

HISTORY OF OLD TESTAMENT ISRAEL

PERIOD #1—THE PATRIARCHAL PERIOD

Emphasis: “Origins”

I. Historical Considerations relevant to this period

A. Chronology: The dates for this period are 2091 B.C. to 1876 B.C.

This period typically dates from when Abram enters Canaan (Genesis 12:4) until Jacob enters Egypt (Genesis 47:9). The chronology of this period deals with four specific individuals: 1) Abraham; 2) Isaac; 3) Jacob; 4) Joseph.

The chronology of this period is based on the fixed date of June 15, 763 BC, an astronomically dated eclipse of the sun identified in the Assyrian Eponym lists.

By using this fixed date and the mention of Ahab and Jehu from the eponym list one can work backward through the divided kingdom, to determine that the Kingdom was divided about 931 BC. The Kingdom divided after Solomon

Since Solomon reigned for 40 years (1 Kings 11:12), he must have become king about 971 BC. By taking note of 1 Kings 6:1, Solomon began building the temple during his fourth year as king about 966 BC 480 years after the Exodus. This would place Israel’s Exodus in 1446 BC.

Exodus 12:40 says that Israel was in Egypt for 430 years. So the year that Jacob went down to Egypt can be dated at 1876 BC. This would be the concluding date for the Patriarchal Period.

Jacob states that he was 130 years old when he appeared before Pharaoh (Genesis 47:9), so his birth can be dated at about 2006 BC.

Isaac was 60 when Jacob was born (Genesis 25:26), so his birth would have been about 2066 BC.

Isaac was born when Abraham was 100 (Genesis 21:5), which suggests that Abraham would have been born about 2166 BC. Since Abraham went down into Canaan when he was 75 (Genesis 12:4), then this period of Israel’s history began about 2091 BC.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE PATRIARCHAL PERIOD								
Birth of Abraham	75 years	Abraham to Canaan	25 years	Birth of Isaac	60 years	Birth of Jacob	130 years	Jacob to Egypt
2166 BC		2091BC		2066 BC		2006 BC		1876 BC

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B. Archaeology: Confirmation of the historical accuracy of this period.

Until very recently, the very existence of such persons as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was doubted; it was widely assumed by critical scholars that the narratives of this period in the Old Testament were nothing more than feeble fabrications, written late and shot through with anachronisms and inaccuracies. But today that attitude is no longer tenable; archaeology has verified the historicity of the Biblical narratives in many ways. Two of the lines of evidence demonstrating the historical accuracy of the Old Testament accounts of the Patriarchal period are as follows:

1. Names:

Certain names of the Patriarchal age, or the equivalent cognates of those names, fit well with in the 2nd millennium BC. The following references are not necessarily biblical characters, but the appearance of the names in this time period shows that the Old Testament records are historically tenable.

- *Jacob* occurs in an 18th century BC text from upper Mesopotamia. It also occurs as the name of a Hyksos chief and a Palestinian place name on the 15th century list of Thutmose III, the pharaoh of the oppression.
- *Abraham* occurs in Babylonian texts of the 16th century BC.
- *Nahor* (the name of Abraham's brother) occurs in the Mari text as a town near Haran. The Mari Texts are texts found in 1933. Some twenty thousand texts were found at ancient Mari and are considered to be the most important archaeological find in the ancient Near East for this ancient time period.
- *Benjamin* occurs in Mari Texts as a tribal name.
- *Zebulun* occurs in the execration texts of Egypt.

The significance of these archaeological records are that these names as they appear in the Scripture do fit the time period of the 2nd millennium BC and therefore give physical credibility to the biblical record.

2. Customs:

There are customs, which prevailed during the Patriarchal period, which seem strange in light of Mosaic Law and later practices. But these are understandable in light of customs of the early 2nd millennium BC, especially as shown in the Nuzi texts. [These are a set of texts found in 1925 along the Tigris River. They were written in the fifteenth century BC in Accadian. They received quite a bit of attention in the academic world because they parallel the Book of Genesis very well. In fact, the Nuzi texts describe a culture more similar to the culture of the book of Genesis than the later Israelite culture was. This is why the Nuzi texts are important for Old Testament studies.]

