Abraham
The Story of a Journey

Jonathan Grossman

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Dr. Noam Shudofsky *z"l*

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Noam loved the study of Tanakh
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"Understand and discern, to listen, learn and teach, to observe,
perform and fulfill all the teachings of the Torah with love."

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Preface and Acknowledgments

History has seen few revolutionaries like Abraham, who left his home and crossed over to the "other side" of the Euphrates to found a new culture, changing the face of history. One man's journey, at a specific point in time, was a giant leap for humanity. Religious and cultural history as we know it today was unquestionably shaped by the call to "go forth," which marked the first step of a national, ethical saga.

Often, exploration of origin awakens fundamental questions that touch upon the very question of existence. Abraham's narrative cycle grapples with the essential definition of the Israelite nation – or, to be more true to the spirit of the Genesis stories – the definition of "the Israelite family." Other raw, profound issues touch upon the tension between morality and nationality, and the tension between taking an autonomous stand against God and total, unquestioning submission to divine authority.

This book was written in memory of Dr. Noam Shudofsky (1933–2005), an accomplished man whose entire life was devoted to the world of education, both formal and informal. Noam began his career as a Bible teacher, and from there, he advanced along the administrative path until he became the principal of the Ramaz Yeshiva of Manhattan, serving in that capacity for forty dedicated years. He was extraordinarily devoted

to his students and staff. His love for the Bible did not wane even after he was no longer actively teaching, and he was especially drawn to the literary approach of Bible study, an approach embraced by the present work. Jewish identity was an inextricable part of his identity, and he held that every person must fulfill himself not only in an intellectual sense, but in life itself. And indeed, Noam was deeply involved in the international Jewish community. His intense efforts – both overt and covert – for the Jews of Russia, who were persecuted solely because of their Judaism, is especially worth mentioning. Writing this book in his memory was a special privilege for me, and I was also privileged to become acquainted with his entire family, people whose lives are deeply rooted in love of Torah and love of humanity, and colored with humility and devotion.

During Hanukkah 2017, Dr. Shudofsky's beloved wife, Nechi, also passed away, and I would like to dedicate this book to her memory as well. Her warmth and generosity enveloped me from our first encounter.

With great pleasure, I wish to thank everyone who helped bring this book to light, from its first conception to its final design. First and foremost, from the depths of my heart, I wish to thank my dear friend Binny Shalev, who made this journey together with me, a journey that taught me so much about humility and kindness. I hope we will always continue reenacting the verse, "And the two of them walked together." We were accompanied on our journey by Rabbi Dr. Itamar Eldar, whose contributions to the ideas expressed in this work were indispensable.

As English is not my mother tongue, Atara Snowbell took on the formidable task of translating the manuscript into English, in the research edition of this book, published in 2016 by Peter Lang. Her love for the words of Genesis translated technical grammatical discussions into precise, sincere explorations of the text's meaning. The work of processing the manuscript and re-editing it for the edition before us was undertaken by Ms. Emily Silverman, who with her literary sensitivity and her love of the Bible led some of the ideas in the book to new heights.

I am privileged to send The Noam Series out into the world through Maggid Books, as part of their Maggid Tanakh Companions series. Matthew Miller and Rabbi Reuven Ziegler have brought about a revolution in Tanakh study, setting new standards for the rare, often incompatible combination of accessibility and caliber in the world of

Jewish publishing. I thank them both for their dedication and ambition, and I hope Maggid Books will continue to soar.

This book has been published through the cooperation of Maggid Books and the Michael Scharf Publication Trust of Yeshiva University Press. This reflects the work's ambition to speak in two dialects, appealing to scholars and *Ohavei Torah* alike. These do not contradict each other; on the contrary, at their best they enrich each other.

Special thanks go to Rabbi Dr. Stu Halpern, the Senior Advisor to the Provost of Yeshiva University, who oversaw this book's publication from Yeshiva University's end. His expertise and broad experience made every consultation a creative, original learning experience, and I thank him for his friendship and partnership. My sincere thanks also go to Maggid's dedicated publication team, Caryn Meltz, Shira Finson, Aryeh Sklar, Debbie Ismailoff, and Nechama Unterman, who worked diligently and thoroughly on the book's language editing – I am indebted to them for their careful attention to detail.

Last but not least, of course, thanks are due to my wife and children, who accompany me on every journey into the world of reading, writing, and study, who so patiently and so fruitfully hear out every thought and dilemma, who color every ordinary day with joy.

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יבואו כולם על הברכה
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Jonathan Grossman
Tishrei 5783

Introduction

Abraham Was But One Man

Abraham was but one man, yet he was given possession of the land," declare the people of Jerusalem to the Babylonian exiles (Ezek. 33:24). And in many ways, the Jerusalemites were right in praising Abraham for his accomplishments despite him being "but one man." Abraham is not only the founder of the Israelite nation, he is also largely considered to be the originator of the revolutionary religious philosophy of ethical monotheism.

As a protagonist, Abraham is fascinating. Literary scholars tend to define characters according to the dynamics of their actions and the complexities of their personas. There are "flat characters" and "round characters," "static characters" and "dynamic characters," and other types of literary character profiles. Abraham contains within him complexities that make it difficult to define him according to these classifications. True, Abraham maintains a certain literary consistency throughout the narrative. However, within Abraham there are internal paradoxes that we rarely see coexisting in the same person. The same Abraham who builds altars in the name of God (see, for example, Gen. 12:7) gathers his legions and goes out to battle in order to save Lot (14:14–16). The same Abraham who silently follows God's command to leave his homeland (12:1), who says nothing when God asks him to sacrifice his only son (ch. 22) – this is the same man who stands adamantly in front of God

and claims that the Judge of all creation was defying His own value of fair justice when it came to the destruction of Sodom (18:25). Abraham, who in one narrative tells his wife, "She is your maid, do with her what you will" (15:6), later refuses to heed his wife's guidance to expel the maid and her son until God commands him to listen to her (Gen. 21:11–12). It would seem that although Abraham's character is cohesive on the whole, it contains a multitude of complexities and paradoxes. Abraham's story is far more nuanced than a mere description of the founder of institutionalized monotheistic thought; his character, like his journey, is complex and paradoxical.

The Historical Period of the Abraham Narrative

When did Abraham live? Many would claim that this type of question is inconsequential when trying to understand the purpose and messages of the stories of the forefathers. To them, it makes no difference in what time period Abraham lived, because at the end of the day, the narrative remains the same. In many ways, this perspective is correct; any reader who follows the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob can sense that these stories are not intended to build a precise biographical history. For example, although the stories are rooted in a sequential narrative throughout the characters' lives, the text makes gigantic chronological leaps over long periods of time; it presents details of great personal significance as parenthetical (such as Abraham's marriage to Keturah and the birth of their six children in Genesis 25:1–4); and it engages in a clear methodology by which it builds recurring themes and ideas within the narrative. These literary devices clearly demonstrate that the Abraham narrative is not so much a biographical-historical account as a narrative intended to highlight the moral ideals within the stories. Thus, to paraphrase Martin Buber, Abraham could be defined as a "figure of history," rather than a "figure of archaeology."[1]

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1. See Martin Buber, *Koenigtum Gottes, Moses, and The Prophetic Faith*. Using a similar methodological approach, William W. Hallo claims ("Biblical History in Its Near Eastern Setting: The Contextual Approach," in *Scripture in Context: Essays on the Comparative Method*, ed. C. D. Evans [Pittsburg, 1980], 16) that "Israelite history" in the Bible only begins with the Egyptian oppression, whereas the patriarchal narratives do not purport to deliver a historical sequence relating to the nation. Hallo

Despite this characterization, it is important to emphasize the historical realism of the Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob narratives; meaning to say, despite the underlying moral lessons of the stories, the narrative itself does not read as folklore. As Nahum Sarna aptly points out, the stories do not depict mythical figures.[2] In fact, the opposite is true: the characters fail repeatedly, they are subject to criticism, and their stories are well anchored in a historically authentic setting of Mesopotamia and Canaan. Indeed, knowledge of the social and legal norms of Abraham's time leads the reader to a deeper layer of understanding of the stories in which he appears. Ephraim Avigdor Speiser, in his analysis of the forefathers, notes that while early contemporary scholars doubted the historical accuracy of the biblical narrative, today – with the many discoveries of Ancient Near East manuscripts – "these chapters are generally a true reflection of prevalent traditions and customs in the relevant era."[3] In the half-century since Speiser wrote those words, our historical and archaeological understanding of the period has expanded significantly, and it is difficult to imagine that there is any doubt regarding the accuracy of the Abraham narrative's overall historical setting among scholars today, although modern scholars are cautious not to date the occurrences too precisely. Either way, Speiser, along with his colleagues of the "archaeological" school of thought, is correct in his analysis that highlighting Abraham and his progeny's literal place in history only serves to deepen our understanding of their narratives and the lessons they embody.

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writes that this proposal "does not imply that all that preceded the oppressions is utterly devoid of historicity...only that it has a different character."

2. Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (The Heritage of Biblical Israel Series 1: New York, 1966), 81–85.

3. Ephraim A. Speiser, "The Forefathers and their Social Context," in *The Forefathers and the Judges: The History of Israel from Its Beginnings Until the Establishment of the Monarchy*, ed. Benjamin Mazar (Jerusalem and Ramat Gan, 1967), 80 (Hebrew). Kenneth A. Kitchen ("Genesis 12–50 in the Near Eastern World," in *He Swore an Oath: Biblical Themes from Genesis 12–50*, ed. R. S. Hess, G. J. Wenham, and P. E. Satterthwaite [Grand Rapids, MI, 1994], 67–92) reached a similar conclusion after examining various perspectives of links between the patriarchal narratives and literature from the end of the second millennium BCE. See also Yehoshua M. Grintz, *The Book of Genesis: Its Uniqueness and Antiquity* (Jerusalem, 1983); Umberto Cassuto, "Abraham," *Entziklopedya Mikra'it*, 1:64–65.

Those who wish to point to a specific time period in which Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lived generally refer to the beginning of the second millennium BCE (2200–1550).[4] This is supported by, among other details, the correlation of names and places mentioned in the text;[5]

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4. This position is not as broadly accepted as it once was. Many now believe that the ancestral period more likely took place during the fourteen to twelfth centuries BCE: Tertius Chandler ("When Was Abraham?" *Bibbia e Oriente* 50 [2008]: 95–101) proposes from 1396 to 1321 BCE; Andre Lemaire ("La Haute Mésopotamie et l'origine des Benê Jacob," *VT* 34 [1984]: 95–101) suggests the first half of the thirteenth century BCE; and P. Kyle McCarter Jr. ("The Historical Abraham," *Interpretation* 42[4] [1988]: 341–352) believes it is the year 1200 BCE. However, Israel Finkelstein and Thomas Römer suggest ("Comments on the Historical Background of the Abraham Narrative: Between 'Realia' and 'Exegetica,'" *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 3 [2014]: 3–23) that the early Abraham material represents traditions about the eponymous hero of the population of the southern highlands in the later phases of the Iron Age. Some scholars calculate the date based on the biblical text: Abraham has Isaac at the age of one hundred (Gen. 21:5), and Isaac had Jacob at the age of sixty (Gen. 25:26). Jacob descended to Egypt when he was 130 (Gen. 47:9). Thus, there were 290 years between the birth of Abraham and Jacob's journey to Egypt. According to Exodus 12:40, the Israelites dwelt in Egypt for 430 years. Some 480 years elapsed from the Exodus to the inauguration of the Temple (I Kings 6:1). The Temple was inaugurated in the fourth year of Solomon's reign, around 967 BCE. According to this chronology (290+430+480+967) Abraham was born in 2167 BCE, and departed for Canaan in 2092 BCE. Yehezkel Kaufmann (*The Religion of Israel* [Jerusalem, 1953], vol. 1, 1n1) notes correctly that this calculation is pure speculation. On this position and additional refutations, see Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 81–85. Sarna demonstrates the symbolic significance of the numbers in the story cycle. See also Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis* (NAC: Nashville, 2005), vol. 2, 37.

5. See, for example, John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia, 1972), 70–71, and Douglas Frayne, "In Abraham's Footsteps," in *The World of the Aramaeans: Studies in Honour of Paul-Eugène Dion*, ed. P. M. M. Daviau, J. Wevers, and M. Weigl (Sheffield, 2001), 216–236, specifically concerning the names mentioned in Genesis 11:27–32; but also see the critique in John van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven, CT, 1975), 39–64. The main location that challenges this claim is Beersheba, which, based on archaeological surveys, was "uninhabited until the settlement of the Israelite tribes" (Nadav Ne'eman, "Israel in the Canaanite Era: Middle Bronze Age and Late Bronze Age," in *The History of the Land of Israel*, ed. Yisrael Efal [Jerusalem, 1992], vol. 1, 265 [in the bibliographical notes]). However, the Negev and the Beersheba valley were certainly settled earlier, and it should be noted that the biblical text is unclear regarding whether Abraham lived in an actual city. Abraham might have lived his entire life in a tent as a nomad (as we see in Gen. 18:1); he might have settled in Beersheba before it became a city, while the text uses the known name

by the prevalence of wandering from land to land, as Terah and Abraham do; by the patriarchal lifestyle, which correlates with documents found at Mari (which was destroyed by Hammurabi in the seventeenth century BCE); and by the use of the title "El" as a private name. Some of these indications have been criticized, demonstrating that confining the stories to too narrow a historical timeline can be problematic.[6]

For our purposes, the most important element is the recognition that the lifestyle and common customs depicted in the Abraham narrative coincide with the depiction of ancient life found in the Mari and Hammurabi texts. The legal and social norms reflected in these records correlate with many aspects of the Abraham narratives, which "supports the authenticity of the background circumstances described in the Bible."[7] This connection also sheds light on a number of events and episodes in the Abraham narrative that are otherwise quite perplexing.

