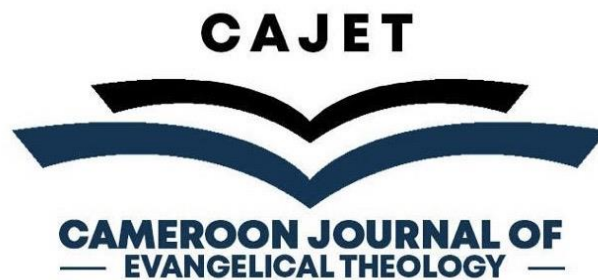


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## Exploring the Patriarchal Narratives and Other Ancient Near Eastern Texts in the Light of Archeological Discoveries

### *Exploration des récits patriarcaux et d'autres textes anciens du Proche-Orient à la lumière des découvertes archéologiques*

Victor Umaru<sup>1</sup>

#### Abstract

The study of patriarchal narratives and other ancient Near Eastern texts has gained renewed interest due to recent archaeological discoveries. These texts in modern-day nations like Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Egypt provide insights into ancient Near Eastern nations' social, political, and economic systems. They also reveal power structures, family relationships, and gender roles. These narratives have been studied primarily from a textual and religious perspective, neglecting their historical and archaeological context. Recent archaeological research has revealed a wealth of new information, including inscriptions, artifacts, and architectural remnants, directly connecting to the characters and locations depicted in the texts. The ancient Near East, encompassing Mesopotamia, Anatolia, the Levant, and Egypt, has been a cradle of human civilisation and culture for millennia. The texts and narratives from this region have played a significant role in shaping the understanding of history, society, and religion. The primary focus of this study is to explore the patriarchal narratives by analysing the stories of figures like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph and scrutinising the intertwined relationship between these narratives and archaeological findings. The study identifies commonalities and divergences between the patriarchal narratives and these non-biblical texts. This approach not only corroborates the narratives but also offers a glimpse into the lives of individuals and communities, allowing one to examine these narratives' historical accuracy and cultural relevance.

**Keywords:** patriarchal narratives, ancient Near Eastern texts, archaeology, Mesopotamia.

#### Résumé

L'étude des récits patriarcaux et d'autres textes du Proche-Orient ancien a connu un regain d'intérêt grâce aux récentes découvertes archéologiques. Ces textes, retrouvés dans des pays modernes comme l'Irak, l'Iran, la Turquie, la Syrie et l'Égypte, donnent un aperçu des systèmes sociaux, politiques et économiques des anciennes nations du Proche-Orient. Ils révèlent également les structures de pouvoir, les relations familiales et les rôles des hommes et des femmes. Ces récits ont été étudiés principalement d'un point de vue textuel et religieux, négligeant leur contexte historique et archéologique. Les recherches archéologiques récentes ont révélé une multitude de nouvelles informations, notamment des inscriptions, des artefacts et des vestiges architecturaux, directement liés aux personnages et aux lieux décrits dans les textes. Le Proche-Orient ancien, qui englobe la Mésopotamie, l'Anatolie, le Levant et l'Égypte, a été le berceau de la civilisation et de la culture humaines pendant des millénaires. Les textes et les récits de cette région ont joué un rôle important dans la compréhension de l'histoire, de la société et de la religion. L'objectif principal de cette étude est d'explorer les récits patriarcaux en analysant les histoires de personnages tels qu'Abraham, Isaac, Jacob et Joseph et en

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examinant la relation entre ces récits et les découvertes archéologiques. L'étude identifie les points communs et les divergences entre les récits patriarcaux et ces textes non-bibliques. Cette approche permet non seulement de corroborer les récits, mais aussi d'avoir un aperçu de la vie des individus et des communautés, ce qui permet d'examiner l'exactitude historique et la pertinence culturelle de ces récits.

**Mots-clés** : récits patriarcaux, textes du Proche-Orient ancien, archéologie et Mésopotamie.

### Introduction

Studying patriarchal narratives and other ancient Near Eastern texts has recently attracted fresh interest, primarily because of ground-breaking archaeological discoveries. The ancient Near East – the birthplace of civilization – can be situated in modern-day nations, including Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Syria, Egypt, and a broad physical region, the birthplace of the Patriarchs including Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and sometimes Joseph.

Texts from nearby cultures, such as Mesopotamia and Egypt, contain stories with patriarchal figures that are similar to these. In addition to having religious significance, patriarchal narratives also shed light on historical Near Eastern nations' social, political, and economic systems. They provide a window into the power structures, family relationships, and gender roles of these historical societies. These legends have long been studied exclusively from a textual and religious standpoint, focusing little on their historical and archaeological context.

Archaeological research in the ancient Near East has uncovered a wealth of fresh information that challenges and deepens understanding of these stories in recent years. The inscriptions, artefacts, and architectural remnants found during these excavations offer direct connections to the persons and locations depicted in the ancient texts. The patriarchal stories in the Hebrew Bible (Gen.11-50) and other historical writings from diverse local civilisations are among these texts.

This paper contributes to the ongoing discussion on the textual and archaeological worlds. It aims to provide a brief knowledge of patriarchal narratives and other writings from the ancient Near East. It entails looking at how archaeological findings add to the understanding of these stories and reveal more about the ancient Near East's material culture, way of life, and socio-economic systems.

