

# THE EXILE OF THE PATRIARCHS AMONGST THE PROPHETS: A NEW BEGINNING OR FIRST BEGINNINGS?

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**ABSTRACT**

Usually, the primary texts on the patriarchs of the Old Testament are considered to be those in Genesis, not only as to the extent of the material offered, but also regarding the dating accorded the patriarchs in relation to the texts concerned. References to the Old Testament patriarchs in the prophetic texts are often considered to be on the margins. In this article, this 'exile' is reversed, at least as far as the dating of the patriarchs in relation to textual references to them are concerned. Repatriating the importance of the earliest prophetic mention of the patriarchs makes possible new insights into where the patriarchs could most plausibly fit into the religious history of ancient Israel.

**SPEED DATING**

To date the patriarchs of ancient Israel is no easy matter. The way the Old Testament presents the life and times of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is by casting them very early in Israel's history, starting directly after the pre-history of Genesis, with that pre-history coming to an end in Genesis 11:26, immediately followed by a genealogical introduction to the call of Abraham (Gn 11:27 & Gn 12:1 respectively; cf. Görg 1989:61–71). Uncritical scholarship followed (and still follows) this dating too speedily, ignoring on the one hand the historiographical difficulties with texts, namely the difference between narrated time and time of narration (cf. Halpern 2000:541) and on the other hand, the historical difficulties related to the personages of these three figures. Such (what I have earlier called) 'naively historical' readings (Lombaard 2008b:49–62; cf. Lombaard 2008c:139–153) of the patriarchal texts, which in extreme cases take them completely at face value (i.e. asymptotically, in the language of Halpern 2000:561), have led to these figures being dated very early in the second millennium BCE, to the point of calculating dates by means of adding the ages given in the Old Testament genealogical tables (the most famous being Ussher 1560 & 1564 [cf. Hunt 1967:138], which still has some influence; cf. e.g. James 1993). In general, though, the traditional time ascribed to a patriarchal age would be at the dawn of the Early Iron Age I period (1250–1000 BCE), with the first half of the second millennium BCE being a favoured conservative approach amongst those reconstructing the narrated time (e.g. Holt 1964:207, 210).

The use of archaeology in attempting to date the patriarchs has been quite interesting (cf. recently Boshoff 2007:10–33 and Finkelstein & Mazar 2007 for overviews). The most extreme example in the Albright school (cf. Long 1996) of Glueck (1935, as one amongst a number of his publications) illustrates an approach in which archaeology serves to corroborate the veracity of biblical texts, an approach which always gives rise to earlier rather than later dating (cf. also Sarna 1996:143–145, dating the patriarchal era to the 13th and 12th centuries and Hoffman 1992:2, to 'the first half of the second millennium BC')<sup>1</sup>. The opposite and still classic example of Noth (1948:273, as one amongst a number of his publications) illustrates the way in which, primarily, texts are read, namely Genesis, giving rise, in his case, to only the oldest of the *Überlieferungen* being dated to pre-monarchical times. Despite the great affinity I hold for this work of Noth, such dating should not be accepted too speedily either<sup>2</sup>. The patriarchs, I believe, lived closer to their texts ...

**FINDING A GOOD DATE**

Since Wellhausen (cf. Pagolu 1998:15–26; Weidman 1968), the criteria for attributing dates to the patriarchs (i.e. to their persons and to the stories about them) have principally revolved around four naturally overlapping matters:

- The historical reliability of the patriarchal texts in preserving much, no or some kernel of truth about these figures (given that it is accepted by all critical scholars that the narrated time and the time of narration of these texts differed by centuries; exactly how many centuries, though, remains a bone of contention).
- The geographical accuracy of the texts, namely the extent to which they contain misrepresentations.
- The cultural resonance of the texts, namely the ancient Near Eastern customs within which the narratives seem to fit best (with the most popular positions being the first half of the second millennium across a broader swath of the Fertile Crescent and the middle third of the first millennium within a narrower Palestinian context).
- The religio-sociological world within which patriarchal family structures and their religiosity seem most natural (with early nomadic versus later semi-sedentary lifestyles being the usual alternatives).

1. Archaeology can indeed be very helpful in dating biblical texts, but then as an additional source of information, also open to interpretation. This avenue will be explored in a later article that forms part of this research trajectory.