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- Abraham’s concern lest Eliezer, his servant, be his heir instead of a son (Genesis 15:1-4). The Nuzi texts reveal that it was the custom of that day for childless parents to adopt a servant as a son; he would serve them for a lifetime, becoming heir at their death if no son were born.
- Sarah giving Hagar, her handmaid, to Abraham as a second wife (Genesis 16:1-4). The Nuzi texts show this was a common practice of the day.
- Rachel’s theft of her father’s teraphim, the family idols (Genesis 31:19, 34-35). The Nuzi texts state that such idols signified the right of heirship. Laban had natural sons (Genesis 31:1), and Rachel was trying to secure for Jacob the place of principal heir.
- The binding quality of oral blessings (Genesis 27:34 etc. . .) The Nuzi texts contain court records of oral blessings, considered fully binding in a legal or contractual sense.

The Nuzi texts have shed some light on the legitimacy of the Old Testament record. Some previously questioned events mentioned above, now have archaeological support as customs from the 2nd Millennium BC.

C. Societal Organization in the Patriarchal Period:

The Patriarchal Period was a period when society was still organized around clans. The term “patriarch” is expressive of the social structure of the period. The term “patriarch” means “ruling father” and is significant in that the father of the clan primarily ruled the culture.

It is important to note that there was no external governing authority, no constituted government exercising rule or restraint. The patriarchal structure was virtually the only governing authority during this period. Most patriarchs ruled along the lines of the code of Hammurabi. The patriarch was not only the ruling authority; he also functioned as a judge. His governing role not only involved control but the responsibility to punish crime.

The following passages demonstrate the authority/rule of the patriarch:

- Genesis 14:13-16—Abram as patriarch involved in military strategy.
- Genesis 31:22-39—Laban was a patriarch and Jacob submitted to his authority.
- Genesis 42:36-37—Reuben recognizes the patriarchal authority of Jacob.

There are basic levels to patriarchal society. The basic unit is the *family* referred to as “the father’s house.” This is simply the household or nuclear family. The next level is the “clan.” The *clan* is several generations of sons, with their wives and families. They are the male descendants and their nuclear families. Sons strengthen the clan, while daughters weaken the clan. The next level up from that is the *tribe*, which is a number of clans with common ties of family and tradition.

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The concept of a “clan society” explains many facets of the Old Testament—and especially patriarchal—culture which are otherwise somewhat difficult for us to understand. These are just a few examples of concepts in the Old Testament that came out of patriarchal society.

- Joy over the birth of a son.
- Dowry—reimbursing the family for raising a daughter.
- Levirate marriage—bound the wife to the family of her husband.

II. An Overview of the Patriarchal Period of Israel’s History

The easiest way to divide these 215 years of Old Testament History is according to the four dominant individuals, the patriarchs themselves. To be certain, there is some overlap between the narratives of these four successive generations, but we will briefly survey the period according to the four great personages of that time—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

ABRAHAM:

Abraham was a man of faith. We see him going forth trusting in God’s guidance, believing God’s promises, inheriting God’s blessing and undergoing difficult testing. Despite his occasional failures, Abraham was accounted as righteous. The following is a brief sketch of Abraham’s life as recorded in Genesis:

ABRAHAM 2166 BC TO 1991 BC		
1. The Birth of Abram	Genesis 11:26	2166 BC
2. Departure from Ur of the Chaldees	Genesis 11:31-32	
3. The Sojourn in Haran	Genesis 11:31-32	
4. Abram’s arrival in Canaan	Genesis 12:1-9	2091 BC
5. Abram’s Flight to Egypt	Genesis 12:10-20	
6. The Separation of Abram from Lot	Genesis 13	
7. Abram’s Rescue of Lot	Genesis 14	
8. The Formal Covenant/Promise of a Son	Genesis 15	
9. The Birth of Ismael to Abram & Hagar	Genesis 16	2086 BC
10. Abram Awaits the Promised Child	Genesis 16-18	
11. Abram’s Experience with the Philistines	Genesis 20	

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12. The Birth of Isaac/Sacrifice of Isaac	Genesis 21-22	2066 BC
13. The Death of Sarah & Encounter with the Hittites	Genesis 23	2029 BC
14. A Bride is Found for Isaac	Genesis 24	
15. Abraham's Marriage to Keturah	Genesis 25	
16. The Death of Abraham	Genesis 25:7	1991 BC

ISAAC:

Isaac was the son of promise. He was the one through whom the Abrahamic covenant would be fulfilled (Genesis 26:24-25). He was the link between Abraham and the following patriarchs. It is interesting that his birth is mentioned in Genesis 21:2-3 and his death in Genesis 35:29, but He is the main character only in the short section from Genesis 25:19 to 26:35. The following is a brief sketch of Isaac's life:

ISAAC 2066 BC TO 1886 BC		
1. Birth of Isaac	Genesis 21	2066 BC
2. Experience on Mt. Moriah	Genesis 22	
3. Isaac's Marriage to Rebekah	Genesis 24	
4. The Birth of Jacob & Esau	Genesis 25:21-34	2006 BC
5. Isaac's Lie to Abimelech concerning Rebekah	Genesis 26	
6. Isaac is Deceived; Jacob gets the Blessing	Genesis 27	1929 BC
7. Isaac's Death	Genesis 35:28-29	1886 BC

JACOB:

Jacob is known as the Father of the Nation of Israel. In fact his name was changed to Israel in Genesis 32:28. He had 12 sons who would become the 12 tribes of Israel. The covenant promise was renewed through Jacob as it had been with Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 28:13-15; 35:10-12). The following is a brief sketch of his life:

JACOB 2006 BC TO 1859 BC		
1. The Birth of Jacob	Genesis 25	2006 BC
2. The Flight to Haran	Genesis 28:1-29:13	

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3. Twenty Year Sojourn in Haran	Genesis 29:14-31:20	
4. Jacob’s Return to Canaan	Genesis 31:21-33:20	
5. Jacob’s Final Years in Canaan	Genesis 34-36	
6. Jacob’s Descent into Egypt	Genesis 46:1-47:26	1876 BC
7. Jacob’s Blessing & Death	Genesis 47:27-49:33	1859 BC

JOSEPH:

Although Joseph, one of Jacob’s 12 sons, was not part of the Messianic line, God sovereignly used him to protect the Messianic line. Joseph is the one responsible for the relocation of God’s chosen people to Egypt. Joseph serves as a link between the patriarchal period and the period of the Exodus. Joseph was a righteous and faithful man despite times of suffering and glory. The following is a brief sketch of his life:

JOSEPH 1915 BC TO 1805 BC		
1. The Birth of Joseph	Genesis 30:24	1915 BC
2. Joseph is Sold into Slavery	Genesis 37	
3. Joseph Suffered in Egypt	Genesis 39-40	
4. Joseph Eventually Honored in Egypt	Genesis 41	
5. Joseph is Reunited with his Brothers	Genesis 42-45	
6. Joseph’s Family Joins him in Egypt due to Famine	Genesis 46:1-47:26	1876 BC
7. The Death of Joseph	Genesis 50:22-26	1805 BC

III. Geographical & Cultural Considerations relevant to this period

In regards to the Patriarchal period of Israel’s history it is necessary to begin with the Life of Abraham and work through significant locations of his travels and end in Egypt where Jacob had led the patriarchal family after a famine in the land of Canaan.

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The City of UR:

At the time of Abraham's departure from Ur of the Chaldees (Genesis 11:31-32), Ur was the capital city of all lower Mesopotamia, chief city of the Sumerian empire, and Sumerian civilization had reached its highest development at this time. The Living conditions in Ur were very prosperous; the city was a center of trade and commerce, and quite advanced in various artisan's crafts, especially metallurgy.

Old Testament historian, Leon Wood says, "It was a progressive world, where cultural advantage was notable. Artists were skilled, builders competent, business active, and times good. Religion, centering in the worship of the moon-god Nanna, was extremely important. Writing was comparatively common, and schools where this art and various subjects might be learned apparently existed. We may believe that Abraham, clearly a capable person, would have availed himself of educational opportunities. He may have learned to write and so would have been able to record some of the early stories later put into Holy Writ by Moses. Certainly he had gained an appreciation for cultural niceties when he found it necessary to leave and go where standards could only be lower." [Wood, p. 42]

Understanding this cultural and geographical background makes the obedience of Abraham even more impressive. He was not only leaving his home behind. He was leaving a comfortable lifestyle behind. The following are some brief cultural aspects of life in Ur at the time of Abraham:

- The religion of Ur was that of the moon-god, Nanna, which was a very superstitious religion. This was likely the religion of Terah, Abraham's father (cf. Joshua 24:2).