However, the enthusiasm that characterized the research of Speiser and his peers in the twentieth century is not shared by current biblical scholarship, which now sees the legal correlation between these sources and the Bible as less convincing than previously believed. That said, regarding social norms and lifestyle, the similarities continue to be most impressive.

For example, details that arise from the Abraham narrative which stand out as not in keeping with the familiar biblical code of conduct find their place in light of these Mesopotamian texts of Mari and Hammurabi.

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from a later period of settlement (cf. Shemuel Yeivin, "Patriarchs in the Land," in *The History of the People of Israel: The Patriarchs and the Judges*, ed. Benjamin Mazar [Jerusalem, 1967], 107). Based on the geographical locations mentioned in the narrative, John J. Bimson ("Archaeological Data and the Dating of the Patriarchs," in *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives*, ed. A. R. Millard and D. J. Wiseman [Leicester, 1980], 68–80) divided the patriarchal narratives into two periods: the Abraham narratives in Middle Bronze I, and the Jacob narratives are in Middle Bronze II.

6. Based on the correlation with the Nuzi documents, Cyrus H. Gordon, "Biblical Customs and the Nuzu Tablets," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 3, no. 1 (1940): 1–12, suggests dating the Patriarchal era between the fifteenth and fourteenth centuries. However, based on links with Aramaic literature, Siegfried Herrmann, *A History of Israel in the Old Testament Times*, trans. J. Bowden (Philadelphia, 1975), 450, suggests the twelfth century BCE.

7. Speiser, "The Forefathers and their Social Context," 79.

For example, in Genesis 48:5, Jacob is tasked with choosing an heir, a tradition common to the ancient orient. Similarly, Abraham implies in Genesis 15:3 that in the absence of a son, the steward of his household, Damascus-Eliezer, will be his heir, a norm which is reflected in adoption documents from Nuzi.[8] The Hammurabi Code includes articles regulating the obligations and privileges of a barren woman who has given her maidservant to her husband, which are relevant to the Abraham/Sarah/Hagar drama of Genesis chapter 16. Ishmael's expulsion from Abraham's house (21:10) is also clarified in light of the Hammurabi Code (articles 170–171), which dictates that a master who fails to recognize the heir born of his maidservant is obligated to set the maid and her son free.

Additionally, the role of the family patriarch as described in Genesis also correlates with the period in question, particularly the father's authority over his sons and daughters as reflected in the narrative of Judah and Tamar (Gen. 38:24), and Reuben's statement about his sons (42:37). Interestingly, Manfred R. Lehmann has suggested that Ephron the Hittite gave Abraham not only the cave he requested, but also the field (23:11), because of Hittite tax law – the Hittite Code dictates that even partial ownership of a piece of land would obligate the owner to pay taxes for the entire area, and the owner can only be exempt from taxation by selling the entire land.[9] The presence of the military general at a treaty signing (21:22, 26:26) is also explained by Mesopotamian documents of the era. Similarly, religious ceremonies such as planting trees (21:33) and building altars (28:18, 22) are issues that, though later biblical texts balked at, were commonly accepted in the ancient world.

This work is not concerned with issues of historical accuracy, with the exception of those that touch upon social or legal questions which inform our understanding of the plot. The analysis in this book

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8. See, for example, André Parrot, *Abraham and His Times* (Philadelphia, 1968), 103; but see also Thomas L. Thompson's criticism in *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narrative: The Quest for Historical Abraham* (BZAW 133: Berlin/New York, 1974), 203–230.
9. Manfred R. Lehmann, "Abraham's Purchase of Machpelah and Hittite Law," *BASOR* 129 (1953): 15–18. On additional encounters between the Abraham narrative and Hittite culture and literature, see Itamar Singer, *The Hittites and Their Civilization* (Jerusalem, 2009), 241 (specifically on the phrase "*El-Elyon*, Creator of Heaven and Earth"), and see there, 106–107.

will therefore tentatively rely on documented social and legal customs from the second millennium BCE which can illuminate various details in the Abraham cycle.

The Literary Structure of the Abraham Narrative

The definition of a collection of stories as a "narrative cycle" necessitates two basic assumptions: (a) the units that create the cycle are each independent literary units, yet (b) these units can be read as part of a continuous overall plot. While the central component that creates internal cohesion in the Abraham cycle is clearly the presence of Abraham as the protagonist, major themes can be identified consistently throughout the cycle, such as God's promise of land and offspring, and Sarah's barrenness. There is also an underlying assumption that the order of the stories is just as significant as their content. The larger literary context in which a story appears elucidates new elements of the story's significance that are not apparent when analyzing the story by itself, and the same can be said of a story's juxtaposition to the narrative preceding or following it. Throughout the analysis of the Abraham cycle, we will encounter numerous examples demonstrating the existence of a "dialogue" that exists between each narrative that comprises the cycle. With this in mind, I would like to examine the structure of the narrative cycle.

The Narrative and Artistic Structure of the Abraham Cycle

The stories that comprise the foundation of the Abraham narrative are (loosely): Abraham's journey to Canaan (Gen. 12); his descent to Egypt (ch. 12); his separation from Lot (ch. 13); the War of the Kings (ch. 14); the Covenant Between the Pieces (ch. 15); Hagar's escape (ch. 16); the Covenant of Circumcision (ch. 17); the tidings of Isaac's birth (ch. 18); Sodom's destruction (ch. 19); the birth of Ammon and Moab (ch. 19); Abraham and Sarah in Gerar (ch. 20); the birth of Isaac and expulsion of Ishmael (ch. 22); Sarah's burial (ch. 23); the search for a wife for Isaac (ch. 24); the expulsion of the concubine's children (ch. 25); Abraham's death (ch. 25); the generations of Ishmael (ch. 25).

Two types of links are apparent between the stories tracking Abraham's life: one type creates continuity between the smaller units – like links in a chain – while the other links the stories through a more complex

overall structure. The "chain link"-type emphasizes that each individual story relates to the surrounding units. For example, Lot's settlement in Sodom in Genesis 13 provides the necessary background for his captivity in chapter 14. And despite the diverse themes between the War of the Kings (ch. 14) and the Covenant Between the Pieces (ch. 15), the stories are linked by parallels in the language, as well as the continuity indicated by the phrase in Genesis 15:1, "After these things." Moving on, the motifs of suffering and liberation, which are so prominent in the Covenant Between the Pieces (ch. 15), reappear in the Hagar narrative that follows it (ch. 16). The angels' visit to Abraham (ch. 18) opens with a verse that neglects to introduce Abraham by name: "And the Lord appeared to *him* by the terebinths of Mamre; *he* was sitting at the entrance of the tent," relying on the previous narrative of chapter 17 for this information. The narrative relating the story of Sarah in the house of Abimelech (ch. 20) ends with the resolution of the temporary infertility that afflicted the women of Gerar because of Sarah, while the following narrative (ch. 21) resolves the infertility of Sarah herself. There are many more examples of this. These links will be discussed throughout the analysis of the text.

The general literary structure of the cycle contains two perspectives: the plot, and the artistic/creative structure. The narrative element that unites the cycle is God's promises. These promises accompany Abraham throughout the narratives, as does Sarah's infertility, something which represents a constant hindrance to the fulfillment of those promises. The cycle includes six narratives about God's promise to Abraham: three promises/blessings (in Ur of the Chaldeans, Shechem, and Bethel), followed by two covenants between God and Abraham, in which Abraham is promised the land and offspring (the Covenant Between the Pieces and the Covenant of Circumcision), and lastly, God's oath at the binding of Isaac. The other narratives placed between these revelations serve to clarify the fulfillment (or lack of fulfillment) of these promises. Therefore, the promises are the connecting links of the entire cycle. The question at the heart of the cycle is whether God will fulfill His promises of land and offspring to Abraham, and in what way.[10]

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10. See, for example, Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC: Waco, Texas, 1987), 259–262, and see Walter Vogels, *Abraham et sa legend: Genèse 12.1–25.11* (Lire la Bible 110: Paris, 1996).

Despite the obvious nationalistic tone of these themes, the narrative is presented as the elaboration of "the line of Terah" (Gen. 11:27). As many have noted, the basic internal division of the book of Genesis is with genealogical "lines."[11] According to this division, the Abraham narrative is presented to the reader as part of Terah's genealogy: Terah had twelve grandsons by Nahor (22:20–24) and two nations by Haran, through Lot (19:30–38). However, Abraham's line is more complex. For one, his wife Sarai is barren, and in addition to her infertility, she is taken twice from Abraham by foreign kings. For another, the alternative heirs – Lot and Ishmael – become inapplicable due to their separation from Abraham, and even Isaac, Abraham's true heir, is nearly sacrificed on an altar. Despite these trials and tribulations, Abraham, too, contributes to the genealogy of Terah by way of Isaac, who survives to be his father's heir and to maintain God's covenant with Abraham.[12]

Presenting Terah's line as the general theme of the narrative highlights the underlying tension that exists in the narrative. On the one hand, Abraham is required to disengage from his family (Gen. 12:1–3), which seems to support an exclusionary approach to the Abraham narrative. We also find this exclusionary approach expressed in the purchase of the Machpelah cave (ch. 23), as well as the search for a wife for Isaac in the appendix of the narrative cycle (ch. 24).[13] On the other

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11. See, for example, Karl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament: Volume I: The Pentateuch*, trans. J. Martin (Grand Rapids, MI, 1980), 35–37; Thomas Desmond Alexander, "A Literary Analysis of the Abraham Narrative in Genesis" (PhD diss., The Queen's University of Belfast, 1982), 255–258; Thomas L. Thompson*, The Origin Tradition of Ancient Israel: The Literary Formation of Genesis and Exodus 1–23* (JSOTSup 55: Sheffield, 1987), 167–172; David M. Carr, "'Biblos Geneseos' Revisited: A Synchronic Analysis of Patterns in Genesis as Part of the Torah," *ZAW* 110, 2 (1998): 159–172, 3: 327–347; Klaus Koch, "Die Toledot-Formeln als Strukturprinzip des Buches Genesis," in *Recht und Ethos im Alten Testament – Gestalt und Wirkung*, ed. S. Beyerle, G. Mayer, and H. Strauss (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1999), 183–191.

12. This is apparent in the frame of the cycle, which opens with the genealogy of Abraham and ends with the genealogy of Nahor. See discussion below regarding the artistic structure of the narrative.

13. The idea of isolationism is emphasized in various studies on the Abraham narrative, such as in Peter Machinist, "Outsiders and Insiders: The Biblical View of Emergent Israel and Its Contexts," in *The Other in Jewish Thought and History: Constructions*

hand, Abraham marries his son to a member of his own family, a practice that will later be adopted by his grandson as well. Arguably, despite Abraham's disengagement from his family, the approach of the text is not truly exclusionary. Furthermore, even alongside the demand to separate from his family, Abraham is told that his blessings will affect "all the families of the land" (12:3), and, in the Covenant of Circumcision, Abraham is informed that God will make him "the father of a multitude of nations" (17:5).[14] The fact that the stories of Abraham are set in the context of the line of Terah also points to the integrative approach of the text, despite the commandments which distinguish Abraham and temporarily separate him from his family.

Aside from this literary structure that connects the plot-driven links between the stories, there is also an artistic structure that arises from the narrative cycle that links the internal messaging of the episodes. Many scholars have pointed to the design of the cycle as two halves surrounding the stories of Hagar's flight and the birth of Ishmael in Genesis 16.[15] However, considering the fact that Ishmael was ultimately rejected from maintaining the covenant, the birth of Ishmael seems an unlikely focus for the structure. It is far more likely that Abraham and Sarah's name change in chapter 17 serves as the fulcrum upon which the narratives divide in two: while the first part describes the events of the

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of Jewish Culture and Identity, ed. L. J. Silberstein and R. L. Cohn (New York, 1994), 35–60, and see Meir Malul, "The Origins of Israelite Self-Perception – the Motif of the Other and the Foundling," *Zion* 67 (2002): 5–18; Shamai Gelander, *Studies in the Book of Genesis* (Raanana: The Open University of Israel, 2009), 371–372. As stated above, while some elements of the narrative encourage this reading, the narrative also includes elements to the contrary, and this indicates that the isolationism approach is more balanced with the universal approach.

14. Uriel Simon emphasized: "Abraham is not the father of mankind, but the father of a nation; in contrast with Adam and Eve, Abraham was not created by God, but rather selected by God. The significance of this fact is that Abraham's choice is not genetic; it is designated" (Simon, "Biblical Abraham: The Blessing of Contrasts," in *The Faith of Abraham: In the Light of Interpretation Throughout the Ages*, ed. M. Hallamish, H. Kasher, and Y. Silman [Ramat Gan, 2002], 42).

15. See, for example, Robert Crotty, "The Literary Structure of the Binding of Isaac in Genesis 22," *ABR* 53 (2005): 31–41; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (WBC: Waco, Texas, 1994), 263; David W. Cotter, *Genesis* (Collegeville, MN, Berit Olam, 2003), 87.

life of Abram and Sarai, the second focuses on the life of Abraham and Sarah.[16] Therefore, the central axis of the cycle is the name change in the Covenant of Circumcision in Genesis 17.

