

## *The Theology Of The Patriarchs*

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.

Hebrews 11:8-9.

The Patriarchal narratives (Gen.12-50) do not provide us with anything like a systematic theology of the Patriarchs. The attention of their writers was centred on “a God who had revealed himself to them, and with their response to that revelation.”(1) Complicating the matter further is the fact that the accounts of the Patriarchs as we know them are all post-Sinaitic, and therefore presuppose and contrast the teachings of Moses with those of the Patriarchs. Exodus 6:3; and Joshua 24:14 state that the Patriarchs did not know God as Yahweh and that they were originally polytheists.(2) This leads logically to the question of whether the later editors of the Genesis accounts read back into them later beliefs, making El-Shaddai equivalent to Yahweh.(3)

John Bright writes:

According to one of the strands (J), the God of the patriarchs was non other than Yahweh. Not only did he call Abraham from Haran (Gen. 12:1) and hold converse with all the patriarchs, but he had been worshipped since the very dawn of time (ch. 4:26). But elsewhere (Ex. 6:2f) it is explicitly stated that though it was really Yahweh who had appeared to the Patriarchs, he had not been known by that name.(4)

Finally, the presuppositions of the scholars greatly colour their findings. For obvious reasons Jews and Christians are unlikely to accept that the Patriarchs were polytheists. More liberal scholars, who support an evolutionary view of religion (that it is a purely human creation) are unlikely to view the Patriarchs as monotheists.(5) Because the analysis of the narrative material depends so much on *a priori* assumptions as to their sources “modern discussions of the patriarchal religion have skirted round the source-critical problem and attempted to make comparisons between other near Eastern religions and the data of Genesis to arrive at a picture of the patriarchal religion.”(6) But here again there is difficulty, because choosing what to compare the patriarchal religion with depends once again on *a priori* assumptions.(7)

Oesterley & Robinson, in common with many other liberal scholars this century, saw the patriarchal narratives as describing an animistic religion. Discussing Genesis 12:6-8 they point out that ‘the Oak of Moreh’ should be translated ‘terebinth of the teacher,’ which, according to them, meant that it was a tree at which divine teaching was given.

The tree was regarded as sacred. Abraham halts at it because he expects a divine manifestation there; and he is not disappointed... there is no room for doubt that we have here an instance of the development of the belief that spirits took up their abode in trees.(8)

They go on to claim that Abraham had the same reason in building an altar at Mamre (18:1). “This spot must have been regarded as a holy one... but it was the presence of the Terebinth that made it holy.”(9) In Gen. 35:4 Jacob buries the ‘foreign gods’ and the ear-rings under the

Shechem Terebinth, which Oesterley & Robinson see as further evidence of the worship of trees, namely that by burying the 'gods' under the oak, they were put under the power of the tree sanctuary of Jacob's God and thus rendered harmless.(10) They find one final evidence of animism in Gen. 35:8, where, without any evidence in my view, they link the name 'Oak of Weeping', with the Canaanite practice of weeping for Tammuz (cf.Ezek.8:14).(11)

Many such scholars find the clearest reference to demonism in Gen. 28:11-22, the story of Jacob's dream at Bethel:

Jacob takes one of the stones of the place and uses it for his head to rest on while sleeping; it is owing to his contact with the stone that he dreams, and thus recognises that it is the abode of a god, a bethel. As a result he sets it up as a pillar... marking a sanctuary, and pours oil on it as an act of worship of the indwelling deity. From the sacred stone as god's house the place receives the name of Bethel (Gen. 35:14-15).(12)

The burial of the dead at 'holy' places (Gen. 21ff; 35:8; cf.12:6; 35:4) is seen as evidence that the dead were worshipped.(13) However, closer examination of each of the above passages shows how much the scholars' biases have directed their conclusions. On the account of Jacob's dream at Bethel, Keil & Delitzsch point out that:

Jacob set up the stone at his head, as a monument to commemorate the revelation he had received from God; and poured oil upon the top, to consecrate it as a memorial of the mercy that had been shown him there... not as an idol or an object of divine worship... He then gave the place the name of Bethel... whereas the town had been called Luz before. This antithesis shows that Jacob gave the name, not to the place where the pillar was set up, but to the town in the neighbourhood of which he had received the divine revelation.(14)

On Genesis 12:6-8 it should be noted that the oak (or *Terebinth*) was a spreading tree much valued for its shade.(15) In the same way as similar trees, such as the Pipal tree in Nepal and the Banyan in India are places of meeting or markets, it is not surprising that Abraham chose this place to make his camp under one, or that Jacob found one a convenient spot for burying idols and ear-rings (35:4). Further evidence for this point can be seen in the fact that in other instances God appeared to Abraham in places unconnected with trees.(16) In the theophanies the deity "invariably appears in human form and there is no suggestion that the deity is identified with the spirit of the tree or spring or stone. These objects are nowhere venerated for themselves.(17)

The evidence is very strongly against an association of patriarchal religion with that of the Canaanites, which has been shown by the Ras Shamra texts to have been demoralising and brutal, involving human sacrifices and sacred prostitution of both sexes.(18) The absence of any female deity and of any compounds of the Canaanite god 'Ba'al' add further weight to this view.(19)

As Wenham points out, due to the lack of other evidence most discussion of the theology of the patriarchs centres about their names for God,(20) and it is this subject that we must now address.