### Overview of Patriarchal Narratives

The patriarchal narratives in the Bible begin with Abram, son of Terah, leaving Ur and travelling to Haran and Canaan.<sup>2</sup> Isaac, his son, becomes the father of Jacob, also known as Israel. During a famine, Jacob and his 12 sons leave Canaan and settle in Egypt, where their descendants become slaves. The biblical description of the patriarchal period mainly focuses on private affairs, with few references to public events. For example, Genesis 14 describes a war between the kings of the five Cities of the Plain against an alliance led by Chedorlaomer. Eric H. Cline claims no extrabiblical record of these events, the names of the kings involved in the war, or other public figures are found. Alternatively, to put it better in his words:

...although numerous excavations have recovered tremendous quantities of archaeological remains from the early second through the early first millennia BCE at sites in lands ranging from ancient Mesopotamia to Canaan to Egypt, there has not yet

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<sup>2</sup> Bill T. Arnold and Brent A. Strawn. *The World around the Old Testament: The People and Places of the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 1-3.

been any direct archaeological or extrabiblical textual evidence found to confirm or deny the existence of Abraham and his fellow Patriarchs.<sup>3</sup>

On the contrary, Kris J. Udd, in his dissertation titled *Bab edh-Dhra', Numeira, and the Biblical Patriarchs: a Chronological Study*, made claims that archaeologists have identified Bab edh-Dhra' and Numeira as potential biblical cities of the Plain.<sup>4</sup> However, he states that the historical context of Genesis 12-50 is challenging to determine due to the absence of general historical references. Nevertheless, chronological indications suggest that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lived in Canaan for 215 years before going to Egypt (from 2091 to 1876 BCE).<sup>5</sup> The period of slavery in Egypt lasted 430 years, and the time from the Exodus from Egypt to the construction of the Temple in Solomon's reign was 480 years.

The proposed chronology of the Exodus and settlement in Canaan has several problems, including accepting the long-life spans of patriarchs and being internally inconsistent. According to Bar et al., the 430-year period assigned to slavery in Egypt is too long for the three generations from Levi to Moses and Aaron, and the dates produced do not correspond well with historical and archaeological evidence.<sup>6</sup> The biblical patriarchal history reflects the political and religious viewpoint of the Judean monarchy and priesthood. P. Kyle McCarter asserts that Genesis 12-50 presents a unique perspective on the Israelites and their neighbours, with the patriarchs often referred to as eponyms.<sup>7</sup> The narratives and genealogies characterise the peoples of the writers' time and delineate their relationships from an Israelite perspective. However, this material is challenging to use in reconstructing Israel's ancestral world. If Genesis 12-50 reflects the time of biblical writers, it may be possible to examine the traditions upon which this material is based, providing insight into the patriarchal age.<sup>8</sup>

Martin Noth studied the preliterate history of patriarchal stories, analysing biblical literature.<sup>9</sup> He believed Israel was formed by amalgamating various clans and tribes during the settlement period in Canaan. Traditions about patriarchs have clear geographical connections, with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all associated with specific regions. The blending of patriarchal traditions in biblical stories occurred during oral transmission before the creation of the J source in Genesis.

Noth assumes that patriarchal tradition grew from independent literary units and that folk literature evolved from simple units into complexes.<sup>10</sup> However, a recent understanding of oral literature has exposed the error of this view, as long stories with complex structures were familiar in preliterate oral stages, such as Homer and Ugaritic literature. Today's historians of ancient Israel approach prehistory cautiously, believing that stories about Abraham, Isaac, and

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<sup>3</sup> Eric H. Cline, *Biblical Archaeological: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 75-76.

<sup>4</sup> Kris J. Udd, "Bab edh-Dhra', Numeira, and the Biblical Patriarchs: a Chronological Study" (PhD., Dissertation, Andrews University Digital Commons @ Andrews University, 2011), ii.

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

<sup>6</sup> S. Bar, D. Kahn, and J.J. Shirley. *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel: History, Imperialism, Ideology, and Literature*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., "The Patriarchal Age: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," revised by Ronald S. Hendel, 19.

<sup>8</sup> Jennie Ebeling, J. Edward Wright, Mark Elliott, and Paul V. M. Flesher., eds. *The Old Testament in Archaeology and History* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Martin Noth, *The History of Israel*, trans. P. R. Ackroyd (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 53-84.

<sup>10</sup> Hermann Gunkel, "The Influence of Babylonian Mythology upon the Biblical Creation Story," *Creation in the Old Testament* (ed. B. W. Anderson; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984; German original, *Schöpfung und Chaos*, 1895), 26.

Jacob contain a kernel of authentic history, but are reluctant to designate individual features as historically authentic.<sup>11</sup>

Genesis 12-50 is a valuable resource for reconstructing the prehistory of Israel, as it likely reflects traditions from other peoples. Hermann Gunkel's principle suggests that features that have lost meaning in their earlier context may be relics of an earlier stage of the tradition. According to Hermann Gunkel, the critical time in forming the patriarchal traditions was the preliterate, oral stage, when the individual units of tradition were expressed in particular genres or forms (Gattungen). Thus, the history of the traditions can best be studied through the identification of these units by reference to the forms in which they are preserved (form criticism) and by investigating how these units were combined into larger narratives.<sup>12</sup> This allows for exploring preliterate traditions and discerning aspects of their history that might go unnoticed. The final form of the patriarchal story of Israel, written around 1000 BCE, represents the community's self-understanding at the end of settlement.<sup>13</sup> Israel is a 12-tribe entity, with southern tribes, particularly Judah, in full membership. The tradition of tribal Israel can be traced back to the 12 sons of Israel in the stories about Jacob and Joseph. The tribes were Israelite or "Hebrew," and their identity was derived from the ancestral tradition preserved in the patriarchal narratives of the Bible. The tradition of Israelite origins asserts that the ancestors of Israel were foreigners from Mesopotamia, not natives of Canaan. This ethnic boundary marking reflects the early Israelite community's identity, likely arising from the conflict between hill-dwelling people and Egypt's population in the Late Bronze Age.<sup>14</sup> The patriarchal tradition's genealogical structure emerged at the end of the Late Bronze Age, coinciding with Israel's early formation.