I believe the following is a more accurate reflection of the cycle structure:

A: The line of Terah: Abram, Nahor, and Haran (Gen. 11:27–32).

    B: Abram's separation from his father's house: "Go forth … to the land" (11:27–32).

        C: Abram journeys through the land and invokes the name of God (12:1–5).

            D: Abram's separation from family members: Sarai is taken by Pharaoh, but returned to Abram (12:10–20); Lot departs for Sodom and does not return (13:1–18).

                E: Lot is rescued from captivity (14:1–24).

                    F: The promise of offspring and land (15:1–21). Abram complains (15:2: "What can You give me") and the word *tzedaka* ("righteousness") is used in the context of his belief in God (15:6).[17]

                        G: The angel's tidings to Hagar regarding the birth of Ishmael (16:1–16).

                            H: The Covenant of Circumcision: Abram and Sarai's names are changed (17:1–27).

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16. A name in the biblical narrative is symbolic of the nature of the character, and often of the situation in which the name was given (see, among others, Yehuda Dvir, *Biblical Proper Names and Their Mission* [Tel Aviv, 1969]; Isaac Heinemann, *The Methods of the Aggadah* [Jerusalem, 1954], 110–111; Moshe Garsiel, *Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns*, trans. Phyllis Hacket [Ramat Gan, 1991], 16–19).

17. The analysis of this narrative will clarify why the tidings of offspring (Gen. 15:1–6) and the tidings of land (15:7–21) should be viewed as one story that includes two separate units.

G': The angel's tidings to Sarah regarding the birth of Isaac (18:1–15).[18]

F': Debate over the destruction of land (18:16–33). Abraham complains (18:25: "Far be it from You to do such a thing!") and the word *tzedaka* is used in the context of God's decision to reveal His plan to Abraham (18:19).[19]

E': Lot is rescued from the destruction of Sodom (19:1–37).

D': Abraham's separation from family members: Sarah is taken by Abimelech but returned to Abraham (20:1–18); Ishmael is expelled to the desert of Paran, and does not return (21:1–21). [20]

C': The covenant of Abraham and Abimelech: Abraham invokes the name of God (21:22–34).[21]

B': Abraham's separation from his son: "Go forth to the land of Moriah" (22:1–19).

A': The line of Nahor (22:20–24).

Transitional Narratives and Conclusion: Sarah's burial and purchasing the cave of Machpelah (ch. 23); finding a wife for Isaac (ch. 24); conclusion

18. The analysis of Gen. 18 will demonstrate that this message is intended for Sarah (and not Abraham).

19. The term *tzedaka* is mentioned only in chs. 15 and 18 out of the entire narrative cycle. The borders of the unit depicting Abraham's argument with God over the destruction of Sodom are complex; Gen. 18:16 deliberately links the episode of Abraham's hospitality with the destruction of Sodom by overlapping the conclusion of the first story and the beginning of the next in the same verse.

20. The reason behind the inclusion of the two parts of the narrative (the birth of Isaac and the expulsion of Ishmael) in one literary unit is discussed in the analysis of Gen. 21.

21. The analysis of these narratives will demonstrate that by journeying through the land and by creating a pact with Abimelech, Abraham in fact assumes ownership of the land.

of Abraham's life and the burial of Abraham (25:1–11); [the line of Ishmael (25:12–18)].

Some of the titles suggested above are debatable, as are the exact definitions of where one story ends and another begins. Furthermore, we must remember that the order of the narratives first and foremost reflects the general chronology of events, and so one cannot expect the overall literary structure to be as tightly constructed as one would find in the artistic structure of an individual story. Nevertheless, this structure contributes to the clarification of the stories in the cycle by following the sequence of the protagonist's life and indicating the thematic links between the various sections.

I would like to justify the omission of the final stories from the overall story cycle. The transitional narratives and conclusions (the deaths of Abraham and Sarah and the appointment of their successors, Isaac and Rebecca), which do not focus on Abraham himself but on the next generation, remain outside the literary structure, and have no parallel in the structure's first section. Moreover, these stories lack one of the major characteristics of the cycle, namely, God's involvement. There are also several literary indications that the binding of Isaac is the climax of the entire narrative, and God's promise to Abraham concludes the theme of blessings and promises throughout the cycle.[22] Instead, the concluding narratives should be categorized as "transitional narratives."[23] The founding generation makes way for the next generation; the unit begins with Sarah's death and ends with the death of Abraham, and between the two deaths the narrative describes the quest for Sarah's replacement and the marriage of the successors. As they are not concerned with our protagonist, but rather with his descendants, a discussion of these episodes is outside the scope of this work.[24]

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22. Robert D. Bergen, "The Role of Genesis 22:1–19 in the Abraham Cycle: A Computer-Assisted Textual Interpretation," *Criswell Theological Review* 4 (1990): 313–326.
23. Gary A. Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis* (Winona Lake, IN, 1986), 50–51.
24. See also Dixon Sutherland, "The Organization of the Abraham Promise Narratives," *ZAW* 95 (1983): 337–343, and Byron Wheaton's discussion regarding chapters 23–25 in "Focus and Structure in the Abraham Narratives," *Trinity Journal* 27 (2006): 143–162.

The Context of the Narrative Cycle

The cycle opens with a report of Terah's genealogy (A) and culminates with a review of Nahor's line (A'). The reader is therefore drawn into the plot from the perspective of Abraham's past, his father's family, which he will ultimately reconnect with when creating his future, since Abraham's son will marry a woman from the family of Nahor. "Terah's son" – Abraham – disengages from his land and the house of his father and goes to Canaan (A), while a daughter of the line of Nahor disengages from her land and family to marry into Abraham's family in Canaan (A'). The cycle is framed by Abraham's dichotomous relationship with his family, which emphasizes the consistent tension we mentioned above between the universal and separatist approaches expressed in the text. The theme of God's promises emphasizes the separation of Abraham's future nation from his surroundings, while the frame of the cycle accentuates the relationship between Abraham and his family. While God unequivocally commands Abraham to disengage from his family, Abraham ultimately reconnects with his family through the marriage of his son.

In addition to the linking of the individual literary units, the structure attests to the unity of the story cycle. The creation of such a solid elaborate structure for so complex a unit proves the cohesion of the Abraham narrative cycle.

The Interchangeability of God's Names

A fascinating phenomenon, discussed widely among the commentators, is the interchangeability of God's names, both in the Abraham narrative, and in Genesis as a whole. Throughout the narrative, God is sometimes referred to as *Elohim*, and other times as *YHWH*. These changes contribute greatly to a conscientious literary reading that considers the design of the biblical narrative. This has been extensively debated by modern commentators. However, the working hypothesis underlying this book focuses on the literary significance of the use of each of God's names in various contexts.[25]

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25. See also Erhard Blum, "Der vermeintliche Gottesname 'Elohim,'" in *Gott Nennen: Gottes Namen und Gott als Name*, ed. I. U. Dalferth and Ph. Stoellger (Tübingen,

It is noteworthy that the interchangeability of God's names is also found outside the Pentateuch, in the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Jonah, in the frame narrative of Job, and in Daniel 1. The name used to describe God in specific biblical narratives was selected according to the content and atmosphere of the text. In many narratives, the interchangeability of a character's titles in the text has literary significance.[26] One narrative will often refer to a character by several titles, which reflect various perspectives in the narrative: In Genesis chapter 12, Sarai is sometimes referred to by name, and sometimes as the "wife"; in chapter 14, Lot is generally referred to as Lot, but also as Abraham's "brother" or "kin"; Hagar is referred to by name throughout the text, but also by her title as a "maidservant" or "slave";

2008), 97–119; Norbert Clemens Baumgart, "Gottesbild, Schöpfungstheologie und die Völker in der Genesis," in *Schöpfung, Monotheismus und fremde Religionen* (BTS 95), ed. L. Borman (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 2008), 63–98; Eckart Otto, "Abraham zwischen JHWH und Elohim. Zur narrativen Logik des Wechsels der Gottesbezeichnungen in den Abrahamerzählungen," in *Die Erzväter in der biblischen Tradition, Festschrift für Matthias Köckert*, ed. A. C. Hagedorn and H. Pfeiffer (Berlin and New York, 2009), 49–65; Bertin Kalumba, "L'emploi programmatique du nom divin YHWH: Ex 6,3 et son context," *Estudios Bíblicos* 67 (2009): 537–581; Evert Van den Berg, "Van elohim tot JHWH: het boek Job als zoektocht naar het monotheïsme," *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 66 (2012): 266–282. Concerning the phrase "*YHWH Elohim*," see Temba L. J. Mafico, "The Divine Compound Name Yhwh Elohim and Israel's Monotheistic Polytheism," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 22 (1996): 155–173; David Noel Freedman, "The Real Formal Full Personal Name of the God of Israel," in *Sacred History, Sacred Literature: Essays on Ancient Israel, the Bible, and Religion in Honor of R. E. Friedman on His 60th Birthday*, ed. S. Dolansky (Winona Lake, IN, 2008), 81–89; Bruce J. Harvey, *Yhwh Elohim: A Survey of Occurrences in the Leningrad Codex and Their Corresponding Septuagintal Renderings* (New York and London, 2011).

26. See, for example, Nechama Leibowitz, "How to Read a Chapter of the Bible," *Reflections on the Bible* 1 (1973): 99–104; Meir Sternberg, "The Structure of Repetition in Biblical Narratives: Strategies of Informational Redundancy," *Hasifrut* 25 (1977): 109–150; Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, 1981), 182–184; Meir Weiss, *Scriptures in Their Own Light: Collected Essays* (Jerusalem, 1987), 303–306; Shamai Gelander, *Art and Idea in Biblical Narrative* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1997), 52–55; Frank H. Polak, *Biblical Narrative Aspects of Art and Design* (Jerusalem, 1999), 329–330. The idea is prevalent outside biblical literature as well. See Boris Uspensky, *A Poetics of Composition: The Structure of the Artistic Text and Typology of a Compositional Form*, trans. V. Zavarin and S. Wittig (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1973), 20–32.

the angels who visit Abraham and Lot are referred to both as "people" and "angels"; Ishmael in chapter 21 is the "son" of Abraham, the "son" of the maidservant, the "boy" and the "child"; Abraham's servant in chapter 24 is referred to as the "servant" and the "man"; and so forth. These changes are viewed as part of the figurative design of the narrative, which contributes to the reading process and develops the purpose of the narrative. In each instance, the text may use a different name for a character in order to draw the reader's attention to a certain personality trait or plot point. While the examples above relate to changes in titles and not in names, the Jacob narratives will introduce interchangeability in the names Jacob and Israel.[27]

These names of God might also be viewed as titles instead of names. "*YHWH*" is used as a personal name, while "*Elohim*" is essentially a title describing divine power.[28] Syntactically, the title functions as a common noun, even when the name is integrated into the text as a proper noun. This is evident from the inflections of the noun and the use of the definite article (e.g., "*HaElohim*" in Gen. 17:18, 20:6, 20:17, 22:3, and 22:9).[29] Additionally, the name *Elohim* often functions as an adjective as well as a noun (e.g., "*Elohei hashamayim veElohei haaretz*" in Gen. 24:3).[30] Therefore, the interchangeability of God's titles is no

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27. Scholars debate whether the interchangeability of the names Jacob and Israel should be attributed to different sources, or whether they serve a literary purpose. See Umberto Cassuto, "Jacob," *Entziklopedya Mikra'it* 3:718–719. See also Zeev Weisman, *From Jacob to Israel: The Cycle of Jacob's Stories and Its Incorporation within the History of the Patriarchs* (Jerusalem, 1986), 50–51 (regarding the repetition of reasons for naming). In Greek and Roman periods, a double-naming was a common phenomenon (Greg H. R. Horsley, "Name, Double," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. by D. N. Freedman et al. [New York, 1992], vol. 4, 1011–1017), and might have been so in the biblical era as well.
28. Frank M. Cross, "אל," *TDOT* 1:242–261.
29. This was noticed by Rabbi Judah Halevi in *Kuzari* IV:3.
30. See a comprehensive discussion by Friedrich Baumgärtel, *Elohim außerhalb des Pentateuch: Grundlegung zu einer Untersuchung über die Gottesnamen im Pentateuch*, BWAT 19 (Leipzig, 1914). Baumgärtel examined the appearances of God's name outside the Pentateuch, and concluded that the name *Elohim* is usually used as a general noun. His study did not relate to the names of God in the Pentateuch.

different from the changing titles of the biblical characters, which are at times referred to by name and at others by various descriptive titles.

What, then, is the essential difference between the names *Elohim* and *YHWH*, and in which stories can we expect to find each one? As we mentioned, the name *Elohim* is used as a common noun, referring to an entity with divine power ("*El*," the word that "*Elohim*" derives from, means "power"). The stories in which God is presented as the Maker of history all utilize the name *Elohim* to emphasize His omniscience and omnipotence. *YHWH*, on the other hand, personifies God as an entity with characteristics that interact directly with the characters. *YHWH* interacts intimately with our heroes, displaying kindness to those who deserve it (for example in Genesis 18), or, alternatively, anger when necessary (for example, the destruction of Sodom in Genesis 19).

The Abraham narrative cycle plays out on these parallel storylines throughout each of the individual stories it contains. The story of Abraham is the story of a hero, alongside a cast of characters who interact with him, in order to impart important moral lessons to the reader. It is also the story of the birth of a nation, and each event, decision, and moral join to comprise a chronicle with immense historical significance.