Albrecht Alt, noting that each patriarch refers to the Deity being in relation to himself suggested that titles such as 'The Shield of Abraham' (15:1); the 'Fear of Isaac' (31:42,53) and the 'Champion (or Strong One) of Jacob' (49:24) represented distinct deities. These three gods were worshipped by three different tribes - the Jacob tribe in the East and North of

Canaan, worshipping the God of Jacob; the Isaac tribes, worshipping around Beersheba, and the Abraham tribes, who settled around Mamre.(21) This view has been shown to have two major weaknesses. First of all, it infers that the patriarchs' gods were anonymous - known only by the names of their worshippers - whereas ancient parallels have shown that such phrases indicated the deities' relationship to the individual, and not a substitute for the divine name (in this case 'El Shaddai'). Secondly, Alt relies heavily on archaeological parallels which have now been superseded since the discovery of the Ras Shamra texts.(22)

As was briefly noted above, the major problem regarding the Names of God in the patriarchal narratives centres around Exod. 6:2f, where El Shaddai is said to have been the name by which the patriarchs knew God.(23) Wenham points out that 'El' was the name of the head of the West Semitic pantheon in the early second millennium BC, and that there is no evidence of the use of 'Yahweh' in any extra-Biblical writings of this period. The name 'Yahweh' is found more often in the narrative frame work of the text of Genesis than in the dialogue. The Yahwist editor, wishing to identify the God of Moses with that of the patriarchs appears to have added 'Yahweh' to the 'El' compounds, such as 'El Elyon', making 'Yahweh El Elyon' (Gen. 14:22) or 'Adonai Yahweh' (15:2). The exception to this is where the actual words of God are being recorded, which the editor apparently did not at liberty to alter.(24)

If this view is accepted only four passages exist where the narrative records the Lord using the name 'Yahweh' to describe Himself. In Gen. 18:14 the saying "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" is "a proverbial statement in the form of a rhetorical question"(25) - the name not being vital to the thrust of the question. Gen. 18:19 is an explanation of God's motives, not necessarily heard by Abraham, that is, it was probably added later. The last instance is "I am the Lord who bought you" (15:7), which as it occurs 22 times in the Pentateuch in connection with the Exodus, must have been used as a stock phrase "used to draw a connection between Abraham's departure and the Exodus from Egypt".(26) It is clear therefore that there is no real difficulty in accepting that the God of the patriarchs is the same as Yahweh, and that the patriarchs knew Him by the name 'El' and its compounds: 'El' Shaddai (17:1; 27:3; 35:11; 43:14); 'El' Elyon (14:18-22); 'El' Olam (21:33); 'El' Ro'i (16:13), and 'El' Bethel.(27)

What did the patriarchs understand about the nature of God? Joshua 24:2 & 14 clearly show that at one time they had been polytheists, worshipping other gods, probably including the "Sumerian Moon god 'Nanna' who was patron deity of both Ur and Haran."(28) In response to a divine calling Abram left his homeland and travelled to Canaan. This call took the form of a three-fold promise (12:1-3); a promise of descendants, of land and of being a blessing to all nations. The number of times that these promises were repeated makes them central to the patriarchs' knowledge of their God (to Abraham, three times: 12:1-3; 15:4-21; 17:1-9; to Isaac, once 26:25 and to Jacob, twice: 28:13-14; 35:11-12).(29) These promises were then reinforced in the form of divine Covenants with Abraham (15:9-21; 17:1-22), which take the form of a Suzerainty treaty (15:9-21). "It is a sacrifice unlike any other referred to in the patriarchal stories, and unlike any of those prescribed in the ritual legislation of the Old Testament".(30) By passing through the pieces alone, Yahweh alone contracts obligation to fulfil this covenant.(31)

The worship of the patriarchs is portrayed as extremely simple. Following the examples of their forefathers Abel (4:3-4) and Noah (8:20-21) they offered 'burnt offerings' (cf. 22:2-14) at the places where God appeared to them, on altars that they built (Hebron 12:7; 13:18;

Bethel-Ai 12:8; Moriah 22:9; Beersheba 26:25; Shechem 33:20 and Bethel 35:7).(32) The fact that 12:7 does not mention a sacrifice does not therefore show that Abram did not offer one and “built it symbolically, demonstrating his belief that it would belong to his descendents,” as Jacob, Cussuto and Westermann have argued.(33) The patriarchs had direct access to God without the need of a priesthood,(34) and was not limited to a particular place.(35) God graciously appeared to them

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## References

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