2. Nor would I opt for the overly cautious position of historians who, fully aware of the difficulties involved (cf. Miller 2006:9–22), 'decline any attempt to reconstruct the earliest history of the Israelites' (Miller & Hayes 1986:79).

Although scholarly choices made within this matrix of possibilities are never without substantiating arguments, the results have been divergent. Broadly speaking, though, two groups may be identified, which I term the 'doubters' and the 'believers'<sup>3</sup>.

The 'doubters' have serious misgivings that the patriarchal texts can tell us anything apart from some (unintended) information about the time of their creation, with the early developers of these thoughts including Wellhausen and Gunkel, among others, whose impulses can be traced in later figures such as Thompson (1974) and Van Seters (1975)<sup>4</sup>, though the latter have re-dated the relevant texts from the early monarchy to around the exile.

The 'believers' include the greater part of Old Testament scholars, who hold to the view, to different extents, that despite all the historical, geographical, cultural and religio-sociological issues, none of which are to be denied, there remains some historical referentiality ('helpful clues'; Atwell 2004:35) in the texts. The patriarchal texts thus do tell us something about the patriarchs and their lives, even though we can extract such insights only with great circumspection and even then the results remain insecure. However, for this group, the choice offered by the 'doubters' is just too stark; their results, though initially unsettling, in time becomes for this group, really, just too easy.

Although I find my sympathies on finding a good date to lie closer to the modern doubting group, the discomfort the 'believers' feel with the too straightforward handling of clearly complex texts by the 'doubters' are just as appealing to me. Hence, my search is for a new way; not a middle way, but in some respects a different one.

## HOLDING MY HAND

The point to be argued here is part of a handful of cards I hold on the patriarchs. I do not hold this deck close to my chest, though: in the most accessible publication to date in which my hand is shown (Lombaard 2008a:907–919), even if briefly, I have put the following cards in play:

- On the identity of the individual patriarchs: that they are in fact composite figures (cf. also Noth 1948:109).
- On the familial relationship of the patriarchs: that initially unrelated figures in Israel's history were in time linked to one another in order to cement later social ties (a point long accepted in Old Testament scholarship).
- On the competitive inclination of the tradents of the patriarchs: that, rather than the usually assumed peaceful relationship between all in the Abrahamic lineage, given that 'Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation and all nations on earth will be blessed through him' (Gn. 18:18; NIV), there was, rather, an adversarial relationship between these tradent groups (Lombaard 2009:66–165), with Abram/Abraham and Jacob/Israel being the later dominant groups and with the classic doublet and triplet texts of historical criticism giving hints in this direction.
- The dating of patriarchal beginnings: that the commonly accepted dating, both historical and historiographical, of the patriarchal figures are too early. Although the historiographical matter has become less problematic in recent scholarship, with the trend towards the later dating of the Pentateuch texts, for those scholars who, as I do, accept some kind of *historical antecedent* for the patriarchal figures in the Old Testament texts (Thompson 1974, e.g., regards them as of only mythological nature), the usual dating accorded the period of the patriarchs lies still in the late second millennium BCE. This date, I suggest, ought to be amended: the patriarchs lived closer to Jesus.

3. It must be pointed out that this terminology relates to views on the historical worth of the texts and not their religious use, on which these two groups would be constituted differently.

4. See, for example, Selman (1980:102–103) for a summary of their views.

Of these four cards, it is only the last one that will be played with in the rest of this article. In taking cognisance of the patriarchal references in the Prophets, I will put on the table the possibility that the Prophets in fact offer us the very earliest glimpses of the patriarchal figures and that there are no particular reasons to accept that these prophetic references reflect traditions extending back in time by several hundreds of years (or even by a millennium and more). The very origins of patriarchal figures ought, I believe, to be sought not prior to the kingship period of Israel (accepting here simply for convenience's sake a traditional date of the initiation of a Jerusalem kingship to lie in the early tenth century BCE), but well into this period. However, different from most later daters, I attribute historical referentiality to the patriarchal personages in the Old Testament texts<sup>5</sup>.