Family and Nationality

The story of Abraham also marks the beginning of the story of the nation of Israel. A unique worldview of nationalism is reflected throughout his narrative cycle, touching upon questions raised within classical political philosophy, and greatly discussed in modern political science.[31] Despite the fundamental difference between the biblical notion of a nation and the modern concept of nationalism, which I will discuss shortly, the Abraham cycle presents a view of nationalism that harmonizes elements which modern discourse generally perceives as conflicting.

I wish to begin by addressing a basic question pertaining to the definition of a nation: Should a nation be defined "politically" – that is,

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31. See, for example, the collection of articles in John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith, *Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), and the survey of Assaf Malach, "The Bases for the Legitimacy of a Jewish Nation-state in a Postmodern Era" (Diss., Bar Ilan University, 2009), 15–98.

national-political cooperation is what renders a group of people into a nation – or "culturally" – according to common cultural factors? Hans Kohn already proposed a division between political nationalism as the product of civil society, and cultural-ethnic nationalism, evaluating the former as rational, humane nationalism, associated with Western Europe, while the latter form of nationalism as romantic and anti-rational, more prevalent in Eastern Europe, though notably found in Germany.[32] Many in his wake adopted this division, either directly or indirectly, to the point of establishing that an entity may be defined as a nation either from a "political" point of view, or from a "cultural" point of view.[33]

In modern political science, this question is accompanied by another controversy: Is a "nation" the product of a human decision, of a group of people's declaration that they wish to govern their lives together for a common purpose – whether that be pragmatic or ethical – or should this concept be perceived as a framework imposed upon human society, one that people are involuntarily born into?[34]

Notable members of the former approach are Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Despite their differences of opinion, they agree that the nation and state are founded upon the free, voluntary union of its members.[35] Locke, for example, argues that a person's natural state is one of freedom to do as he wishes, and that he

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32. Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism* (New York, 1944), 329–331.

33. According to Friedrich Meinecke. See also Anthony D. Smith's discussion in *The Nation in History: Historiographical Debates about Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Hanover, 2000), 22–23. Smith is a leading advocate of the fusion of ethnic nationalism in the ancient world and modern nationalism. He himself called this school of thought "ethno-symbolism" (ibid., ch. 3). Concerning this division and the problems it poses, see also Seymour et al., "Introduction: Questioning the Ethnic/Civic Dichotomy," in *Rethinking Nationalism*, ed. J. Couture et al. (Calgary, 1996), 7–28.

34. In a certain sense, there is a connection between the two issues, and indeed, some have established this connection, such as Malach in "The Bases for the Legitimacy of a Jewish Nation-state in a Postmodern Era."

35. Many scholars use "nation" and "state" interchangeably, even though Walker Connor is correct in stating that more room should be given to ethnic identification within the study of nationalism, and nationalism should not be identified with the state. He opposes Carl Deutsch and the school of "Nation-Building" (Connor, "Nation-Building or Nation-Destroying?" *World Politics* 24 [1972]: 319–355).

has "natural rights" (these assumptions oppose Hobbes' beliefs), but he freely chooses to forfeit these rights in order to form a single community:

> Men being, as has been said, by nature, all free, equal, and inde-pendent, no one can be put out of this estate, and subjected to the political power of another, without his own consent. The only way whereby any one divests himself of his natural liberty, and puts on the bonds of civil society, is by agreeing with other men to join and unite into a community for their comfortable, safe, and peaceable living one amongst another, in a secure enjoyment of their properties, and a greater security against any, that are not of it …. For when any number of men have, by the consent of every individual, made a community, they have thereby made that community one body.[36]

According to Locke, a person's choice to forfeit his natural rights and hand them over to a greater entity stems from the unremitting, inevitable fears and dangers integral to the most basic form of freedom.[37]

Proponents of the social contract theory are usually associated with the concept of a "nation state" whose members come together for the sake of a more convenient lifestyle. Essentially, however, the matter is more complicated. The political philosophy of Rousseau, for example, illustrates this complexity. On one hand, he is the most salient advocate of the social contract theory, which is based on the individuals' free con-sent to form a political body. His work *The Social Contract* (published in 1762) is entirely based on the notion of "the general will" as a fundamen-tal basis for a legitimate political community and government. However, Rousseau is not merely concerned with a technical declaration of a way of life: "Unlike Hobbes and Locke, who justify the social contract through its regulation of existing interests, Rousseau holds that the citizens who sign the contract undergo an immediate process of change and generate a new form of society – a 'moral collective body, composed of as many

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36. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ch. 8.
37. Ibid., ch. 9.

members as there are votes in the assembly.'"[38] Rousseau believes that the decision to become a member of a political group is a triumph of the collective good over the individual's narrow personal interests, and therefore, despite the fact that a state's existence depends on its citizens' free will, it should not be considered a mere facilitator of technical needs:

> This passage from the state of nature to the civil state produces a very remarkable change in man: the role that instinct used to play in his conduct is now taken over by a sense of justice, and his actions now have a moral aspect that they formerly lacked. The voice of duty has taken over from physical impulses and a sense of what is right has taken over from appetite; and now – only now – the man who has until now considered only himself finds himself forced to act on different principles and to consult his reason before listening to his inclinations. In this "civil" state he is deprived of many advantages that he got from nature, but he gets enormous benefits in return – his faculties are so stimulated and developed, his ideas are extended, his feelings ennobled, and his whole soul uplifted. All this happens to such an extent that if the abuses of this new condition didn't often pull him down to something lower than he was in the state of nature, he would be bound to bless continually the happy moment that took him from it forever, and out of a dull and limited animal made a thinking being, a man.[39]

As Anthony D. Smith shows, although Rousseau emphasized that consent is the fundamental basis of a nation, he also perceives a nation as a naturally occurring entity, and in several places he relates to various traits that characterize different nations.[40] Therefore, Rousseau also saw importance in allowing each nation the independence to express its cultural nature: "The first rule that we must follow is that of national

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38. A. Hoffman, "Between Absolutism and Revolution: Rousseau and the 'Social Contract' in Historical Context," in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau's The Social Contract*, trans. Ido Bassok (Tel Aviv, 2006), 23–24.

39. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, ed. Jonathan Bennett (2010), 9.

40. Anthony D. Smith, *The Nation in History*, 8–9.

character. Every people has, or must have, a character; if it lacks one, we must begin by endowing it with one."[41]

We will explore the attempt to reconcile the notion that a nation has distinguishing traits with the idea that a nation is founded upon free will when we discuss the biblical model.

There are many other proponents of the approach that a nation is the product of its citizens' free will. Some, like Rousseau, propose intriguing analyses of this type of nation.[42] Ernest Renan wrote a famous essay in 1882 entitled "What is a Nation?" and it is considered a classic example of the voluntary approach in political thought. Renan opposed the ethnic criterion of defining a nation, claiming that many dominant nations, such as Britain, France, and Italy, are ethnically diverse. Renan also devoted a separate essay to the subject of Jewish nationalism, claiming that it is also problematic to claim common ethnicity in the context of the Hebrew nation, as many have joined the Jewish nation over time. The problem with equating ethnicity with nationality, Renan argued, is not only technical; a nation should not be considered "natural" from a cultural or linguistic perspective. He opposes the approach that a nation is a collection of individuals who have gathered merely for the sake of common interests, but he does emphasize that "a nation's existence is, if you will pardon the metaphor, a daily plebiscite, just as an individual's existence is a perpetual affirmation of life."[43] Indeed, those who object to any natural definitions of nationalism usually base their theory upon the unceasing consent of the individuals who comprise a nation.

In contrast to this approach, some perceive the formation of a nation as a natural trait of human society. Rousseau's contemporary,

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41. As quoted in Smith, ibid., 8.

42. For example, John Stuart Mill claimed that the definitive basis of a nation is the sense of solidarity and brotherhood that generates desire for political union. He believed that consciousness of a common past is a central factor in national unity. However, he does not perceive nationalism as an objective unto itself, or a supreme value, nor does he consider a nation a natural form of human existence, but rather something to be acquired (see further in Malach, "The Bases for the Legitimacy of a Jewish Nation-state in a Postmodern Era," 17–18).

43. Cited and discussed in Smith, *The Nation in History*, 26–27, and in Malach, "The Bases for the Legitimacy of a Jewish Nation-state in a Postmodern Era," 19–20.

Johann Gottfried Herder claimed that cultural diversity is a fundamental human characteristic. He argued that the variety of human cultures in areas of different climates and other natural conditions result from the divine intention that humanity will not be uniform, but will fulfill the wide range of possibilities encoded within it. Every nation expresses a unique culture, and it is morally bound to do so.[44] Herder explicitly referred to language as the central means of national expression, claiming that each language determines the speakers' form of thought, and thus every person becomes a product of the nation he belongs to.[45]

Johann Gottlieb Fichte also claimed that a person's affiliation with his nation is natural, and not merely the result of social consent. In Herder's wake, he underscored that each nation must prudently preserve the purity of its own language, and preached that the German nation must zealously prevent the German language from becoming contaminated with foreign words, particularly those of Latin or French origins, because such words, he believed, reflect the corrupt world of the Romans.[46] According to Fichte, not only does a nation's defining language demand that it preserve its culture, its language is what grants a nation the privilege of its own state, in order to freely express its culture and maintain its own language.[47] These theories clearly reflect the connection between the two aforementioned issues: that a nation is "natural," and that this is fundamentally related to the perception of the nation as a "nation of culture," as a community with its own unique way of life.

Nowadays, the inherent danger of extreme nationalism is well known, and in the wake of the trauma of the twentieth century's wars, many perceive nationalism as contradictory to liberal thinking. This danger was already manifest in the philosophy of Heinrich von Treitschke,

44. See Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA, 1993), 4, and Malach, "The Bases for the Legitimacy of a Jewish Nation-state in a Postmodern Era," 8–10.

45. Kedourie, *Nationalism*, ch. 5.

46. These ideas are discussed in the series of lectures Fichte gave in Berlin in 1807–1808, called "Addresses to the German Nation" (J. G. Fichte, *Addresses to the German Nation*, trans. R. F. Jones and G. H. Turnbull [Chicago: Open Court, 1922]. Reprint by Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1979).

47. Concerning Fichte's philosophy, see Umut Ozkirimli, *Theories of Nationalism: A Critical Introduction* (New York, 2000), 17–19.

who developed the idea of political nationalism in violent, antisemitic directions. For the sake of this discussion, it is important to mention his position that a nation's power is a supreme, even sacred, value, that war is an expression of the participating nations' virility, and that this virility is what renders a people into a nation and binds its citizens together.[48]

For our discussion, it suffices to present these two extreme positions, whose confrontation escalated with the development of modern political philosophy, and is still a key component of global discourse. Some argue that the two approaches represent two different models of society that developed at different times over the course of history. This is the premise of Elie Kedourie, who argues that modern nationalism is based on common collective objectives, in contrast to ancient tribalism, which formed naturally and spontaneously, and was the agent of cultural expression:

> Nationalism is also sometimes described as a new tribalism. The analogy is meant to indicate that like the tribe, the nation excludes and is intolerant of outsiders. But such characteristics, as has been said, are common to all human groups, and cannot serve to define either tribe or nation. But the analogy is not only unable to shed light on the matter, it can also mislead. A tribesman's relation to his tribe is usually regulated in minute detail by custom which is followed unquestioningly and considered part of the natural or the divine order. Tribal custom is neither a decree of the General Will, nor an edict of legislative Reason. The tribesman is such by virtue of his birth, not by virtue of self-determination. He is usually unaware that the destiny of man is progressive, and that he can fulfil this destiny by merging his will into the will of the tribe. Nationalism and tribalism, then, are not interchangeable terms, nor do they describe related phenomena.[49]

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48. Zvi Batscha and Avraham Yassour, *The Great Modern Political Theories* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, 1975), vol. 1, 365. Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that some favor the model of the "natural nation" and envision universal peace and harmony (such as Giuseppe Mazzini and Adam Mickiewicz).
49. Kedourie, *Nationalism*, 69.

Kedourie's words are one example of a prevalent position, which dictates that perception of the nation as stemming from natural necessity ("tribal nationalism," to use his terms) considerably reduces the discourse about a nation's purpose and progression, while those who argue that a nation's formation is based upon its members' free will seek to establish the ideological and objective platform of this collective gathering. As we will see, the story of Abraham attempts to reconcile these two apparently polar positions.

The Abraham Cycle: Between "Nation" and "People"

Exploring the Abraham narrative cycle through these terms produces a captivatingly ambivalent picture. Biblical exploration is rooted in a different sphere of discourse than modern political philosophy, as the biblical nation is explicitly defined in ethnic terms. While the concept of a "nation" exists in the Bible, and is apparently a conceptual innovation in Ancient Near Eastern thought,[50] and even if Daniel Gordis is correct in asserting that "the concept of nationhood – of a distinct group identity based on common language, culture, land, and blood ties – was not a modern European innovation, as some scholars proclaim it to be, but rather an integral part of the Jewish tradition from its very beginnings,"[51] nationhood in the Bible is still considered an extension of family. This is evident from the presentation of humanity as the product of three distinct families – Shem, Ham, and Japheth: "These are the groupings of Noah's descendants, according to their origins, by their nations; and from these the nations branched out over the earth after the Flood" (Gen. 6:32). Additionally, this seems to be reflected in the story of the Tower of Babel.[52] In fact, the very appellation "the Children of Israel" illustrates that familial origin is what essentially defines a nation, and as Daniel Block emphasizes, the Bible considers all nations – and not just Israel – extensions of family clans (such as

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50. Wolfram von Soden, *The Ancient Orient: An Introduction to the Study of the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1994), 13–14.
51. Daniel Gordis, "The Tower of Babel and the Birth of Nationhood," *Azure* 40 (2010): 19–36.
52. See, for example, Theodore Hiebert, "The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World's Cultures," *JBL* 126 (2007): 29–58.