Abraham, a biblical figure, is not an eponymous ancestor and may have been a historical individual before becoming a figure of tradition and legend. His name appears only as a personal name in the Bible, not as a tribal or local designation. His period is uncertain, but the variants "Abram" and "Abraham" arose in different languages and dialects.<sup>15</sup> The biblical stories about Abraham have no historical basis, and the claim that Abraham came to Canaan from Mesopotamia is not historically implausible.<sup>16</sup> However, the connections between Abraham's family and Haran in northern Mesopotamia are precise in the earliest narrative source. Abraham is depicted as the founder of religious sites in Shechem, Bethel/Ai, Hebron, Mount Moriah, and Beersheba, all within early Israelite settlements in Iron Age I. These sites unite northern and southern tribes, forming a common social and religious identity.<sup>17</sup>

Isaac, a biblical name, is associated with the northern Negev, specifically the oases of Beersheba and Beer-lanai-roi.<sup>18</sup> Settlement in the area began in the 13th century BCE, and the patriarchal tradition in the Beersheba region may have been developed later during the southern development of the tradition. The name Isaac may be a shortened form of a name like "Isaac-

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<sup>11</sup> Nadav Na'aman, "The Jacob Story and the Formation of Biblical Israel." *TEL AVIV*, Vol. 41, (2014): 95-125

<sup>12</sup> Hermann Gunkel, *The Legends of Genesis: The Biblical Saga and History*, trans. W. R. Carruth (New York: Schocken, 1964), 90-103.

<sup>13</sup> Terry J. Prewitt, "Kinship Structures and the Genesis Genealogies," *JNES* 40 (1981), 97-98.

<sup>14</sup> Pieter J. Lalleman, "The Old Testament and Archaeology. With a personal top ten of discoveries," *Evangel* 26.3 (Autumn 2008): 83-88.; Alan R. Millard, "King Og's Iron Bed: Fact or Fancy?" *Bible Review* 6.2 (April 1990), 20.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives: The Quest for the Historical Abraham* (Berlin, New York: 1974), 20.

<sup>16</sup> John van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1983), 40-42.

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin Mazar, "The Historical Background of the Book of Genesis," in *The Early Biblical Period*, ed. S. Ahituv and B. A. Levine (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1986), 59.

<sup>18</sup> Yohanan Aharoni, *The Archaeology of the Land of Israel*, trans. Anson F. Rainey (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 168.

El,” meaning “May (the god) El smile,” that is, “May El look favourably upon.”<sup>19</sup> In the eighth century, Amos used the name Isaac as a parallel to Israel, reflecting its use as a designation for the northern tribal region.

Genesis describes Jacob’s birth and childhood in Beersheba, Isaac’s home. After returning from Haran, Jacob lived in the central hill country of Shechem, where he founded Bethel and built an altar like Abraham. Jacob is associated with the central hills of Israel, unlike Abraham and Isaac. The biblical name “Jacob” is a shortened form of “Jacob-El,” a West Semitic personal name from the Middle Bronze Age and the Hyksos period.<sup>20</sup> The genealogical structure of the tradition was an early feature, with Jacob being the key figure in the genealogical scheme. The name “Israel” may not have been invented when forming the community in Canaan, but an arriving people may have used it. Noth notes that the relationship between Jacob and Esau may have predated identifying the two brothers with Israel and Edom in the genealogical structure.<sup>21</sup> The conflict between Jacob and Esau in Genesis falls into the category of ethnic boundary-making, as one’s ancestor is identified with civilisation in contrast to another’s ancestor, who is wild and uncivilised.<sup>22</sup>

The special prominence of Joseph in the biblical narrative must be, at least in part, a reflection of the eminence of “the house of Joseph” at the end of the settlement period (about 1000 BCE) and the continuing historical importance of the Manasseh -Ephraim region. Scholars believe the long story about Joseph and his family in Genesis 37 and 39–47 originated independently of the other patriarchal narratives. This story depicts Joseph as preeminent among his brothers and as the favourite of his father, Jacob (Israel). The story was probably passed down orally among the inhabitants of the region around Shechem and Dothan (cf. Genesis 37:12 and 37:17), in the heart of the traditional territory of Ephraim and Manasseh, the two “half-tribes” of Joseph’s sons. In an early form, this story may have eulogised Joseph, the tribal Patriarch, as a man who went to Egypt as a slave and rose to a position of authority in the Egyptian court.<sup>23</sup>

Joseph, a name belonging to Isaac, Jacob, and Israel, may be a personal, tribal, or geographical designation. The term “the house of Joseph” was used as a collective designation for northern tribes in early monarchy literature. References to a tribe of Joseph are rare and appear only in late materials. The story about Joseph and his family in Genesis 37 and 39-47 originated independently from other patriarchal narratives. It depicted him as preeminent among his brothers and a favourite of his father, Jacob. Scholars believe that the events described in the story have an ultimate basis in historical fact, possibly during the Hyksos period (c. 1675-1552), when Asian princes ruled Egypt.<sup>24</sup> In Mazar’s view, the biblical Joseph story is more like a historical romance than a historical work of history, with its narrative motifs originating from ancient Near Eastern literature and folklore.<sup>25</sup> The story contains authentic Egyptian details, indicating the author’s time, not the Hyksos period.