## THE EXILE OF THE PATRIARCHS AMONGST THE PROPHETS

Although the Prophets were not meant to be historical books, they certainly do contribute to our understanding of the history of ancient Israel (Moore 2006:24–25). However, in research on Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, it is surprising to see how many scholars pay these texts scant attention, or none. When it comes to the patriarchs, often the Prophets have been held in an exile of sorts; marginalised or silenced, the Prophets have not been allowed to open their mouths on not so much the patriarchs *in* the texts of the Pentateuch, but rather on the patriarchs *behind* those texts. Certainly, there is not much material in the Prophets on the patriarchs, but as is the case with Isaac as the most diminutive amongst the three fathers of Israel (cf. Lombaard 2008a:907–919), it is precisely on such a small swivel point that much leverage may be gained for new insight.

Hence, trying in some way further to repatriate the Prophets into the discussion on dating the patriarchal figures, three texts in three early prophetic books that refer to the three patriarchs respectively present themselves as possible candidates for a primary, that is chronologically a first, occurrence: for Jacob, Hosea 12; for Isaac, Amos 7; and for Abraham, (what is traditionally known as) Deutero-Isaiah. The latter being as late as it is, post-586, disqualifies Abraham for our purposes here as the primary entry of patriarchy into prophecy<sup>6</sup>. Isaac, apart from a brief mention in Jeremiah 33:26<sup>7</sup>, found amongst

5. More radically and more or less alone, I attribute abundant historical referentiality to the patriarchal personages in the Old Testament texts, in that I regard them as multiplex personages. By this I mean that multiple historical figures have been drawn together in each of the patriarchal personages in the Old Testament, a point already argued in Lombaard (2008a:907–919) and to be expanded upon in forthcoming publications. Interesting comparative material, both on Jacob, can however be found in Noth (1948:109) and in Koet (2002:156–170). The works on biblical personal names by Layton 1990 and Fowler 1988 have been suggested to me as sources for further reflection in this regard. However, precisely because of the way the names are dated in these two works (namely too broadly, or not at all), they are not of much assistance with this research trajectory.

6. J. Jeremias (1989:139) is cautious on the reason for this relative late showing of Abraham being that he is a hitherto completely unknown figure, proposing as more likely Abraham's usefulness only later as a prophetic theme, namely for comforting distressed people. However, clearly the former reason carries more weight within the kind of thinking followed in this article. That would mean that there is thus no 're-application of the patriarchal traditions' in Isaiah 40–55 (Goldingay 1980:34; cf. C. Jeremias 1977:206, 217, 222), but rather that Deutero-Isaiah counts amongst the birth texts of the patriarchal material, specifically for Abraham.

The latter has strong exegetical implications. To give one example: Abram coming from 'Ur of the Chaldeans' (Gn 11:31) is, from such a dating of the origins of this patriarch, not an anachronism in the usual senses in which this is employed, namely, conservatively, as an indication that an ancient story (from pre-monarchic times) has been preserved or edited incorrectly here, or more modern, that this proves that these narratives are late inventions, given that the Chaldeans reach the height of their influence in the 800s and 700s (cf. e.g. Weinfeld 1988:355<sup>4</sup>). Rather, if the patriarchal narratives are to a greater degree contemporary to their *signifiés*, the 'Ur of the Chaldeans' reference may well be more accurate than is generally held, the anachronism now being that these narratives are placed – the narrated time – not contemporary to their being written, but earlier, by half a millennium and more.

7. A text in which all three patriarchs feature:

וְיָדַעְתָּ יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי יָדָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתָיִם אֶת אֲבֹתָיִם אֶת אֲבֹתָיִם אֶת אֲבֹתָיִם

NJB translation: 'why, then I shall reject the descendants of Jacob and of David my servant and cease to choose rulers from his descendants for the heirs of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob!'

the Prophets only in Amos 7:9–17, a textual reference which is in any case difficult to understand (J. Jeremias 1989:139). As I have argued elsewhere (Lombaard 2005:158), this pericope is definitely to be dated post-722<sup>8</sup>. This leaves us with Jacob, who (although widely encountered within the Prophets) makes a first personal appearance in the very early prophetic text of Hosea 12 (J. Jeremias 1989:139)<sup>9</sup>.