Edom, Ammon, and Moab), even if it is not at all clear whether these nations also perceived themselves in these terms.[53] Effectively, this perspective characterizes the Jewish people until this very day. As Blaise Pascal famously marveled:

> Advantages of the Jewish people – In this search the Jewish people at once attract my attention by the number of wonderful and singular facts which appear about them. I first see that they are a people wholly composed of brethren, and whereas all others are formed by the assemblage of an infinity of families, this, though so wonderfully fruitful, has all sprung from one man alone, and, being thus all one flesh, and members one of another, they constitute a powerful state of one family. This is unique.[54]

Perception of the nation as an extension of a family (not only in an ideal sense, as reflected in Aristotle, but when members of a nation are considered part of the same "clan") has broad implications in the context of mutual responsibility. This is prominent in biblical laws that require compassion for another member of the community because he is "your brother" (particularly evident in the laws of Lev. 25, Deut. 15, and Deut. 22–25). The law extends the concept of family responsibility to apply between every member of the nation.[55] In this respect, biblical nationalism is an extreme manifestation of the notion of a "natural nation," wherein membership is the automatic result of being born to a certain family. This is consistent with the biblical perception of Israel as a "nation of culture" – as a nation that is distinguished from other nations not merely by its political context, but through its covenant with God, by being "God's nation." Moreover, this is also true, in at least some books of the Bible, in relation to other nations;

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53. Daniel I. Block, "Nations/Nationality," *NIDOTTE* 4: 968.
54. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. W. F. Trotter (New York, 1910), sec. 8, 620.
55. For the notion of the nation as family as a basis for the moral guidelines of the Bible, see W. A. L. Elmslie ("Ethics," in *Record and Revelation*, ed. H. Wheeler Robinson [Oxford, 1938], 275–302), who even included the common covenant of the entire community as part of the moral guidelines.

the culture of Egypt or Amalek can also be traced over the course of the text,[56] among others.[57]

Nonetheless, this must be stated with caution, as the "culture" that defines Israel is not derived from its nature, but from its ancestral history. Abraham was chosen as the father of a nation because of his morality (Gen. 18:19), while Amalek is characterized as God's enemy because it attacked the weak, nascent nation that had only just left Egypt. That is, a biblical nation's culture is determined by its moral decisions. This issue is related to the ambivalence that accompanies the definition of the Israelite nation, which is already reflected in the Abraham cycle on a semantic level.

The distinction between a nation as an extended family and a nation in a political sense is also reflected in the language of the biblical narrative. There are two common biblical expressions for the word nation: "*am*" and "*goy*." The word "*goy*" is usually translated as "nation," while the word "*am*" may be translated as "nation" or "people"; sometimes *am* is used, it seems, to differentiate it from the word *goy* if both are used in the same context (as in Isaiah 2, for example). Speiser claims that these terms actually have different meanings: the term *am* refers to an extended family that has evolved into a nation,[58] while the word *goy* represents a nation

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56. Concerning Amalek, see, for example, Jakob H. Grönbäk, "Juda und Amalek – Uberlieferungsgeschichtliche Erwägungen zu Exodus 17, 8–16," *Studia Theologica* 18 (1964): 26–45. Concerning Egypt, see, for example, Asher Weiser, "Egypt in the Bible," *Mahanaim* 105 (1961): 16–24.

57. It is debatable, however, whether this defines the nation according to its culture, or on a literary-symbolic level. Egypt, for example, represents human pride in several prophecies, but Egypt may merely be a *symbol* of pride; this was not necessarily the cultural factor that unified the Egyptian nation into a single political entity.

58. Sometimes the word simply means "family" (as in Gen. 32:8; 48:19; Lev. 21:1–4; Job 18:19). The expression "gathered unto his people" seems to be parallel to the phrase "gathered unto his forefathers" (Bern Alfrink, "L'expression נאסף אל עמיו," *OTS* 5 [1948]: 118–131). The meaning of the word is not limited to the Bible, but appears in other Semite languages. At the end of a broad survey of different languages, Lipiński writes: "In summary, we can say that the West Semitic word *'amm* refers to agnates, both individually and collectively…. The biblical usage of *'am* appropriates this double meaning without any difficulty" (Edward Lipiński, "עם," *TDOT* 11:169–170).

in the political sense.[59] The choice of a particular word often affects the connotations of a particular phrase: the term *am* is often accompanied by a possessive suffix ("My people," "your people," etc.), while such suffixes are rarely added to the word *goy*. This shows that "*am* is something subjective and personal, *goy* objective and impersonal. Note, '*Ure'eh ki emkha hagoy hazeh*' – 'Consider, too, that this nation is Your people' (Ex. 33:13). The same utterance with the two nouns interchanged would be unthinkable in a biblical context, though not in translation."[60]

Speiser's argument is somewhat overstated; Jacob Licht and Edward Lipiński are more correct in their assertion that sometimes the two words are interchangeable, used in parallelisms, and the word *am* is also sometimes used in a political sense.[61] Aelred Cody's conclusions are also a preferable version of Speiser's, as he claims with more nuance that the words do have different connotations, but in a literary sense,[62] insofar as terminological basis of the word *am* is semantically related to family, so this association arises even when the word is used in the more general sense of "nation." These connotations serve an important function in the construction of the narrative sphere of discourse, and we will see this come into play in the story of Abraham.

Should Abraham be considered the head of a family, or the head of a nation? There is no contradiction between the two roles in biblical thought; on the contrary, Abraham would not be able to establish a nation without first establishing a clan, a tribe. At the same time, the story looks out to the future, anticipating a distant time when Abraham's seed will be as numerous as the stars. In these passages, are Abraham's descendants represented as a "nation" in the political sense, or as a family

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59. For a philological debate of these two terms, see also Leonhard Rost, "Die Bezeichnungen fur Land und Volk im Alten Testament," in *Das kleine Credo und andere Studien zum Alten Testament* (Heidelberg, 1965), 76–101; Block, "Nations/Nationality," 966.

60. Ephraim A. Speiser, "'People' and 'Nation' of Israel," *JBL* 79 (1960): 158. Abraham Malamat claims that the term "*goy*" also has military connotations, especially in Joshua 5:6 and II Kings 6:18 (Malamat, "On the Study of the Israelite Pre-History of the People of Israel," in *The Controversy over the Historicity of the Bible*, ed. L. Levine and A. Mazar [Jerusalem: Yad Itzhak Ben Zvi, 2001], 112–123), but others reject this claim.

61. Jacob Licht, "*Am*," *Entziklopedya Mikra'it*, 6:235–239; Lipiński, "עַם," 174. See also Ronald E. Clements, "גוי," *TDOT* 2:426–427.

62. Aelred Cody, "When Is the Chosen People Called a *Goy*?" *VT* 14 (1964): 1–6.

extended to extremes? Within a broader biblical perspective – to the extent that it can be determined – Israel are presented as both *am* and *goy*, in that its people share common ancestors, but they can also be defined politically, as Speiser shows.[63] A more cautious picture, however, emerges from the Abraham cycle – the term *goy* and its political connotations is used in relation to Abraham's "chosen seed" in only two places. First, in God's first revelation to Abraham: "I will make of you a great *nation*, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing" (Gen. 12:2); and second, in the narrative's explanation as to why God involves Abraham in Sodom's fate, since "Abraham is to become a great and populous *nation* and all the nations of the earth are to bless themselves by him" (18:18).

In both contexts, the reader's vision is directed to the distant future. God's promise to Abraham at the beginning of his journey is not merely a promise for the future, but a blueprint of his entire path: Abraham will eventually establish a great nation, through which "all families of the earth will be blessed." The narrative's intervention in Genesis 18:18, which justifies Abraham's involvement with Sodom's fate, hints to Abraham's broader role and to the purpose of his election, and here, too, the narrative gazes into the future: "Abraham is to become…"

Aside from these two instances, the word *goy* is not used again in relation to Abraham's chosen seed, although it is consistently used in relation to other nations. This is particularly salient during the episode of the commandment of circumcision. Abraham is to be the father of many "nations," "*goyim*," but this particular word and its political connotations are not actually used to describe the chosen seed who will perpetuate the covenant with God:

> As for Me, this is My covenant with you: You shall be the father of a multitude of nations (*goyim*). And you shall no longer be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I make you the father of a multitude of nations (*goyim*). I will make you exceedingly fertile, and make nations (*goyim*) of you; and kings shall come forth from you. I will maintain My covenant between

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63. Speiser, "'People' and 'Nation' of Israel," 162–163.

Me and you, and your offspring to come, as an everlasting covenant throughout the ages, to be God to you and to your offspring to come. (Gen. 17:4–7)

A multitude of nations will descend from Abraham, but the covenant shall be retained through "your offspring to come," who are not described with the word *goyim*. This is even more striking later on in the narrative, when Ishmael, who is rejected from the chosen line, is described as the founder of a nation with the word *goy* – "As for Ishmael, I have heeded you. I hereby bless him. I will make him fertile and exceedingly numerous. He shall be the father of twelve chieftains, and I will make of him a great nation (*goy*)" (Gen. 17:20) – in contrast to Isaac, whose descendants will perpetuate the covenant: "But My covenant I will maintain with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year" (17:21). This phenomenon repeats itself in the story of Ishmael's expulsion from Abraham's household. Both Ishmael's mother and father hear that he is to be the father of a *goy*: "As for the son of the slave-woman, I will make a nation (*goy*) of him, too, for he is your seed" (21:13); "Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation (*goy*) of him" (21:18). This phrase is not used in conjunction with Isaac even once; rather, the term "*zera*" meaning "offspring," or "seed," repeatedly occurs. For example, "your offspring (*zarakha*) to come" (17:10), and Isaac's children as well are referred to as "his offspring (*zaro*) to come" (17:19). The definition of Isaac's children does not extend from the family sphere into the national sphere.

This does not seem coincidental. In other stories too, the term *goy*, with all its political associations, applies to other nations, but not to Abraham's seed. During the Covenant Between the Pieces, for example, God declares, "I will execute judgment on the nation (*goy*) they will serve" (Gen. 15:14), while Abraham's seed at the time of their exodus from Egypt, who will already have become a nation, are still referred to as "your offspring (*zarakha*)" (15:13). Abimelech of Gerar also refers to his own people as a "*goy*" (20:4),[64] while Abraham repeatedly hears

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64. Speiser, among others, claims that the inclusion of the word *goy* here is a corruption (Speiser, "'People' and 'Nation' of Israel," 159).

blessings showered upon the heads of his "*zera*," "offspring," but not upon the "*goy*" he is to establish.

This distinction is not merely linguistic; a careful reading of these narratives reveals that the text relates to the future nation of Israel not as a nation but as "Abraham's family." This is salient, for example, in the aforementioned narrative of the Covenant Between the Pieces. On one hand, there is a clear national dimension to this revelation. The covenant ends with a description of the borders of the land (including the eastern side of the Jordan), anticipating the nation that will inhabit this territory, coming to fruition in David and Solomon's time. This conclusion would serve well as the ending of a narrative of national-political character, but this is not the case. The chapter opens with Abraham's complaint that he has no "heir" (Gen. 15:2–3); God promises him that he will be granted a son of his own, and that his descendants will one day be too numerous to count. The discussion of an "heir" connotes an intimate family atmosphere, and in this spirit the reader is also introduced to the subsequent discussion of inheritance of the land (I will explore this juxtaposition in depth in the relevant chapter, below). Indeed, the term "*yerusha*," "inheritance," with its striking familial connotations, is repeated in the chapter, mentioned in context of inheritance of the land. God promises "to assign this land to you as a possession (*lerishtah*)," whereupon Abram asks, "How shall I know that I am to possess it (*irashenah*)?" (15:7–8).[65] Therefore, the aforementioned linguistic distinction is consistent with the general atmosphere of this chapter. The nation who will enslave Israel is referred to as a "nation," while Abraham's seed are his "offspring," the "fourth generation" of the head of the clan who will one day return to the land to inherit it.

The theme of Israel as a family also colors the scene concerning circumcision, which is also inherently related to the family sphere. Abraham will father "nations" and "kings" but the covenant will be perpetuated through "your offspring (*zarakha*) to come" (Gen. 17:7), who will one day settle in the land "of your sojourning" (17:7–8).

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65. Note that the biblical law of inheritance (Num. 27:8–10) is given in the context of dividing the land into portions, so that "the Israelite law of inheritance originates in the division of land through tribal-familial organization." Samuel E. Loewenstamm, "*Yerusha*," *Entziklopedya Mikra'it* 3:789.