Further, the author of the biblical Joseph story displays only a limited knowledge of the life and culture of Egypt.<sup>26</sup> Recalling the hot wind that blows across the Transjordanian plateau into Israel, he writes of the east wind scorching pharaoh’s grain (Genesis 41:23, 27), but the

<sup>19</sup> Aharoni, 168.

<sup>20</sup> Thompson, *Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, 45–48.

<sup>21</sup> Noth, *History of Israel*, 71.

<sup>22</sup> Siegfried Herrmann, *A History of Israel in Old Testament Times*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981).

<sup>23</sup> Wiseman, 364-65.

<sup>24</sup> Noth, *History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, 97–98.

<sup>25</sup> Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible, 10 000 - 586 B.C.E.* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 12

<sup>26</sup> Theodor H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (New York: Torchbooks/Harper & Row, 1975), 217–218.

south wind blights crops in Egypt.<sup>27</sup> The titles and offices the author assigns to various Egyptian officials have closer parallels in Syria and Canaan than in Egypt.<sup>28</sup>

### Patriarchal Narratives and Archeological Discoveries

Archaeology has significantly contributed to the understanding of the Bible, providing an additional perspective that written evidence alone cannot provide.<sup>29</sup> The science of Biblical Archaeology is owed to scholars from various nations who have worked diligently to recover and reconstruct past relics. The first systematic study of the Bible lands began in the 19th century with the work of E. Robinson, the British "Palestine Exploration Fund,"<sup>30</sup> and Ch. Clermont-Ganneau.<sup>31</sup> Sir Frederick Petrie<sup>32</sup> made the most significant breakthrough in archaeological methodology in 1890 with his insights into the structure of tells and pottery used to ascertain relative chronology.

William Foxwell Albright was a significant figure in these studies, particularly in the archaeological search for evidence of patriarchs. He is remembered for his ability to integrate archaeological data into the broader framework of biblical research, historical geography, and general Near Eastern studies.<sup>33</sup>

H. D. Lance believes that biblical archaeology is not about proving the Bible but providing a context of reality for the biblical story and reasonability for biblical faith.<sup>34</sup> Early work by Old Testament critics was done in isolation from comparative materials, with Wellhausen consciously ignoring early archaeological finds.<sup>35</sup> Gunkel disagreed with Wellhausen's conclusions, taking into account extrabiblical paradoxes like the Gilgamesh Epic.<sup>36</sup> After Gunkel's publication, Old Testament research would follow many paths, but it became clear that the Bible could no longer be reliably interpreted as a self-contained system in isolation from the rest of the ancient Near East.<sup>37</sup> Archaeological discoveries have led to the modification of the Documentary Hypothesis, which is now held to be historical but transmitted orally for an extended period, affecting the preliterate stage rather than the sources themselves. Selman notes that only a few writers have argued for abandoning the Documentary Hypothesis based on archaeological data.<sup>38</sup>

There is a wide range of opinions on the exact period of the 'Patriarchal Age', with most scholars arguing for a date in the early second millennium, the Middle Bronze Age.<sup>39</sup> Some scholars, such as Albright and Glueck, believe that Abraham was associated with the Amorite migrations during this period,<sup>40</sup> while others, like John Bimson, argue for an earlier date (Abraham c.2092 - 1992 BC) to avoid problems associated with assigning the patriarchs

<sup>27</sup> Donald B. Redford, *A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph, VT supp. 20* (Leiden: Brill, 1970).

<sup>28</sup> de Vaux, *Early History*, 301–302

<sup>29</sup> W.S. Lasor, "Archaeology," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (ISBE), rev., Vol. 1. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 243.

<sup>30</sup> "Historical Survey of Archaeology," *New International Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 49.

<sup>31</sup> Mazar, 10.

<sup>32</sup> W.F. Albright, *The Archaeology of Palestine* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1949), 29.

<sup>33</sup> Mazar, 12.

<sup>34</sup> H. D. Lance, *The Old Testament & The Archaeologist* (London: SPCK, 1983), 65.

<sup>35</sup> Lance, 4.

<sup>36</sup> R.E. Clements, *A Century of Old Testament Study* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1976), 16.

<sup>37</sup> Lance, 4-5

<sup>38</sup> R.K. Harrison, *An Introduction to The Old Testament* (Tyndale Press: London, 1970), 79-80.

<sup>39</sup> W.F. Albright, *From Stone Age to Christianity*, 3rd edn. (Doubleday & Co. Ltd., 1957), 200.

