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The Patriarchs

*“The whole land of Canaan,
where you are now an alien,
I will give as an everlasting possession to you
and your descendants after you;
and I will be their God.”*

Genesis 17:8

“Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel.”

Genesis 32:28

The archaeological record of settlement in Palestine goes back at least 10,000 years. However, my interest in probing for roots of conflict begins with the story of Abraham, as told in the Book of Genesis.

Abraham

Nearly four millennia ago, Abraham, a man of means and owner of many flocks and herds, is living in the Sumerian city-state of Ur on the Euphrates River in lower Mesopotamia.

With his family, servants, and flocks, along with those of his father and his nephew Lot, Abraham and his party leave Ur and travel to the tribal lands of his uncle in Haran, in the region known as Padan Aram. Haran is about halfway along the Fertile Crescent between Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean in what is now southeastern Turkey. In Haran, a Sumerian city-state like Ur, Abraham and his family prosper. There his father dies.

Abraham is often considered to be the world’s first Monotheist. Although he comes out of a polytheistic society, he listens when God – the One God – speaks to him in Haran. What God says to Abraham is this: “Go to a land which I will show you, and there I will make you the father of a mighty nation.”

On faith, Abraham leaves behind the comfortable life he has known in Haran and becomes a nomad. Traveling with his nephew Lot, their wives, servants and flocks, he begins his journey southwestward along the Fertile Crescent, a route which even at that time is well-traveled. He keeps his flocks north and west of the desert. Eventually, he reaches the hilly land at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. This land has been settled for thousands of years. It has a Bronze Age culture. Early empires from Mesopotamia and Anatolia, and local kings as well, have warred over it. The Hittites have passed through on their way to Egypt, and a few have stayed to claim land.

Abraham stops first at a settlement called Shechem, within the central hill country. This is the site of the present West Bank city of

Nablus. Because Abraham stops first at Shechem, but also because Shechem figures prominently in the later history of Abraham's descendents, today both Muslims and Jews consider Nablus as a holy site.

Nablus today is entirely an Arab city, and almost all of its inhabitants are Muslim. It is ringed by Israeli settlements on higher ground. Nablus seethes with opposition to Israeli settlements. Israeli tanks make frequent entries into the city to halt Hamas terrorist activity generated there.

After stopping at Shechem, Abraham proceeds slowly southward, but there is drought in the land. He escapes the threat of famine by going for a time into northern Egypt. Returning from Egypt, Abraham settles in the vicinity of present-day Hebron, near the northern reaches of the Negev Desert. (Lot and his family and flocks take up land near Sodom and Gomorrah, cities at the southern end of the Dead Sea. The present day sites of Lot's settlement have disappeared, destroyed, by tradition, because of the dissolute behavior of their inhabitants). After a long life, Abraham is buried in Hebron, beside his wife Sarah. Later the tomb becomes the burial site also of his son Isaac and his grandson Jacob. Because the patriarchs are buried there, Hebron comes to have great religious significance.

The arid land I see in the vicinity of Hebron is now blooming because of irrigation. For Abraham, it was grazing land and probably received more rainfall than now. Because Abraham settled near Hebron and was buried nearby, Muslims consider the town a sacred site. Most of the town is administered by the Palestinian Authority. Some 400 ultra-Orthodox Israelis, most of them originally from the United States, live in Hebron today, under Israeli protection. In today's Hebron, the atmosphere is often charged.

Ishmael, Isaac, and the Rock of Sacrifice

Three generations of Abraham's descendents can be named by Jews, Christians, and Muslims the world over, because as the first of the Patriarchs, Abraham figures prominently in the foundation of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Although Abraham and his wife Sarah are childless and Sarah is long past childbearing age, God tells Abraham that Sarah will have a son who will make him the father of a mighty nation. God will give this nation the land of Canaan – the hill country between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River – as their heritage; in turn, God will require circumcision as a sign of the covenant. It happens as God promises: Sarah gives birth to Isaac. Meanwhile, Abraham has an older son named Ishmael by an Egyptian servant woman named Hagar.

God promises that Ishmael, too, will be the father of a great nation. Out of favor with Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael flee southward into the Negev Desert. Ishmael grows up, takes an Egyptian wife, and by tradition becomes the father of the Arab nation. (Twenty-four centuries later, the Jewish community in Medina passes on to Muhammed another tradition: that Abraham goes to visit Ishmael in Mecca and that together he and his son build the Kaabah, the huge black-draped cubic structure located on a great square in the center of Mecca. Within one corner of this structure is a large black meteorite. In ancient times tribes in the vicinity of Mecca worship the meteorite as the abode of the god Al-Lah. To this day the Kaabah centers Islamic worship in Mecca.)