We can now return to the two anomalous places where Abraham's chosen seed is referred to as a *goy* and read them in a new light. Cody demonstrates that Israel is described as a *goy* when the narrative seeks to present them as one nation among many:

> *Goy* is used of the Chosen People because Israel is being considered a *goy* among *goyim*, either because it is being looked upon as an individual within the class, or because the pagans in contexts of national consciousness do not distinguish Israel from other *goyim*, or because God, in upbraiding the infidelity of the Chosen People, reduces it from the preferable status of His *'am* to that of a mere *goy* like all the rest.[66]

In order to emphasize the international significance of these two sources, the appellation *goy* is used. Both sources focus on the relevance of Abraham's seed for the surrounding nations: "I will make you a great nation (*goy*) …. All the families of the earth (*mishpeḥot haadama*) shall bless themselves by you" (Gen. 12:2–3); "All the nations of the land (*goyei haaretz*) are to bless themselves by him" (18:18).[67] Victor Hamilton adds that Abraham's influence on the surrounding nations is actually fulfilled in the plot in Genesis 18, in the context of his concern for Sodom.[68] This reading is supported by Ed Noort's exploration of Abraham's universalistic significance. While arguing that "the linchpin (12:1–3) of the primeval history and the patriarchal narratives breathes universalism," and in the Abraham-Lot cycle, "the question of 18:25 concerns all mankind

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66. Cody, "*Goy*," 2.
67. Regarding this connection, see, for example, Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18–50* (NICOT: Grand Rapids, MI, 1995), 18. Ludwig Schmidt and Claus Westermann surmise that the difference at the end of the linguistic expression between "families of the earth" and "nations of the land" reflects two different sources (Schmidt, *"De Deo": Studien zur Literakritik und Theologie des Buches Jona, des Gesprächs zwischen Abraham und Jahwe in Gen 18, 22ff und von Hiob 1* [Berlin and New York, 1976], 136; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Continental Commentary*, trans. J. J. Scullion [Minneapolis, 1995], 288); however, the familiar phrase incorporating the rarer word "*goyim*" in relation to Abraham's offspring shows that there *is*, in fact, a connection between these two verses.
68. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18–50*, 18.

and the mediator is Abraham,"[69] Noort demonstrates that the rest of the narrative is concerned with Abraham's own family and descendants. Aside from these two passages, "the supposed universalism of Gen. 12 is nowhere present" – not even in references to Abraham in later biblical works – and most of the Abraham cycle itself is concerned solely with Abraham's own family: with Lot, Ishmael, and chiefly, of course, the fate of his son and heir, Isaac.[70]

If so, the definition of Abraham's seed as a nation in the Abraham cycle is clearly ambiguous. The promise that a nation is to arise animates God's covenant with Abraham, but there is also noticeable restraint exercised to prevent national connotations from coloring the story. Cody argues that the biblical reservations toward the term *goy* stem from the negative connotations of this word, as it is not used to present Israel as the chosen people, but rather lowers Israel to the level of other political nations (and indeed, this has led to the word "*goy*" becoming a post-exilic term for a non-Jew).[71] The Bible, however, is capable of implementing this word in a positive sense, as in the case of Genesis 12:2 and 18:18. It seems to me that even when Abraham's seed becomes a nation in the active political sphere – a "great nation" ("*goy gadol*") that all nations shall be blessed through – there is clear narrative intent to present this political entity in the context of its family ties; that is, as the product of its "forefathers." The Israelite nation is depicted as the natural, unified progeny of a single family, a "natural nation."[72] This presentation of nationalism commissions more mutual commitment from its members (as expressed, for example, in the story of Lot's rescue from Sodom), which in turn contributes to the members' emotional sense of belonging to their own nation.

This brings us to the unique approach of biblical familial nationalism. Critics of natural-ethnic nationalism have claimed that

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69. Ed Noort, "Abraham and the Nations," in *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites: Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Perspectives on Kinship with Abraham,* ed. M. Goodman et al. (Leiden, 2010), 18, 17.

70. Ibid., 13.

71. Cody, "*Goy,*" 1–6.

72. Needless to say, the theory of social contract is not the basis of this kind of nationalism.

this "natural" form of nationalism is liable to degenerate into fascism and negation of the Other – and history has proven them right. The premise of this criticism is clear: reinforcing the national sense of unity through emphasis on natural, unalterable factors constructs an insurmountable wall between members of the community – who were born into these circumstances – and outsiders.

The Abraham cycle, however, despite its emphasis on family as the basis of the nation, presents a completely different approach. Abraham's family is chiefly characterized by its moral quality, and this morality is what serves as the chosen nation's definitive cornerstone: "For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right" (Gen. 18:19). This declaration is followed – and illustrated – by Abraham's efforts to prevent Sodom's destruction. As mentioned, the prevalent position – represented above by Kedourie – attributes common ideals as a collective basis to the liberal definition of a nation, while the tribal-ethnic definition of a nation does not set moral objectives. The biblical ethnic national-ism shatters this dichotomy, however – at least in relation to Israel. As I have already mentioned, it is not entirely clear whether the Bible holds that every nation has a definitive culture it must fulfill,[73] but Abraham's offspring is elected for moral reasons, as the text hints and implies in vari-ous ways, and the family-nation Abraham will establish is to be rooted in moral values. In other words, although the nation in question evolves naturally, out of a single family, this "natural" nation is not solely charac-terized thereby; rather, the narrative employs moral discourse about the nation's foundation upon divine values of righteousness and justice. The nation's morality is an integral part of its character and purpose.[74]

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73. Some of the philosophers mentioned above relied upon language differentiating between the nations as a gauge for difference in culture (Herder and Fichte). Even if they did not state this explicitly, this can be read in the story of the nations' dispersal (Gen. 10) and the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11). In these narratives, the nar-rative emphasizes the dispersion of the nations together with the development of their individual languages. According to this reading, the linguistic differentiation between nations hints that each nation has a culture it must fulfill.

74. A similar model appears in Hegel's work "Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts," even if it is only similar structurally. When he seeks to explore the "ethical life," he begins by presenting the family as every person's first social framework, and from

Communal Will and Divine Will

This biblical configuration of a nation is described as the result of God's voluntary election of Abraham. According to the social contract theory, the "nation of culture" is based on the "community's will." The Bible exchanges this collective will for the divine will. Therefore, despite the "naturally" evolving depiction of the nation, it is not bound by a deterministic approach which creates the impression of a nation without moral value or purpose. The free will upon which the nation is based facilitates moral discourse; at the same time, however, because a single man is chosen as the father of the nation, the nation is still considered natural. As I mentioned earlier, even though the nation is considered a naturally evolving entity, the culture of this nation is not imposed upon its members merely because they were born into it. The covenant with God is a moral and religious obligation more than a definition of national character.

This approach has several important implications for the Abraham cycle:

- *Rescue mission, not military campaign*. Von Treitschke emphasized the importance of military aggression as an expression of national virility and unity.[75] In his eyes, exercise of national power is an integral part of a nation's definition, and even a supreme value. (Even without adopting his aggressive opinion, it should be noted that in the ancient world, a king established his

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this framework, a person progresses to "civil society," and eventually encounters "the state," which, in his opinion, is the fulfillment of the ethical ideal. He emphasizes that the ideal collective union (i.e., "the state") should not only be considered as if it were solely intended to safeguard the individual's property and individual freedom (which already occurs in "civil society"), but should comprise the content and purpose of every individual in it, and only through the state can a person find ethical fulfillment (Georg Wilhelm Freidrich Hegel, "Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts," in *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, ed. E. Moldenhauer and K. M. Michel [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970], vol. 3, especially no. 258). When Hegel refers to the "general will" as something palpable, which surpasses individual will (even if the individual is not aware of it, Hegel believes, he must submit to it), he already paves the way to the next step of God's will being an expression of general will.

75. Batscha and Yassour, *The Great Modern Political Theories*, 365

might and won over his subjects through his success in war and the extent of his military conquests.) Abraham is also presented as a military figure who leads a campaign (Gen. 14). This chapter is so incongruous with the traditional perception of Abraham's character that many have questioned whether this is an original part of the Abraham cycle. I will discuss this at length below, in the relevant chapter, where I will argue that Abraham's victory awards him not only religious recognition but political renown. However, the battle in question is not the result of a military campaign, but a rescue mission – Abraham seeks to rescue his nephew Lot, who has been taken captive. This motive allows the narrative to hold the rope at both ends – Abraham rises to political fame through the accepted route of a victor returning from the battlefield, but he does not become characterized as a power-hungry conqueror. This is because his underlying motive for attack is moral – saving his nephew, that is, family commitment.[76]

- *Particularism and universalism.* Modern political thought perceives nationalistic separatism as contradictory to universal liberalism. The reasoning is clear, as defining what is "national" inherently defines the Other, who is thereby excluded from the privileges granted to members of the nation.[77] In the wider con-

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76. It may well be that for the sake of emphasizing this, Abraham's war is described as reaching until north of Damascus (Gen. 14:15), that is, north of the border of Canaan, which emphasizes that the present war is a rescue mission, and the time of conquering the land is not yet at hand. As we will see, this war granted Abraham rights to the eastern side of the Jordan. I will discuss this at length in my analysis of Genesis 14 and 15.

77. Nonetheless, the beginnings of modern political philosophy already saw thinkers who combined a strong nationalistic approach and liberal-universalistic thought. For example, the French historian Jules Michelet took a liberal stance that developed, on one hand, the importance of the specific nation, but also saw the nation as an agent of universal freedom. In his opinion, history is the story of humanity's struggle for freedom, against nature and fate, and France is the nation that represents this spirit of freedom, which will influence all of humanity in the future. Michelet justified violence and denial of freedom over the course of the French Revolution (such as withholding the right to vote from most of the nation through the monarchical

text of particularism versus universalism, many have correctly stated that the Bible is suspended in unresolved tension; some works are inclined toward one worldview, while others favor the opposite approach. The Abraham cycle also oscillates between these two extremes, which are, nowadays, largely presented as conflicting.

The beginning of the Abraham cycle already establishes that Abraham's election is not a particularistic-chauvinistic election but a choice with universalistic implications: "All the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you" (Gen. 12:3). This idea is confirmed on the eve of Sodom's destruction: "The nations of the earth are to bless themselves by him" (18:18). And it is further reiterated during God's final revelation to Abraham: "All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants" (22:18). These universalistic statements frame Abraham's election. They do not state that in the future, all nations will become part of the Hebrew nation, but that they will become "blessed" through it. The narrative thus presents a universalistic view. The post-diluvian world is comprised of many nations, and the story of the Tower of Babel presents this phenomenon as the result of God's will, similar to Herder's approach mentioned previously. It is well known that out of the major monotheistic religions, Judaism is the only one that has never attempted to impose its beliefs and culture upon those outside of the Israelite community. This attitude is already rooted in the Abraham cycle, which anticipates peaceful coexistence with

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constitution of 1791) for the sake of the Revolution's success, because he believed that the minority sometimes reflects the nation's innermost desires. Due to these approaches, some consider Michelet's works a combination of political and cultural, mystical and historical, chauvinistic and universalistic nationalism. See especially Hans Kohn, *Nationalism: Its Meaning and History* (Malabar, FL, 1982), 97–102; Malach, "The Bases for the Legitimacy of a Jewish Nation-state in a Postmodern Era," 30–31. Alongside the French Michelet, Malach also counts the Italian Giuseppe Mazzini and the Polish national poet Adam Wickiewicz (who, oddly enough, never set foot in Poland). He argues that these thinkers also emphasize, in one way or another, that nationalism is not at odds with universalism, but rather is a preliminary stage of advancing universal concepts.

other nations. At the same time, however, the establishment of the Hebrew nation is an unmistakable process of separation and segregation. Abraham openly fears his son's intermarriage with the daughters of Canaan, similar to God's command for him to leave his hometown and wander to another place. This issue is complex and will crop up repeatedly throughout the different stories. Here, I wish only to draw attention to the fact that in the Abraham cycle, incidents which hint to nationalistic particularism are balanced out by stories that elevate universal benefit as the ultimate objective of Abraham's election. In this context, too, the narrative seems to be holding the rope at both ends, wherein the "natural nation" to evolve from Abraham's seed is also committed to the fulfillment of values of universal justice.

- *Nation and territory*. The "national purpose" of Abraham's election also complicates the issue of the nation's relationship with its land. The promise of inheriting the land is obviously a central, fundamental aspect of the Abraham cycle, and there is virtually no revelation without explicit mention of this promise.[78] At the same time, however, the narrative does not present the land as the nation's birthplace but rather as the land of their destiny. Intriguingly, Israelite culture does not tell itself stories of how its forefathers were born in the land, or of how the land was desolate until its ancestors came to settle it. On the contrary, there is repeated emphasis on Abraham's journey to the land, how the Canaanites already dwelled there (Gen. 12:6 and 13:7), and that his descendants will not immediately inherit the land because "the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete" (15:16).[79] This complexity is especially striking in the story of Abram and

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78. The only revelation which does not explicitly mention the land (Gen. 15:1–6) is balanced out by this promise mentioned in the very next verses (15:7–21), which begin a new revelation, as I will show in my analysis of the two halves of Genesis 15.

79. Moshe Weinfeld claims that besides the Bible, there are no other stories of the origins of the major cultures in the Ancient Near East. The first founding story which shows structural similarity to the Abraham cycle is the story of Aeneas, founder of Ancient Rome (Moshe Weinfeld, *From Joshua to Josiah: Turning Points in the History of Israel from the Conquest of the Land Until the Fall of Judah* [Jerusalem, 1992], 13–26).