<sup>40</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, "The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17," *New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 60-61.



to either MBI or MBII.<sup>41</sup> Cornfield et al., however, opt for a Late Bronze Age (LBA) date for Abraham and Joseph due to references in Genesis 49, Isaac's blessing of his sons, and Noah's curse on Canaan.<sup>42</sup>

Much evidence has been put forward for dating of 1950 - 1700 BC, including alliances between Mesopotamian powers,<sup>43</sup> personal names of the patriarchs,<sup>44</sup> seasonal occupation of the Negev,<sup>45</sup> presence of city-states,<sup>46</sup> and certain social customs.<sup>47</sup> However, this evidence is not as strong as once thought, and Van Seters claims that the Arabian names in Genesis 25 must be from the first millennium.<sup>48</sup> Hamilton points out that this absence is likely due to the lack of contact between the Tigris-Euphrates and Canaan before that time. Based on this evidence, the milieu of the patriarchal narratives is more likely to be of the second millennium than the first, leading to a more acceptable dating among scholars of 1950 - 1700 BC.<sup>49</sup>

Like all sciences, archaeology has limitations due to its inability to verify spiritual truth and the possibility of data misuse.<sup>50</sup> Genesis 14 is the most debated area of patriarchal archaeology,<sup>51</sup> with many scholars regarding it to be the late and unhistorical account of the four Kings.<sup>52</sup> Attempts at identifying the four Kings have been rejected on both philological and historical grounds.<sup>53</sup> However, the name of the Kings, the route taken by the armies, and incidental references to the Canaanite religion give it a ring of authenticity.<sup>54</sup>

The Hyksos Period (c.1700 - 1550 BCE) also received significant attention due to the rise of Joseph to power and the entry of Jacob and his family into Egypt.<sup>55</sup> The identity of the Hyksos is uncertain, but some identify them with a Hurrian ruling class who dominated Syria, Canaan, and the Lower Kingdom of Egypt through superior weaponry and strategy.<sup>56</sup> The subjugation of the confused and weakened Lower Kingdom was more likely to have been more by infiltration than by conquest.<sup>57</sup> No direct evidence of Joseph's administration is available from archaeology, but incidental features of the Joseph narrative (Gen. 37-50) are consistent with the Hyksos period. The price of 20 shekels was the average slave price in the 18th century BC, which rose to 40-50 in the 15th-14th centuries. The technical terms used in Pharaoh's court, court, prison procedure, and etiquette are accurate.<sup>58</sup> While Cornfield argues that mentioning Rameses before the rise of the Nineteenth Dynasty in the 14th century is anachronistic,<sup>59</sup> the name may be accurate, being interpreted as 'Re has created it'.<sup>60</sup> Specific

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<sup>41</sup> J. J. Bimson, "Archaeological Data and the Dating of the Patriarchs," *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives*, 84.

<sup>42</sup> G. Cornfield, & D.N. Freedman, *Archaeology of The Bible Book by Book* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendricksen, 1989), 28.

<sup>43</sup> K.A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and The Old Testament* (Chicago: IVP, 1966), 45,47.

<sup>44</sup> Bright, 33-34.

<sup>45</sup> Bright, 78-80.

<sup>46</sup> John van Seters, *Abraham In History and Tradition* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1975), 60-64.

<sup>47</sup> Wenham, xliv.

<sup>48</sup> Wiseman, 310.

<sup>49</sup> Roland De Vaux, 216.

<sup>50</sup> Martin Noth, *The History of Israel* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1960), 124.

<sup>51</sup> J.H. Hayes, & J.M. Miller, *A History of Israel & Judah* (London: SCM, 1986), 64.

<sup>52</sup> Hayes and Miller, 64.

<sup>53</sup> G.W. Anderson, *The History and Religion of Israel* (Oxford: OUP, 1989), 17.

<sup>54</sup> Van der Woude, 231.

<sup>55</sup> C.E. Devries, "Hyksos," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev., Vol. 2. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 787.

<sup>56</sup> James B. Pritchard, *The Times Concise Atlas Of The Bible* (London: Time Books, 1991), 18

<sup>57</sup> Cornfield, 32.

<sup>58</sup> Pritchard, 18.

<sup>59</sup> Cornfield, 32.

<sup>60</sup> R.W. Pierce, "Rameses," *ISBE*, Vol. 4, 1988, 39.

Egyptian names are not attested elsewhere until the 12th or 10th centuries BC, but this is probably due to a lack of documentary evidence rather than their non-use.<sup>61</sup>

### Ancient Near Eastern Texts

This section synthesises current research on *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (ANET) discoveries and re-evaluations. It surveys textual material from Syro-Palestinians, Egypt, Hittite, and Syro-Canaan texts, focusing on documents from the 6th century BCE or earlier discoveries that contribute to understanding the Patriarchal narratives. The study traces significant developments in the comparative study of ancient Near Eastern texts and the Hebrew Bible over the decades.

### Egypt and Akkadian Texts

Akkadian literature is rich in myth, with the *Enuma Elish* being a hymn commemorating Marduk's elevation to the head of the pantheon. Other ANETs, such as the Memphis Creation Account, Heliopolis Creation Account, Kumarbi Cycle, *Illuyanka*, and *Baal Cycle*,<sup>62</sup> can be attributed to Egyptian, Hurrian, and Ugarit cultures. Sumerian tales, such as *Enmerkar*, *Lugalbanda*, and *Gilgamesh*, are also documented in Akkadian culture. Other texts from the ancient Near East contain divination and incantation references, such as rites of purification and celestial omens. Letters representing domestic internal memos or international correspondence between kings are also found within ANET. Other forms of ANET include royal inscriptions, annals, chronicles, treaties, legal documents, law collections, wisdom literature, hymns, prayers, prophecy, archives, and fictional autobiographies. These ANETs provide insight into the cultures of the times and offer valuable insights into the culture of the time.<sup>63</sup>

Comparative study of Egyptian texts to the Hebrew Bible has been slow due to a lack of direct evidence of connections. Egyptologists have found little direct evidence of connections, and the field has co-existed independently of biblical studies. However, the past decade has seen a rise in comparative research, with scholars becoming proficient in Egyptology and biblical studies.<sup>64</sup> Studies have focused on interactions between Canaan and Egypt, economy, administrative texts, royal hymns, and influences on narratives in Gen. 1-11.

