a sequence of incidents in order that there may be full reconciliation between them. At times he was hard on his brothers, but he showed that he had overcome the bitterness caused by their cruelty. His attitude was revealed when he named his firstborn Manasseh, and he said, "God has made me forget all my trouble" (41:51). After he made himself known to his brothers, he had to convince them that they could trust him. He encouraged their trust by his insightful words: "Do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you" (45:5). Years later, Joseph reassured his troubled brothers that he would not take vengeance

on them, saying, “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (50:19–20). Proverbs 19:21 captures Joseph’s conviction: “many are the plans in a man’s heart, but it is the LORD’s purpose that prevails.” Joseph lived always trusting in God’s leading.

In these stories the patriarchs sometimes erred and even did wrong. The text does not cover up their failures or the way they made matters worse when they did not wait for God to act (e.g., when Abraham took Hagar as a concubine, when both Abraham and Isaac misled people by introducing their wives as their sisters, or when Sarah was cruel to Hagar). The ancestors bore the responsibility for their errors, but they did not let their failures keep them from following God. Consequently, they were moral giants despite their stumbling, especially when they are compared with characters such as Cain, Lamech, or the citizens of Babel. The patriarchs persisted in seeking God until he fulfilled his promises. Their failures raise our estimation of them because we see them as real people who vacillated between trust and action as they walked with God. Since trust in God won out in their lives, their stories motivate us to persevere despite our failures, keeping our eyes focused on God.

Notes

1. There are two variations to this pattern. The first *toledoth* is placed at the end of the creation account (2:4a), forming an *inclusio* with the heading to that account (1:1). This particular *toledoth* formula is also unique in that it recounts the “genealogy” of a thing rather than a person, namely, of the heavens and the earth. Nevertheless, it still identifies the first section of Genesis (1:1–4:26). The other variation is the presence of two *toledoth* formulas in the genealogy of Esau (36:1, 9). The editor of Genesis may have kept both to indicate that he drew on two different sources for these genealogies. Given their proximity and the single topic of ch. 36, they are considered here to mark one section of Genesis.

2. In a few sections material usually included in a *toledoth* has been placed throughout the section. For example, from the *toledoth* of Isaac (25:19–35:29) the report of the births of Esau and Jacob comes at 25:25–26, the note about Isaac’s age at their birth at 25:26c, and the account of

Isaac's death at 35:27–29. But this variation is the exception. For a discussion of the role of these *toledoth* formulas in the compilation of Genesis from a conservative viewpoint see D. Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis: The Sources and Authorship of the First Book of the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), pp. 91–106.

3. The Jacob narrative does not really end with the start of the Joseph narrative, for material from the Jacob tradition is found in chs. 46–50.

4. In describing these structural patterns in Genesis I draw on the work of G. Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1986); he in turn builds on the solid work of M. Fishbane (*Text and Texture: Close Reading of Selected Biblical Texts* [New York: Schocken, 1979], pp. 40–62).

5. The account of Judah's settlement Adullam, which is in the Shephelah, the lowlands east of Bethlehem, is an interlude in the Joseph narrative and has a role similar to that of the interludes in the Jacob narrative. On the surface this account appears disjunctive to the Joseph story, but a closer look at the details and motifs in the story reveals many connections between it and the following account of Joseph in Egypt (see the introduction to Gen. 38).

6. Rendsburg argues that even the entire section is organized as a palistrophe (*Redaction of Genesis*, pp. 79–97), but his identification of the sections seems somewhat forced.

7. The assumption is that certain features so characterize an author's style as to distinguish the writings of that author from those of others. For example, the creation account (1:1–2:4a) presents an abundance of information economically by recounting in a carefully structured pattern what God did on each day of creation. The account of the garden of Eden, however, is a narrative that achieves penetrating insight into the human dilemma of pain, alienation, and death through brief exchanges between actors and the skillful use of symbols. It is also the only account in Genesis that uses the divine name Lord God (Yahweh Elohim). The story of the deluge has a distinctive structure formed around two chronological systems. An unusual density of wordplays and alliterations distinguish the narrative of the Tower of Babel (11:1–9). These sorts of distinctive features of various accounts attest that they probably existed independently before they were assembled in this collection.

Similarly, it is possible to demonstrate that many of the individual accounts within the Abraham and Jacob narratives originated independently. In contrast, the Joseph narrative is a whole, marked by the same literary style up to the insertion of material from the Jacob traditions.

8. This divine name is part of two names among the ancestors found in Numbers: Zurishaddai (1:6) and Ammishaddai (1:12).

9. El was the supreme God in the Canaanite pantheon. He was known as a kind, wise, yet salacious deity, and many epithets exalt him.

Several scholars equate El in the biblical texts with the Canaanite El, but it is possible that the preference in Genesis for identifying the God of the ancestors as El Shaddai was to place some distance between the God of the fathers and the Canaanite El.

10. Once Jacob used the anomalous name *pakhad Yitskhaq* (possibly “the Fear of Isaac,” 31:42; cf. 31:53).

11. El forms a part of several names in the patriarchal narratives, including Eliezer (15:2), Ishmael (16:11), and Bethuel (22:22–23).

12. *Yahweh* or *yahu* is an element in Amorite personal names. Whether it is a name or a verbal element is debated (F. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973], pp. 62–65). Also, some scholars equate the element *ia* in some Northwest Semitic names with *Yahweh*, but this seems unlikely since *Yahweh* as a God is not known outside Israel.

13. M. Selman identifies thirteen points of correlation between the ways of the patriarchs and customs attested in the Middle Bronze Age in “Comparative Customs and the Patriarchal Age,” in *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives*, pp. 134–38.

14. Some details in the Joseph narrative, including similarities to themes in Proverbs as noted above, have led scholars who are knowledgeable about Egyptian culture and history to conclude that the author was from Canaan and that this story was edited during the time of Solomon (R. de Vaux, *The Early History of Israel* [trans. D. Smith; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978], pp. 301, 307–10).

15. The lack of embellishment of the fantastic in the patriarchal narratives is further demonstrated by the way these stories are retold in later literature, including Pseudo-Philo’s *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* and the *Book of Jubilees*. These later writers tend to smooth out many of the disjunctives found in Genesis. The fact that these disjunctives have been left in Genesis further indicates that the editors who collected and arranged the accounts of the patriarchs preserved them essentially as they found them. That is, they did not touch up or adjust the accounts so that they would fit together smoothly and be free of seemingly conflicting details.