Sarai's descent to Egypt (Gen. 12), which interrupts the sequence of his journey to the chosen land, and I will discuss this in depth below. Like the covenant at Sinai, which takes place outside of the borders of Israel, Abraham's election also occurs outside of the territory which his offspring are to inherit, rendering the chosen land a destination rather than a point of origin; it is Israel's destiny, not its birthplace.[80]

- *"The gods of my father."* In his classic 1929 work, *Der Gott der Väter,* Albrecht Alt claims that the ancestral gods did not have a name of their own; rather, they were named for the person who established their ritual worship; thus, he includes the references to "the God of Abraham," "the Fear of Isaac," and "the Mighty One of Jacob." Only later, supposedly, were these gods identified with the Israelite God. Therefore, Alt argues that these ancestral gods were not cosmic deities, or even territorial-national deities, but gods identified with central historical figures, to the extent that they were referred to by the name of these figures (this form of religion, according to Alt, was common in nomadic tribes). This theory was accepted as widely as it was criticized.[81] For our purposes, the crucial aspect of this theory lies in his surprising claim that this phenomenon – the god's naming according to his central worshipper – is only documented in the patriarchal narrative cycles. Claus Westermann, however, is correct in asserting that this testifies to the familial-personal nature of the patriarchal cycles more than to a unique theological practice: "It is only from this context that the titles acquire their meaning."[82] In other words, the obvious familial nature of the patriarchal cycles does not only have bearing on the nation's

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80. Similarly, Machinist, "Outsiders and Insiders: The Biblical View of Emergent Israel and Its Contexts," 49.

81. See, for example, Jacob Hoftijzer, *Die Verheißungen an die drei Erzväter* (Leiden, 1956), 84–97; Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, 1973), 3–75; Thomas Edward McComiskey, "The Religion of the Patriarchs: An Analysis of The God of the Fathers by Albrecht Alt," in *The Law and the Prophets*, ed. J. H. Skilton (Nutley, NJ, 1974), 195–206; Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis*, vol. 2, 56–60.

82. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Continental Commentary*, 108

definition, but on the construction of its religious infrastructure. God appears to the forefathers privately, addressing them as the heads of the clan, rather than as chief representatives of the nation which is to arise from them.

Nationalism and Morality

Beyond the aforementioned implications, the most important principle that can be derived from the notion of Israel as a natural-yet-ideological nation is related to the field of morality. Once again, the denouncement of marked nationalism is practically a premise of modern political philosophy; the trauma of Nazism certainly serves as a red light against any radical displays of nationalism, but not only Nazi Germany has committed atrocities in its name. The list is long and grows longer with time. At the same time, nationalism has also achieved great things, as Lea Brilmayer neatly states in her opening address to the New York University School of Law:

> One of the puzzling things about nationalism is that it sometimes seems to be a force for good, and sometimes a force for very great evil. At this particular time, we are more likely to think in terms of the evil nationalism brings about; this association is the legacy of the war in the former Yugoslavia, the killings in Rwanda, the ongoing fighting in Chechnya, and many other examples that all too easily come to mind. Nationalism now tends to be associated with barbarism: with genocide, ethnic cleansing, rape and wanton murder. But nationalism can also be a force for great good. When Armenians living in America contribute from their own limited resources to help Armenian earthquake victims, when Eritreans sacrifice their lives to liberate their country from a colonial power, or when Rigoberta Menchu commits herself to a life of personal hardship and danger to advance the human rights of Central American native peoples, it is hard to deny that national sentiment can play a noble role in world events.[83]

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83. Lea Brilmayer, "The Moral Significance of Nationalism," *Notre Dame Law Review* 71 (1995): 7.

The solidarity between members of the nations that Brilmayer mentions has been witnessed among Jews throughout history. This phenomenon has baffled cultural researchers, and still remains somewhat of a mystery. There are too many examples to mention, but one notable case is the reaction to the Damascus Affair; Jews the world over endangered their positions and sacrificed their time and resources for the Jews of Syria during that blood libel of February 1840. The Jews of Damascus suffered terribly at the hands of the government.[84] Different scholars point to the Damascus Affair as a climactic point of national solidarity: Jews from across the globe enlisted to help their brothers in a distant land.[85] The Jews who went to extremes to help the victims in Damascus – despite the heavy personal prices they were forced to pay – had never met their Syrian "brothers," nor is it even likely that had they met, they would have been able to communicate through the language barrier. Yet their belonging to the same nation served as sufficient motivation to leave their home for weeks on end in a desperate attempt to prevent injustice to their own people in Syria, while no such efforts were made by the victims' own Arab neighbors.

Of course, this story, and the countless incidents similar to it, do not have the power to negate the grievous atrocities committed in the name of nationalism; this is not my intention. Brilmayer, however, is correct in noting that national solidarity moves citizens to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their people.

I wish to take this observation one step further and assert that nationalism in itself is neither positive nor negative; rather, it is employed to justify positive or negative actions, depending on that nation's culture and regime. For the sake of this discussion, I wish to adopt Brilmayer's working hypothesis:

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84. George Pieritz, a Protestant missionary, described how the detained Jews were dipped in freezing water, how their heads were squeezed until their eyes popped out, how they were dragged by their ears and set alight. The government even seized and tortured sixty Jewish children between the ages of three and ten in order to pressure their parents into "confessing" about the death of Father Thomas and his Muslim attendant.

85. Jonathan Frankel, *The Damascus Affair: 'Ritual Murder,' Politics, and the Jews in 1840* (Cambridge, 1997).

The hypothesis I want to investigate here is that nationalism, itself, is morally transparent, and that this fact accounts for its ability to coexist equally well with good and evil. The argument is that the overwhelmingly relevant normative feature of today's nationalism is the justice (or lack of justice) of the claim nationalists advance on behalf of their nation. The single most important normative feature – indeed, perhaps, the only important normative feature – is the right of the nation to the thing that nationalists assert on its behalf, and this right is not itself a consequence of nationalism but a consequence of other underlying moral claims. What matters from a moral point of view is whether the claims of one's nation and co-nationals are worthy, and whether they are pursued by morally acceptable means. Resistance to colonialism, human rights abuses, and dictatorship is just, at least so long as morally defensible means are used, and ethnic cleansing, rape, and genocide are morally wrong; this is not so because of any reasons involving nationalism, but because of other moral features of the situation. Nationalism means simply that one identifies with the claims of one's nations and one's co-nationals, and takes them as one's own. Nationalists act as agents of their nation, and when agents act what matters is the rights of the principal (that is, the nation) rather than the agents' motivations (that is, their nationalism).[86]

This position, even if not universally accepted, is important for the understanding of the legacy that the Abraham cycle leaves for the Israelite nation. Not only do the Abraham narratives not pose a contradiction between nationalism and morality, but on the contrary, Abraham's election is presented as being contingent upon moral values of justice and righteousness. Moshe Weinfeld correctly notes that the description of Abraham's election in Genesis 18:19 implies that the upholding of "justice and righteousness" pertains to Abraham's entire household – that

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86. Brilmayer, "The Moral Significance of Nationalism," 7–8.

is, to the entire nation – and not only to the leader himself.[87] As I will posit throughout my analysis of the Abraham cycle, the central question of Abraham's election is explored through pairs of narratives; one of each pair addresses the issue of his continuity from a nationalistic perspective, while the other presents a moral perspective.[88] This is true of the double Ishmael narratives (Gen. 16 and 21), of the story of Lot (Gen. 19 includes two narratives of Lot's escape from the falling city), and of the double tidings of Isaac's birth (Gen. 17 and 18). In each pair, one narrative presents the birth of a nation bound to a covenant with God, while the parallel story depicts the birth of a nation as the result of divine reaction to certain moral actions of the characters. For example, Isaac's birth is justified twice: once in order to perpetuate the covenant with God (Gen. 17), and once as Abraham and Sarah's reward for their hospitality (Gen. 18). This dichotomy, which reoccurs at every narrative junction, ardently clarifies the relationship between nationalism and morality – between Abraham's election for national purposes as well as for moral purposes. Asserting the moral obligations of the nation's founder as a unifying justification of a nation's existence can be considered a revolution in ancient political thought. William Irwin may well be correct in his argument that this revolution was already the result of a more fundamental theological revolution, that of the unique moral values of the God of Israel.[89] In any case, the Abraham cycle introduces a natural (ethnic) nation whose moral purpose and obligations are a fundamental condition for its existence – a natural nation that evolves from a single family yet is inherently established upon free choice.

Moral Nationalism and Post-Modern Nationalism

In Israel, a lively public debate recently raged with regard to the institution of a "Jewish nationality law," which seeks to ratify the State of Israel

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87. Moshe Weinfeld, *Justice and Righteousness in Ancient Israel Against the Background of Social Reforms in the Ancient Near East* (Jerusalem, 1985), 125–126.
88. Compare to Thomas L. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue: A Literary, Historical, and Theological Commentary* (New York, 2001), 89–94.
89. William A. Irwin, "The Hebrews," in *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: An Essay of Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East*, ed. H. Frankfort et al. (Chicago, 1946), 326–359.

as a Jewish-democratic state. One of the main opponents of this law is Prof. Mordechai Kremnitzer, in whose eyes, the "Jewish nationality" of the State of Israel is obvious and inherent, so that there is no need to anchor it through a legal definition:

> The State of Israel is the national state of the Jewish people. It always has been, and will always be. Whether one considers our legal system superficially or in depth, there is only one conclusion: our State is of a Jewish and democratic nature. This is evident from mention of the expression "Jewish and democratic" in our constitution, but not only from that; it is evident from our Declaration of Independence, from the Law of Return, from our festivals and days of remembrance...it is evident from the special status of the Hebrew language.[90]

The nature of this debate reflects a national reawakening of the attempt to define itself in light of contemporary philosophical discourse. This reawakening, of course, is not unique to the State of Israel. According to economist Guy Sorman, a national reawakening in East Asia is quashing liberal European assumptions pertaining to the decline of nationalism and the unlikelihood of war between democracies. In his opinion, Western attention is focused on the economic boom in East Asia, overlooking the fact that the region is sizzling with nationalistic debates that challenge the region's stability as well as the notion that the time of nationalism is long past.[91]

In 2014, Scotland rejected an independence referendum by majority opinion that would have separated them from the United Kingdom. While this decision reflects other factors being privileged over nationalism, the very fact that this issue has come to a head at this point in time – with similar issues bubbling to the surface in other parts of the world – shows that nationalistic sentiment is still stirring across the globe.

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90. Mordechai Kremnitzer, "The Jewish State Bill: A Danger for Zionist Enterprise," *Makor Rishon*, May 9, 2014.
91. Guy Sorman, "Where Nationalism Still Matters: Asia's Simmering Political Tensions Defy Conventional Wisdom," *City Journal*, August 20, 2012.

Abraham

These political factions indicate that questions of nationalism are still relevant, and rather than attempt to quash these issues out of fear from shadows of the past, there is growing need to devote time and effort to formulate a discourse regarding nationalism through the employment of moral terms and obligations. The story of Abraham exemplifies the fusion of nationalistic and moral values; the ancient text has much to contribute to an age-old debate in new guise.

The Line of Terah
(Gen. 11:26–32)

Every hero's journey begins with a call to action.[1] In just a few lines, the reader will experience that first moment of revelation, when God appears to Abram and proclaims, "Go forth from your land and from the place of your birth and from your father's house to a land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1). This is the moment that plants the seed for Abram to become the father of monotheism; it is his "Call to Adventure."

Just before that momentous divine revelation, the text introduces six innocuous verses, ostensibly simply to provide genealogical context to the hero that will emerge in the following chapter. Our hero Abram is introduced at the end of a description of the genealogy of Shem, which culminates with the birth of Terah's three sons: "Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran" (Gen. 11:27). The reader is told of the death of one of the sons, Haran, and Terah's genealogy is followed by a description of his journey to Canaan: "Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot, the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the

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1. Although an examination of the Abraham cycle through the lens of Joseph Campbell's "Hero's Journey" paradigm is not the focus of this work, I will point out some of the major milestones that appear in the Abraham cycle that coincide with Campbell's hero cycle.

wife of his son Abram, and set out with them from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan; but when they arrived in Haran, they settled there" (11:31).

These six lines depicting the lineage of Terah and his journey to Canaan are in fact the true opening scene of the Abram narrative. We are told of the birth of the brothers Abram, Nahor, and Haran, of Haran's subsequent death and the effect it had on the family dynamic, and of the patriarch Terah's apparent decision to move the family to Canaan. These events are the prequel to the Abram narrative, and beneath the surface they tell a fascinating story of how the man who became the father of the Jewish people left his "land…birthplace…and the home of [his] father."

Who Is Our Hero?

Noah marks the tenth generation of Adam's genealogy; Terah marks the tenth in Noah's. It's not clear who the heroes of this story are yet, as we are introduced to a number of Terah's family members in the next few verses. The parallels between Adam's and Noah's lineage nonetheless produce a literary effect: their similarity generates anticipation that a leader might emerge in the next generation.[2] The allusion to the previous biblical "beginnings" implies that the reader is on the brink of a new era.[3] Just as Noah's story began with the enumeration of his lineage, the next chapter in the biblical narrative opens in similar fashion, indicating that a new hero is about to be introduced. The very next verse, however, relates a family tragedy: the death of Terah's son.[4] Abram and Nahor, the remaining brothers, seem to continue

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2. See further in Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Meaning of the Chronogenealogies of Genesis 5 and 11," *Origins* 7 (1980): 53–70.
3. Note that according to the "three-son model" Terah (and not Abram) parallels Adam and Noah.
4. The claim that Haran died "in confrontation with Terah" (C. Wynand Retief, "When Interpretation Traditions Speak Too Loud for Ethical Dilemmas to Be Heard: On the Untimely Death of Haran [Genesis 11:28]," *Old Testament Essays* 23 [2010]: 788–803) is, in my opinion, somewhat exaggerated. When the text states that Haran died "*al penei Teraḥ aviv*" (Gen. 11:28), literally translated as "in the presence of," this "presence" is chronological, i.e., in his lifetime.

on comparable paths, each taking a wife – "the name of Abram's wife being Sarai and that of Nahor's wife Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and the father of Iscah. Now Sarai was barren, she had no child" (Gen. 11:29).