Washington and Kitchen's studies on the relationship between Egyptian and Hebrew wisdom literature highlight their socio-historical background, particularly regarding wealth and poverty.<sup>65</sup> They argue that both texts advocate for low-income people and employ similar literary patterns throughout the ancient Near East. New studies focus on style and terminology, with Shupak's research focusing on Hebrew wisdom terminology and its relationship to Egyptian literature<sup>66</sup>. There were points of contact between Egypt and Israel in wisdom literature.

According to Hoffmeier, the Joshua material, often viewed as late Deuteronomistic sixth century BC, shares similarities with the annals of Thutmose III.<sup>67</sup> Both annals combine lengthy battle accounts with terse reports, often using hyperbolic exaggeration and divine manifestations. Barta's work provides a larger context for the Sinuhe story, comparing it to Egyptian

<sup>61</sup> Wiseman & Yamauchi, 20.

<sup>62</sup> James B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

<sup>63</sup> Ann E. Killebrew, *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity: An Archaeological Study of Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines and Early Israel, 1300-1100 BCE*, *Archaeology and Biblical Studies* 9. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005).

<sup>64</sup> Arnold, et al., 201.

<sup>65</sup> K.A. Kitchen, "Ancient Orient and Old Testament." *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 5.1 (Spring 2000): 153-170.

<sup>66</sup> Shupak, 1-11.

<sup>67</sup> L. James, *Israel in Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 165-79

autobiography and biblical narratives. He sees the story as a valuable historical fiction for understanding Egypt and Palestine during the Middle Kingdom period.

### Syro-Palestinian Texts

Mesopotamia and inland Syria have been famous for biblical comparative analysis due to their cultural, historical, and linguistic connections.<sup>68</sup> In Sumerian literature, a body of cosmological writings, the gods and their roles in the purpose of the land are mentioned by Enki and the Ordering of the World. The creation of people and animals is also discussed. Even if there are other stories, the Sumerian Creation contains a Middle Assyrian creation story.<sup>69</sup> Many similarities, yet unique differences, are presented in this piece of literature as compared to Genesis.

Wright revisited the relationship between ancient Near Eastern law codes and the Mosaic Code, arguing that Hebrew legal tradition directly depended on Mesopotamian codes.<sup>70</sup> He believes the biblical writer had direct access to the Hammurabi Code, which was copied as late as the Neo-Assyrian period. Wright's research furthers understanding of literary borrowing from a sociocultural perspective.

New Nuzi texts have been discovered and rediscovered in the British Museum, including the name of a Babylonian officer, Nebo-Sarsekim, mentioned in Jeremiah 39 and an Old Babylonian tablet about the flood.<sup>71</sup> However, there is a lack of consensus on the importance of Nuzi material for biblical studies.<sup>72</sup> Most believe they provide documentation for socio-economic practices in Mesopotamia, shedding light on biblical customs and law. Comparisons between Patriarchal narratives and Nuzi material are difficult due to dating and literary genres.<sup>73</sup> Emar, a Bronze Age site near the Middle Euphrates, offers comparative material in religious spheres, including anointing, festivals, calendars, and prophetic offices. Its mixed urban and small-town Syrian communal life provides a closer social comparison for Israel than Ugarit. Many studies on the Old Babylonian period site of Mari and the Bible acknowledge the chronological difference and different literary genres.<sup>74</sup> Recent re-evaluations of biblical and Mari prophetic traditions emphasise comparing cultural systems to avoid errors in conclusions rather than evaluating isolated elements.<sup>75</sup>

### Syria and Canaan Texts

Coastal Syria, Lebanon, and ancient Canaan have produced numerous documents that can be used to compare the Ugarit and Hebrew Bible.<sup>76</sup> Over the past, more research has been done on the relationship between Ugarit and the Bible than any other Near Eastern site. The 1994 excavation of the Urtenu house in the thirteenth century BC revealed around 356 new Ugaritic and Akkadian texts. Korpel's work on the tablets of Ugarit's high priest, Ilmilku, has

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<sup>68</sup> John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006), 94-95.

<sup>69</sup> Bill T. Arnold, and Brent A. Strawn. *The World around the Old Testament: The People and Places of the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Publishing Group, 2016).

<sup>70</sup> Jennie Ebeling, J. Edward Wright, Mark Elliott, and Paul V. M. Flesher, eds. *The Old Testament in Archaeology and History* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2017).

<sup>71</sup> "Biblical Archaeology," ([http://www.britishmuseum.org/the\\_museum/news\\_and\\_press\\_releases/press\\_releases/2007/biblical\\_archaeology\\_find.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/the_museum/news_and_press_releases/press_releases/2007/biblical_archaeology_find.aspx)).

<sup>72</sup> "Noah's Ark Was Circular." <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2010/jan/01/noahs-ark-was-circular>

<sup>73</sup> R.K. Harrison, *An Introduction to The Old Testament* (Tyndale Press: London, 1970), 79-80,

<sup>74</sup> Jennie Ebeling, J. Edward Wright, Mark Elliott, and Paul V. M. Flesher., eds. *The Old Testament in Archaeology and History* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 296.

<sup>75</sup> Bill T. Arnold, and Brent A. Strawn. *The World around the Old Testament: The People and Places of the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Publishing Group, 2016).