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- The streets of Ur were narrow and one could often stretch out their hands and touch buildings on either side. The buildings facing the road were windowless with only doors opening on the street to the houses.
- The houses were constructed around a central courtyard and the common middle class home would be about forty by fifty feet or more with 10-20 rooms and normally two stories.
- Irrigation canals fed agriculture around the city of Ur and farmers used stone or copper hoes and wooden plows drawn by oxen. They would often cultivate barley, wheat and vegetables. Sheep and cattle occasionally grazed around and groves of date palms and fruit trees dotted the landscape.
- The diet of those living in the city of Ur consisted of cereals such as barley, wheat, millet, and emmer (a variety of wheat). The primary vegetables used would be chick-peas, lentils, onions, garlic, lettuce, turnips, leeks, mustard, cabbage, radishes, and a variety of cucumbers. The spices most often used included mustard, cumin, and coriander along with salt. The most important fruits were the apple, pomegranate, and fig. Bulls, cows and calves were important for their meat and skin, while sheep provided meat and wool. They also utilized pigs for meat, fat and skin. The Sumerians especially enjoyed pork.
- The people of Ur typically wore woolen clothes. Women wore a shawl-like garment draped over one shoulder. Men frequently wore a flounced skirt or kilt and sometimes a felt cloak draped around the upper body.
- There was an emphasis in the city on brick making; wood working; and metal working. The primary metal used during the time of Abraham was that of copper with some silver.

The City of Haran:

The city of Haran was a town situated on the arch of the Fertile Crescent, in the region that was called Padan-Aram by later Biblical writers. Cuneiform references identify Haran as a very prosperous city, being the junction of caravan trade between Carchemish and Nineveh, Mesopotamia and the Hittite empire in Asia Minor, and the communities along the eastern Mediterranean seaboard. In other words it connected all the major regions of this ancient civilization. The culture was likely very similar to that in Ur. It would be the location that Abraham's father Terah would die and that his brother Nahor would settle. In fact, Abraham would send for a wife for Isaac from among his family in this area and it is in this same area that Jacob would come and serve Laban and marry his daughters.

The Land of Canaan:

When Abraham moved into Canaan (c. 2091 BC), he entered what was for him a quite different world—a life fundamentally different from what he had known in the cities of Ur and Haran in Mesopotamia. He found the land in a rather rural state—few urban centers stood in his path. It

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might be compared to moving from Los Angeles to rural Montana.

The general de-urbanization in Canaan during this time was likely caused by a significant weather shift to drier conditions, combined with a greatly weakened economy and disruption of trade systems.

The Land of Canaan as previously discussed is not vast open ranges that we might picture a nomadic people traveling in. Instead the area is about the size of Connecticut and Delaware being only 25-30 miles wide in the north and only 80 miles wide in the south. The terrain was varied with coastal lowlands, a central mountain range and the Jordan River valley. The climate was not too dissimilar to the that of the Antelope Valley, extremely hot and dry in the summer and quite cold in the winter especially in the central mountains where snowfall was not unusual.

The government in the land was a patriarchal clan style of government. Abraham and his family were the people of God during their day. Abraham and his family worshipped Yaweh and it is clear that Abraham would set up private altars and worship God; although not much is known regarding the extent of this worship.

Scripture presents the patriarchs as essentially nomadic dwellers in tents. The tents were made of goatskins during this period. They were long and almost flat, but slightly higher in the center for rain run off. To afford privacy, families could hang curtains in the tents to create separate rooms. A raised tent flap could provide a sort of reception area where guests could be welcomed or in Abraham's case the entertaining of the heavenly visitors (Genesis 18:4).

There seems to have been little or no furniture in the tents. Beds consisted of a mat that was unrolled on the ground at night. The table consisted of a skin or mat that was spread on the ground, and people sat on mats or rugs around the table to eat their meals. Dishes were made of baked clay and the most common was a saucer or bowl that could serve food or drink.

Cooking usually occurred outside in the open, but on rainy days they would likely cook under a raised flap of the tent. The menu usually consisted of bread, butter, milk and the meat of a calf. However, meat was usually reserved for special occasions, because the animals were too valuable as sources of wool or milk. Milk, cheese and butter came from cows or goats. The patriarchs could have grown wheat and barley as they were not always on the move or they could have purchased it from local inhabitants. The diet also included wild fruits, honey, olive oil, beans, lentils and peas.

IV. Theological Considerations relevant to this period

The primary theological consideration from the Patriarchal Period of Israel's History involves the covenant with Abraham. The Abrahamic covenant is described in Genesis 12:1-3 as an unconditional covenant because there are no conditions attached to it. It should also be understood as a literal covenant in which the promises made should be understood literally. It is also identified as an everlasting or eternal covenant. We will first examine a brief overview of the covenant and then its partial fulfillment in history.