A dramatic family dynamic emerges from the unpacking of the wives' introduction. Milcah and Iscah were the daughters of Haran, together with their brother Lot. We know that upon his brother's death, Abram adopted his nephew, Lot. Here we learn that the recently orphaned Milcah was adopted (by way of marriage) by her uncle, Nahor. And what of the third orphaned child of Haran, Iscah? It would appear that Abram took her under his wing as well. This would appear to be the basis of the midrash that claims that Iscah is Sarai, although this claim is difficult to justify with the plain reading of the text, since Abraham's wife is introduced as Sarai, without the additional detail that Sarai is Iscah.

Abram, the second son, married a woman with no significant lineage – Sarai is presented with no genealogical context. Furthermore, the story makes it clear by mentioning Sarai's infertility that it is unlikely that her union with Abram will yield any further offspring.

This introduction seems to suggest that Nahor will become the story's protagonist: Terah's eldest, Haran, died young; Sarai, wife of Terah's second son, is barren; therefore Nahor, whose wife is deeply connected with the family past, and is presumably fertile, will continue Terah's line. The sudden change of focus afterward to Abram is designed to enhance the sense of divine selection unfolding throughout his story.

The Family Journey

Terah, apparently out of nowhere, picks up his family and moves from Ur of the Chaldeans to Canaan. "Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot, the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and set out with them from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan; but when they arrived in Haran, they settled there" (Gen. 11:31). The text emphasizes Terah's relationships with Abram, his wife, and his nephew Lot, while blatantly omitting Nahor's family. Terah's extended family is tribal in its bonds; the sons have adopted the orphaned children of their brother. When Nahor and his family reappear later in the

narrative,[5] it indicates that they too were part of the family's unified journey to another land. Given all this, the reader should find it odd that Nahor is omitted from this part of the narrative.

Furthermore, no reason is provided for Terah's journey to Canaan. Josephus writes that Terah's grief over the death of Haran drove him away from Ur.[6] Others mention Sarai's barrenness,[7] financial reasons, local conflicts,[8] or religious reasons, for his departure.[9] Whatever the cause may be, this apparently intentional lacuna indicates that the reason for Terah's departure plays no role in the story; in fact, its absence might serve as a clue to the story's true purpose and role in the origin story of Abram.

These two glaring omissions – the reason for Terah's journey and the question of Nahor's fate – are linked with the narrative design. Why is Terah's journey – a journey he never sees through; a journey that ends in Haran; a journey that never reaches its final destination – included in the narrative cycle starring his son?

In the next chapter (Gen. 12), God appears to Abram and tells him to go to Canaan. This is perplexing, as it seems that Terah was already on the way to Canaan, with Abram in tow. If this is the case, why did God feel the need to tell Abram to journey somewhere he was already going? Even more perplexing is that this initial revelation of God to

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5.   When Abraham's servant seeks a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24), and when Jacob moves into the house of Laban (Gen. 29–32).

6.   Josephus, *Antiquities*, I:152 (Louis H. Feldman, *Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary. Volume 3: Judean Antiquities 1–4* [Leiden: Brill, 2000], 55, and see 55n476). See also Yair Zakovitch, "The Exodus from Ur of the Chaldeans: A Chapter in Literary Archaeology," in *Ki Baruch Hu: Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Baruch A. Levine*, ed. R. Chazan, W. W. Hallo, and L. H. Schiffman (Winona Lake, IN, 1999), 429–439.

7.   Yehuda Kiel, *Daat Mikra: Genesis* (Jerusalem, 1997), vol. 1, 205.

8.   Edouard P. Dhorme, "Abraham dans le Cadre de l'Histoire," *RB* 37 (1928): 379.

9.   I have difficulty with Rabbi Mordechai Breuer's suggestion (*Pirkei Bereshit*, ed. Y. Ofer [Alon Shevut, 1999], vol. 1, 224–225) and Patricia Berlyn's ("The Journey of Terah: To Ur-Kasdim or Urkesh?" *JBQ* 33 [2005]: 73–80) that Terah went to the land of Canaan because it is the land in which God resides, and that Terah felt this deeply in his soul. There is no indication to this effect in the written text. However, according to Abraham ibn Ezra's interpretation, perhaps Breuer's suggestion could be accepted for a different reason, as discussed below.

Abram in chapter 12 is considered the beginning of Abram's journey – "Go forth from your land, from your birthplace, from the house of your father, to a land that I will show you." God's words to Abram, "Go forth from your land," become the lyrical embodiment of his journey for generations to come. God asks Abram to leave everything he knows – his homeland, his birthplace, and the house of his father. This divine edict to leave his home establishes Abram's character as the self-sacrificing, adventurous hero who leaves everything behind to become the father of monotheism, and the messenger of the one true God. It is his first heroic act, an act of blind faith that echoes throughout his entire story. And yet, upon closer inspection, it appears that the text suggests that Abram's leaving his homeland after the divine revelation was nothing more than coincidence. His father, Terah, has already decided to move the family to Canaan. God's revelation to Abram occurred only once the family were already on their way. Practically speaking, Abram had already left his land and his birthplace at the bidding of his father. When God approached Abram in Haran, he had already taken the difficult step to leave the land of his birth. He was, in fact, already halfway through the very journey God commanded him to complete.

The language of "Go forth from *your land* and from *the place of your birth* and from your father's house to a land that I will show you" indicates a level of self-sacrifice and adventurousness that does not align with the apparent chronology of the revelation. It is no great ask for God to command Abram to leave everything he has ever known in Haran – his true home and birthplace was Ur. In fact, God later tells Abram that He "brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans" (Gen. 15:7), not from Haran. According to the chronological flow of the narrative, it would seem that God came to Abram in the midst of a journey that he undertook at his father Terah's behest. Since Terah's journey to Canaan has no compelling purpose or motivation, the sequence of events here seems coincidental at best.

Of course, we know that Abram's journey is anything but coincidental. This is the starting point of a physical and spiritual journey the entire essence of which is guided by the hand of God. In order to properly understand the narrative, we must discuss the journeys of Terah and Abram on two separate planes: development of the plot, and the literary

purpose of the narrative. Terah initiates a journey that is unrelated to God's command; how does this correlate with the command to Abram to journey to that very same destination? Additionally, there must be literary significance to the consecutive *presentation* of the two episodes. Seeking literary significance goes beyond the historical question ("What happened?") and instead relates to the narrative design ("How is the story presented to the reader, and why?").

The Chronological Story

The text relates that Terah begot sons at the age of seventy, and died at 205 (Gen. 11:31). Abram leaves for Canaan on God's command at the age of seventy-five, when Terah is 145 (70+75). The fact that Terah's death (11:32) is recorded *before* God's command to Abram (12:1) creates the false impression that Terah died before Abram left for Canaan, while chronologically Abram arrived in Canaan during his father's lifetime. However, biblical protagonists frequently exit the narrative stage long before their chronological lives are over. For example, though it seems Noah dies long before the Abraham narrative begins, a simple calculation can determine that Noah dies when Abraham is fifty-eight years old. Similarly, Isaac is still alive when his grandson Joseph is sold.[10] Genesis is not a history book, but a sweeping series of portraits tracing a character from birth to death before the next character is introduced. The narrative follows Terah's life: the birth and marriage of his sons (11:27–30), the journey to Canaan that ends in Haran (11:31), and his death in Haran (11:32). The spotlight only falls on Abram once Terah has stepped down, despite the fact that some of Abram's episodes (such as God's revelation and his journey to Canaan) occur during Terah's lifetime.

      This narrative style re-illuminates the correlation between Terah's journey and God's revelation to Abram. As the events are clearly not

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10.   Isaac is sixty years old when Jacob is born, and Jacob is ninety-one when Joseph is born (and so, when Jacob comes before Pharaoh, he is 130 years old and Joseph is thirty-nine). That is to say, when Joseph was born, Isaac was 151 years old, and when Joseph was sold to Egypt at the age of seventeen, Isaac was 168 years old. Isaac died approximately ten years before Jacob discovered that Joseph was alive and governing Egypt, around the time when Joseph was taken from the pit to interpret Pharaoh's dreams.

recorded in chronological order, it is reasonable to assume that Terah's decision to immigrate to Canaan is connected with God's command to Abram to journey to the very same place. The story presented to the reader has Terah leaving for Canaan before his son Abram is visited by God. In fact, chronologically, after Abram is commanded to go to Canaan, his father Terah decides to join him on his journey.

In other words, according to the story's narrative sequence, Terah departs for Canaan before the reader is aware that God had spoken to Abram and commanded him to go, while according to the chronological order of events, after Abram was commanded to go to Canaan, his father Terah decided to join him on his journey.[11]

The chronological sequence of the plot could therefore be described like this: After God spoke to Abram and commanded him to go to the "land that I will show you," Abram then shared this information with his father, Terah. A religious man himself, Terah decided to join his son on his journey. It would be reasonable to assume this version of events based on what we know of the characters involved. Abram had already established himself as a highly moral and spiritual leader. Terah, a pagan, would not have been surprised to discover that his son had been chosen by "a god" to be his benefactor. If that was the case, thought Terah, why shouldn't he and the rest of his family also benefit from Abram's divine sponsorship? Terah therefore decides to join Abram on the journey that this "new" god chose for him to fulfill.

The Literary Story

This version of the story is not presented to the reader in a chronological fashion. We must remember that the biblical text is far more biographical than historical – it seeks to tell the stories of personalities, not necessarily of chronological plot development. The narrative sequence of events not only deviates from the actual timeline, certain verses seem intent on misleading the reader into thinking that Abram received the divine message in Haran, after Terah's journey had begun: "Abram was seventy-five years old *when he left Haran*. Abram took his wife Sarai

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11. A similar suggestion is offered by Ibn Ezra and Radak, in their commentaries on the verse.

and his brother's son Lot, and all the wealth that they had amassed, and the people *they had acquired in Haran*; and they set out to go forth to the land of Canaan" (Gen. 12:4–5). The premise of these verses is that Abram set out from Haran, not Ur of the Chaldeans! It is true that Abram departed from Haran after his family had already settled there, but his true journey began in Ur of the Chaldeans, where God first revealed Himself to him. The narrative structure of this story, and the jumbling of the chronological plot points, must intend to tell the story of who Abram was, emphasizing the traits the text deems important to emphasize, and glossing over traits or actions that may disrupt the flow of the moral message.

The text relates to Terah's and Abram's journeys as completely separate – Terah left Ur of the Chaldeans apparently of his own accord, while Abram was commanded by God. The focus of the text on Terah as an independent protagonist contributes to the analogical design of the two journeys: father and son embark on one journey, which is described to the reader as two separate journeys, enabling the reader to compare the individual experiences of father and son. Terah set out for Canaan, but only got as far as Haran. The story omits the reason for Terah's journey, and the reader has no reason to believe the reason behind it is anything but his own free will. In contrast, Abram embarks on his journey "as the Lord had commanded him" (Gen. 12:4). Even if both characters did leave together, there is a literary purpose in presenting the story through two different journeys: one without cause or purpose, which does not culminate in the desired destination, and the other ordained by God, culminating in the desired destination of Canaan.

This presentation of the story also emphasizes the relationship between Abram and the land of Canaan. Abram and Terah's arrivals, although occurring at the same time and place, are also presented as separate. Both Abraham and Terah passed through Haran on their way to Canaan. Terah arrived and settled in Haran – although it was not his original destination, he decided to remain in the city, and so his journey ended there. Abram, however, only "arrived" in Haran. The reason for which he set out on the journey was not yet fulfilled – it was only once he reached Mamre that Abram fulfilled his purpose of "Go forth from your land" and settled in the land of Canaan. Terah's journey precedes

Abram's so that the reader can contrast Terah's choice to remain in Haran with the choice of his son to follow God's command.[12]

Despite the differences, the story is designed to convey the feeling that Abram's journey is a continuation of Terah's; this is the reason that Abram is described as departing from Haran (12:4–5), the very place Terah had ended his journey.[13]

The Complexity of Heroism and Family

Abram's journey is therefore presented ambivalently. While Abram obeyed God's command and left his native land to go toward the unknown, he chose to take Lot and his possessions along with him, elements that seem to be continuous to his father's journey. It would seem that Abram bringing his nephew with him was in conflict with God's directive to leave his family behind. This may be the case, and may also be why the text decided to separate the journey of Terah from that of Abram – to indicate that although they may have traveled together, the impetus and purpose of their journeys were far from being the same. The first chapters of Abram's story, therefore, paint a complex picture of Abram, who faithfully follows God's command and journeys to Canaan; Abram, who physically abandons the house of his father, but maintains an emotional bond by following in his path.

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12. Compare with Yitzhak Peleg, "Was the Ancestress of Israel in Danger?" *ZAW* 118 (2006): 197–208. According to Peleg, the narrative omits the reasons for Terah's departure from Ur of the Chaldeans because Terah is a secondary character, and only information that is needed to further the plot is provided with regard to secondary characters. I believe the narrative's silence here is critical, as the literary purpose of Terah's character in the narrative is to go without a particular reason, and of his own volition. In this way, Terah is contrasted with Abram.

13. Perhaps the emphasis on the move "from Haran" intends to demonstrate the difference between Terah and Abram; whereas it is Terah's own decision to stay in Haran, Abram is obligated by divine decree to leave Haran and continue to Canaan. Perhaps this is also the reason that Abram's age (Gen. 12:4) and the people accompanying him (12:5) are mentioned in the context of the departure from Haran.