<sup>76</sup>Schmidt, et al. 200.

reevaluated biblical text editorial processes. He suggests that the same individual likely did the Hebrew Bible editorial traditions.<sup>77</sup>

Excavations at Qatna in Syria reveal the cuneiform tradition in the Middle and Late Bronze Ages.<sup>78</sup> A headless basalt statue dating to the 17th century BC was found, along with legal and administrative texts, royal letters, and lists of destruction and the fall of Mitanni. A royal tomb and a royal cult of the dead were also found. The Cuneiform in Canaan project published nearly one hundred known cuneiform sources in 1997, including tablets from the Late Bronze Age.<sup>79</sup> The project now includes a modern edition of the Taanach, Hazor, Megiddo, and Aphek tablets and isolated finds from Beth Shean, Gezer, Jericho, Hebron, Shechem, and Jerusalem.<sup>80</sup>

Two Neo-Assyrian contracts have been discovered at Tel Hadid in northern Shephelah, suggesting that cuneiform writing returned to Palestine after Assyrian annexation and deportations.<sup>81</sup> A 13th-century BC cuneiform tablet was found in Jerusalem in 2010. West Semitic inscriptions literary works have been studied for comparative analysis, providing better insights into Hebrew narratology.<sup>82</sup> New editions of Hebrew inscriptions from Canaan have been published, including cognate inscriptions, Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, and ‘Philistine’ inscriptions. A damaged Moabite inscription has led to a re-evaluation of the Moabite stone, suggesting it likely refers to Israelite prisoners. Over 200 unprovenanced West Semitic inscriptions from Jordan have been discovered, including Tell al-‘Umayri, Tell Hesban, and Tell el-Mazar. A Moabite temple near Dhiban in Jordan suggests further textual discoveries in Moabite.<sup>83</sup> The Temple Mount Sifting Project has discovered several texts and fragments, including an Old Canaanite incised inscription at Tell es-Safi.

### Hittite Texts

Hittite scholars have not extensively studied the Hebrew Bible due to geographical distance and unfamiliarity with biblical material. Biblical scholars have avoided studying Hittite, an Indo-European language similar to Greek. However, recent generations with comparative studies have found valuable research in both areas. Over the past 50 years, scholars have identified similarities between biblical covenantal forms in Deuteronomy and Hittite vassal treaties, biblical and Hittite law, and Hittite and Israelite historiographic forms.<sup>84</sup> They have also discussed areas of contact, such as necromancy, ritual purity, scapegoats, ‘apology’ texts, and lexical forms.<sup>85</sup> Weinfeld’s study of Hittite influences in biblical descriptions of the Israelite cult highlights the importance of understanding these similarities.<sup>86</sup> The king removes his linen clothes and performs a scapegoat ritual, similar to David in 2 Sam. 6:5. New Hittite texts, such as *The Song of Release* and letters from Masat Hoyuk, may provide insights into biblical texts. They also connect biblical terms like komer and Hittite kumra, male priests in Hittite temples, with Hittite laws. Hoffner’s new edition of Hittite laws has exciting parallels with Mosaic law.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Korpel, 86-111.

<sup>78</sup> Adebayo, 364-65.

<sup>79</sup> Adebayo, 364-65.

<sup>80</sup> Goren et al., 200.

<sup>81</sup> Na’aman and Zadok, 179-80.

<sup>82</sup> Mazar et al, 201.

<sup>83</sup> Emerson, 293-303.

<sup>84</sup> Wingert, Michael. “Ancient Near Eastern Literary Influences on Hebrew Literature and the Hebrew Bible.” *A Companion to Ancient Near Eastern Languages*, Vol. 23, (2020): 28.

<sup>85</sup> Terence C. Mitchell, *The Bible in the British Museum* (London: British Museum Press, 1988; 2nd ed. 2004).

<sup>86</sup> Kitchen, 170.

<sup>87</sup> James K. Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai. the Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Traditions* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), 65-80.

The Bronze Age site of Alalakh, in southeastern Turkey, is a valuable source of comparative material for the Hebrew Bible. Its customs, such as marriage contracts, have been compared to biblical Patriarchal periods, revealing a familiar cultural milieu.<sup>88</sup> Fink reassessed the stratigraphy and dated the Idrimi statue to the early 14th century BC.<sup>89</sup>

Iron Age Luwian and Northwest Semitic texts from Anatolia and Syria have been discovered, providing insights into the Hebrew Bible. Thompson's publication of hundreds of Luwian inscriptions and Neo-Assyrian texts, such as an Assyrian treaty, have been published, potentially influencing the Judges, I-II Samuel, and I Kings.<sup>90</sup> A New Aramaic mortuary stele of KTMW, servant of king Panamuwa (II), found in Zincirli from the late eighth century BC, provides essential information about Sam'alian Aramaic and indirect connections with biblical Hebrew.<sup>91</sup> The inscription includes a relief scene of a figure seated at a banquet table. A trilingual inscription from Incirli, Turkey, has been found and consists of three languages: Phoenician, hieroglyphic Luwian, and Neo-Assyrian. The inscription confirms the connection between Pul and Tiglath-Pileser.<sup>92</sup>

### Patriarchal Narratives and Ancient Near Eastern Texts

Archaeology in the mid-20th century was a popular method for studying the historical value of Genesis 12-50. Scholars believed that the patriarchal narratives were based on reliable traditions from earlier periods. Excavations provided new data, including written material, which led to the belief that the biblical patriarchal stories contained authentic details from their origin. This perspective, supported by William F. Albright<sup>93</sup> and Ephraim A. Speiser,<sup>94</sup> argued that specific story details corresponded to second-millennium culture in Mesopotamia, Syria, and Canaan.