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<i>An Overview of the Abrahamic Covenant</i>									
THE PARTIES INVOLVED	The Abrahamic covenant was established by God with Abraham, his physical descendants, and the people of Israel (Genesis 15:18; 17:4-8, 19-21).								
THE SIGN/SYMBOL	The sign of the Abrahamic covenant was circumcision. Circumcision was a physical demonstration of God’s commitment to His people, Abraham’s physical descendants.								
THE PROMISES	<table border="1" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">Personal Promises to Abraham</td> <td> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To bless Abraham and make him a blessing to others (Genesis 12:2). 2. To make his name great (Genesis 12:2). 3. To give him many descendants (Genesis 13:16; 15:4-5; 17:6). 4. To make him a father of many nations (Genesis 17:4-5). 5. To give him the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession (Genesis 13:14-17; 15:7; 17:8). 6. To bless those who would bless him and curse those who would curse him (Genesis 12:3). </td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">National Promises to Abraham</td> <td> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To make Abraham’s physical descendants a great nation (Genesis 12:2). 2. To give the land of Canaan from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates River to Abraham’s physical descendants forever (Genesis 12:7; 13:14-15; 15:18-21; 17:8). 3. To give the Abrahamic covenant to Abraham’s descendants as an everlasting covenant (Genesis 17:7, 19). </td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">Universal Promise to the World</td> <td>All the families of the earth would be blessed through Abraham’s physical lineage (Genesis 12:3; 22:18; 28:14).</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">Summary of Promises to Abraham</td> <td>God’s promises to Abraham can be divided into three types: promises involving the land of Canaan, promises involving the descendants of Abraham and promises of blessing to God’s people.</td> </tr> </table>	Personal Promises to Abraham	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To bless Abraham and make him a blessing to others (Genesis 12:2). 2. To make his name great (Genesis 12:2). 3. To give him many descendants (Genesis 13:16; 15:4-5; 17:6). 4. To make him a father of many nations (Genesis 17:4-5). 5. To give him the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession (Genesis 13:14-17; 15:7; 17:8). 6. To bless those who would bless him and curse those who would curse him (Genesis 12:3). 	National Promises to Abraham	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To make Abraham’s physical descendants a great nation (Genesis 12:2). 2. To give the land of Canaan from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates River to Abraham’s physical descendants forever (Genesis 12:7; 13:14-15; 15:18-21; 17:8). 3. To give the Abrahamic covenant to Abraham’s descendants as an everlasting covenant (Genesis 17:7, 19). 	Universal Promise to the World	All the families of the earth would be blessed through Abraham’s physical lineage (Genesis 12:3; 22:18; 28:14).	Summary of Promises to Abraham	God’s promises to Abraham can be divided into three types: promises involving the land of Canaan, promises involving the descendants of Abraham and promises of blessing to God’s people.
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The Partial Fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant in History	
Fulfillment of the Personal Promises to Abraham	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. God blessed Abraham (Genesis 24:1, 35). 2. God made Abraham a blessing to others (e.g. Genesis 14). 3. God has made Abraham’s name great as he is mentioned 41 times in the Old Testament after the Book of Genesis and 64 times in the New Testament. Even Judaism and Islam respect him greatly today. 4. He has many descendants and is the father of many nations, from Israel to the Arab nations, which descended from him through Ishmael.
Fulfillment of the National Promises to Abraham	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. God made Israel a great nation of Abraham’s descendants. 2. God gave Israel the promised land after the exodus from Egypt (Deuteronomy 31:7-8; 32:45-52 and Joshua 1:1-11). 3. Israel has never perished as a people, which is necessary in order for the national blessings to be completely fulfilled.
Fulfillment of the Universal Promise to Abraham	God has made great blessing available to all the families of the earth through Abraham’s physical line in the person of Jesus Christ.
Principles of the Fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The parts of the Abrahamic Covenant, which have been fulfilled thus far have been fulfilled literally. This would lead us to believe that God intends to fulfill every promise of that covenant in the same manner. 2. Some parts of the Abrahamic Covenant have not been fulfilled completely. God has not yet given the entire land of Canaan to Abraham’s descendants as an everlasting possession. 3. When the Abrahamic Covenant was formally established (Genesis 15:7-21) it was established unilaterally by God and without any conditions, which must be met by Abraham or anyone else. According to Galatians 3:15, once a covenant has been established no conditions can be added to it.

Since the Abrahamic Covenant is unconditional and since God fulfills His promises literally, then we can expect that God will one day give the nation of Israel the entire land from the Nile to the Euphrates. This promise that remains is a fundamental argument in support of premillennialism, which teaches that there will be a future re-gathering of the nation of Israel on earth.