## JACOB IN HOSEA 12

The text of Hosea 12 (NIV) reads as follows:

<sup>1</sup> Ephraim feeds on the wind; he pursues the east wind all day and multiplies lies and violence. He makes a treaty with Assyria and sends olive oil to Egypt.

<sup>2</sup> The LORD has a charge to bring against Judah; he will punish Jacob according to his ways and repay him according to his deeds.

<sup>3</sup> In the womb he grasped his brother's heel; as a man he struggled with God.

<sup>4</sup> He struggled with the angel and overcame him; he wept and begged for his favor. He found him at Bethel and talked with him there—

<sup>5</sup> the LORD God Almighty, the LORD is his name of renown!

<sup>6</sup> But you must return to your God; maintain love and justice, and wait for your God always.

<sup>7</sup> The merchant uses dishonest scales; he loves to defraud.

<sup>8</sup> Ephraim boasts, 'I am very rich; I have become wealthy. With all my wealth they will not find in me any iniquity or sin.'

<sup>9</sup> 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt; I will make you live in tents again, as in the days of your appointed feasts.

<sup>10</sup> I spoke to the prophets, gave them many visions and told parables through them.'

<sup>11</sup> Is Gilead wicked? Its people are worthless! Do they sacrifice bulls in Gilgal? Their altars will be like piles of stones on a plowed field.

<sup>12</sup> Jacob fled to the country of Aram; Israel served to get a wife, and to pay for her he tended sheep.

<sup>13</sup> The LORD used a prophet to bring Israel up from Egypt, by a prophet he cared for him.

<sup>14</sup> But Ephraim has bitterly provoked him to anger; his Lord will leave upon him the guilt of his bloodshed and will repay him for his contempt.

The single undoubtedly pre-722 reference to a patriarchal person is found here, in Hosea 12:3–4 & 12 (Whybray 1995:49<sup>10</sup>; Whitt 1991:18–43, who amongst others argues that both these occurrences are primary Hosean material, rather than later textual additions - Whitt 1991:25–26). As many commentators note, though, this is not a particularly glamorous entry for the patriarchs onto the stage of history, because the appearance is negative (cf. Koet 2002:157), with reference here being made to and inference drawn from deception and suffering (with e.g. Hs 12:3, like Jr 9:3 and later MI 3:6, referring to the Jacob-Esau birth story of Gn 25.26 - Van der Merwe 1956:136–137). This Hosea-text is therefore critical of Ephraim/Judah/Jacob/Israel.

Clearly, many of the well-known episodes from Jacob's life that are documented in Genesis are summarised here, implying that the intended audience were well aware of these (or similar - cf. Whitt 1991:28–41; or here poeticised - Ausin 1991:10–21) narratives in order for them to be rhetorically employed in such a relatively cryptic fashion. Situated at the beginning of the last major section of the Hosea composition (cf. Vosloo 1992:246–251<sup>11</sup>), this text reflects loosely structured content (Whitt 1991:23–24) that may best be dated to just before the last quarter of the

8. There is some irony, Tucker (2006:91–94) points out, that this late text in the book Amos contains the most historical references for dating the person of Amos.

9. For Jacob in the book of Amos, see J. Jeremias (1989:139–154), McConville 2006:131–157; for Jacob in Deutero-Isaiah, see Polliack (2002:72–110); on Jacob amongst the Prophets in general, see C. Jeremias (1977:210–215).

10. Only in the exilic texts of Isaiah 51:2 and Ezekiel 33:24 do we have reference to Abraham as an individual as opposed to a designation of a group.

11. For a detailed analysis of Hosea 12 based in the *Richter Schule*, see Diedrich 1977.

eighth century BCE and thus attached to the prophet Hosea with the current Pentateuchal stories finding writing only a century and more later (Vielhauer 2007:178 believes earlier).