The most important finds for the archaeological study of the patriarchal period have been made at Nuzi, Mari,<sup>95</sup> and Ebla. Rather than being objects, these are ancient books. Over 4,000 clay tablets, many of which date to the 15th to 14th century BC, were discovered during excavations in the mound of Yorghana in Kirkuk, Iraq, between 1925 and 1931. At that time, the city there was called Nuzi and was a province of the Mitanni Kingdom. These tablets are the source of the startling similarities to patriarchal traditions and contain a variety of papers, including marriage contracts, wills, and agreements of sale for property and slaves.<sup>96</sup>

Many of the papers omit information that both parties understood and instead only include the essential details required for the transactions they depict. This has led to a variety of possible interpretations of the passages. Mari (Tell-el-Harari), which lies on the west bank of the Euphrates, is about 25 km from the Iraqi border. In 1925, excavations have shown that the city was thriving throughout the patriarchal era.<sup>97</sup> According to Faith Adebayo, the renowned "Mari Letters" from the Royal Archive were among the discoveries.<sup>98</sup> Although they do refer to a few names from the Old Testament (such as "Nahor" and the cities of Haran, Hazor, and Laish), their significance is more general than that of those from Nuzi because they

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<sup>88</sup> Hoffmeier, 199.

<sup>89</sup> Pieter J. Lalleman, "The Old Testament and Archaeology. With a personal top ten of discoveries," *Evangel* 26.3 (Autumn 2008): 83-88.

<sup>90</sup> Thompson, 82.

<sup>91</sup> Thompson, 82.

<sup>92</sup> Thompson, 82.

<sup>93</sup> William F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968).

<sup>94</sup> Ephraim A. Speiser, *Genesis, Anchor Bible 1* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964).

<sup>95</sup> G.W. Anderson, *The History and Religion of Israel* (Oxford: OUP, 1989), 17.

<sup>96</sup> F.W. Bush, "Nuzi," *ISBE*, Vol. 3, 569

<sup>97</sup> Bright, 57-58

<sup>98</sup> Adebayo, 363.

give information about the world of the second millennium in general rather than drawing many specific parallels, although some have been made.<sup>99</sup>

The finds at Tell Mardikh (in Northern Syria) support Biblical figures, and events were the most spectacular of all such claims. One of these assertions said that the names of the five cities of the Plain had been discovered on the same tablet in the same chronological order as in the Bible. Later, this assertion was retracted.<sup>100</sup> 16,000 Sumerian manuscripts were recovered, many of which, like the texts from Nuzi, were concerned with business and commerce. However, documents, including royal decrees, lexical information, and religious texts, were also discovered.<sup>101</sup> Once more, translation issues leave specific texts open to interpretation. However, they suggest that the entirety of Genesis was written in the second millennium rather than the first, demonstrating that names like Abraham, Israel, and Esau, as well as locations like Salim, were all in use at this time.<sup>102</sup> Using this extrabiblical material, three methods have been utilised to establish similarities to biblical events.<sup>103</sup> The first step is to provide further examples of already-known Genesis practises, such as the purported opening language employed in dispositions on deathbeds (Gen. 27:2) and the sale of a birthright (Gen. 25:29–34). The second was to give context for issues like shepherding agreements (Gen. 31) and the custom of a barren wife giving birth to children through one of her slave girls (Gen. 16:1-4; 30:1-13). The third technique was utilising archaeological evidence to explain a little-known biblical practice.

Abraham's 'adoption' of Eliezer (Gen. 15:1-4), Abraham's acquisition of the Cave of Machpelah (Gen. 23), and Rachel's theft of 'the household gods' (Heb. *teraphim*) (Gen. 31:19, 30–34) are three instances of this. The methods to draw these similarities sometimes owe more to passion than scientific procedure. According to Millard, the information was chosen randomly and not reflective of the practises described in other documents discovered nearby. Instead, it was chosen because it was comparable to a Biblical passage.<sup>104</sup> The Patriarchal Narratives may, at best, reveal some of the same practices, which leads to believe that they may describe the same era. From this study, one can deduce that the Patriarch narrative is no longer a myth, bearing the fact that archaeology and other ANET support the claim that they existed. Some of these extrabiblical materials affirmed the claim. Therefore, this study has debunked outrightly the claim of "no extrabiblical materials" supporting the Patriarchs' existence and the claim that Patriarchal narratives, as recorded in Genesis 11-50, are mythology.

### Conclusion

This study explores ANET's historical, cultural, and social contexts, particularly the biblical patriarchs. Archaeological excavations at sites like Ur, Mari, and Nuzi have confirmed the existence of urban centres, trade networks, and societies similar to those described in the Bible, thereby validating the historical credibility of these narratives. Comparing biblical accounts with cuneiform inscriptions and legal codes has provided valuable contextual information, revealing commonalities and distinctions and offering an understanding of the patriarchal period. Exploring patriarchal narratives and other ANET through archaeological discoveries has deepened the appreciation for the Patriarchs' rich human history and culture. As scholars continue to unearth and analyse archaeological evidence and texts, this unending and exciting understanding of the ANE and its impact on biblical narratives will undoubtedly evolve, enriching biblical scholars' appreciation for these enduring texts' historical and cultural roots.

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<sup>99</sup> Hamilton, 61

<sup>100</sup> Bright, 84

<sup>101</sup> Bright, 37

<sup>102</sup> LaSor, 757

<sup>103</sup> Selman, 97

<sup>104</sup> Millard, 47

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