Whybray (1995) suggest that

*the stories of the patriarchs which the author of Genesis used may for the most part be no older than that period [i.e. ± 725]. There is no evidence that they were current over a long period before then, and the fact that they are mentioned neither in the historical books nor by the preexilic prophets suggests the contrary.*

(Whybray 1995:50)

The last part of Whybray's reasoning here is the strongest and finds a parallel in the question on the almost complete absence of the patriarchs in the Psalms, Psalm 105 being the exception (cf. Lombaard 1998:59–70). However, the Jacob stories must have been known in some detail, as indicated above, by the intended audience in order to make it practicable to include these allusions here. However, either they were not widespread enough, or not authoritative in prophetic and/or scribal circles to the extent that they soon became important literary material. The point remains, though, that Hosea 12 indicates the first surfacing of a strand of Israel's religion that would later become one of the most expansive sections of their writing and one of the dominant intra-religious forces, later, post-586 BCE and again much later, post-70 CE, to become the saving grace, sociologically speaking, of Israel's faith.

## NEW OR FIRST PATRIARCHAL BEGINNINGS IN THE PROPHETS?

The historical reality of the patriarchs have been firm over time in only the sense that these three 'historische figuren' have remained of importance throughout the Jewish and Christian centuries (Herzberg 1986:7). However, whether the individual patriarchs' stories refer to 'real men, ... shadowy myths or tribal projections' (Frost 1963:17) has been debated throughout the era of critical Bible scholarship.

The reason why the geographical, historical and religious references in the Pentateuchal Jacob stories can be linked to 'frühestens der späten Königszeit' (Wahl 1997:310) may be ascribed to the fact that this is more or less the time they came into large scale existence. Not only do these texts not, but they cannot provide information on the earliest history of Israel (Wahl 1997:310), before the first millennium, because no such history existed (Lemche 1998:42). To call therefore the whole of the patriarchal cycles invented (Liverani 2003:259–264), for the sake of post-exilic politics in Palestine, is however too harsh. It leaves unexplained the way patriarch Jacob comes into play in his earliest prophetic appearance.

This kind of perspective is thus in one respect *contra* the belief of Wellhausen (1885:318–319)<sup>12</sup> and his followers on the point that the Pentateuchal patriarchal stories can tell us only something of historical worth about the time of their (oral and literary) composition: the time of the patriarchs and the time of the composition of their stories are not that far apart.

The idea most influentially from the later 'doubters' van Seters (1975) and Thompson (1974) that the patriarchal narratives have no ancient historical kernel and are namely entirely exilic or post-exilic fictions, is also only correct in one sense. Namely in this respect: if one understands how these then-recent stories would have been understood in Babylon (= 'Ur?') and Yehud, namely as self-affirming identity narratives, believed to be ancient because they were cast as such and continually edited as such, both to include and exclude, namely in the service of both 'external' politics (over against the Canaanites, for instance) and 'internal' identity politics (for instance the power struggles

12. So too Gunkel 2008 [1901]:92; cf. for example Holt 1964:17.

between returnee exiles and those who remained in Palestine and the power relations between different patriarchal groups too; cf. Lombaard 2008a:907–919).

Although the tradents and/or scribes involved indeed would have collected extant stories, starting roughly from Hosea's 8th century (Finkelstein 2007a:17–18), I am of the opinion that these stories did not preserve ancient material, from a previous millennium, as is often pleaded by historical maximalists and moderates; nor were the contents just invented, as is pleaded by historical minimalists or revisionists. Rather, these were new stories of contemporary or almost-contemporary figures, the foreign ambience of which do not necessarily reflect ancient material (the traditional view) nor only continuing ancient custom (the view of van Seters 1975:65–103, e.g.), but rather the completely different yet contemporary life styles of nomadic and semi-sedentary patriarchal figures, who thus lived more or less co-temporaneously with their probably city-dwelling scribes. From this perspective, many of the so-called anachronisms in the patriarchal texts can no longer be said to reflect on authorial skill (which may be valued negatively as inadequacies, because they reveal their own historical circumstances without wanting to, or positively, as writing in ways sensitive to the material circumstances which their intended readership would have been familiar with; cf. Finkelstein 2007b:46–49), but show contemporary realities, certainly 8th century and much later. The casting back of these contemporary figures and events into ancient, foundational history had simply a theological reason: 'Jahves Vorsehung über den Anfängen Israels, das ist das Motto dieser Geschichte' (Gunkel 1920:131; cf., parallel, Noth 1948:273). If we as critical scholars accept that fictive narrated time, the two logical options are gradients within what has come to be termed historical minimalism and maximalism. For my part, as has become clear above, I think there are alternate avenues to explore.

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