

The Historical Reliability of the Old Testament

Part 4 - The Patriarchs

Introduction

- The Patriarchs are the fathers of the nation of Israel - Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (Israel), and his 12 sons.
- According to the Bible, the patriarchs lived around the year 2000 BC. In general terms we are talking about the late third and early second millennium BC.
- We do not have very many written records from this time, and we certainly don't find any extra-biblical mentions of the patriarchs.
- But we can ask whether the story fits with our knowledge of that time period (or whether it is filled with anachronisms made up by a later storyteller).



The Battle in the Valley of Siddim

- Genesis 14:1-4
 - 4 Kings from the North and East go to war against 5 vassal kings in Canaan who have rebelled.
- There is nothing too significant about the alliance of Canaanite kings - this occurred in many different time periods
- But there is great significance in the alliance of the 4 King alliance:
- The names fit with the regions ruled.
 - Amraphel was king of Shinar [Babylonia]. His name is semitic, which tracks with Babylonia.
 - Arioch king of Ellasar. We do not where Ellasar was, but the name Arioch is well attested in writings uncovered in Mari dating from the early and mid second millennium.
 - Kedorlaomer king of Elam. His name is characteristically an Elamite name.
 - Tidal king of Goyim. His name is an early Hittite name. And his title is equivalent to titles used in Anatolia (modern day Turkey)
- The type of alliance was only possible in a certain period of history
 - For several centuries before 2000 BC, the Akkadian and neo-Sumerian empires dominated large areas of Mesopotamia, their influence reaching into Syria and the Mediterranean coast.
 - But this power collapsed around 2000 BC and led to many small kingdoms taking their place.
 - This lasted until the 18th century, when Hammurabi of Babylon asserted control.
 - Thereafter control moved between Assyria and Babylon.
 - Therefore, it is only in this brief period of the early second millennium (2000-1750 BC) that we might see something like the alliance of many kings that we do in Genesis 14.
- Also, it is only during this time period that we can say that Elam was extensively involved in the politics of Mesopotamia.

Covenants between People

- Genesis 21:22-33 (2 covenants); 26:26-33; 31:43-54
- Recent discoveries at Mari have found evidence of the format of covenants used at this time (which is distinct from the formats used earlier or later in history).
- The four covenants in Genesis share these same distinctive elements with those found at Mari.

Heirs and Inheritance

- Genesis 15:2-3; 16:1-2
 - Having no natural heir, Abraham first resorts to adoption of a member of his household. Then, on Sarah's advice, to an "heir by proxy", using Sarah's handmaiden to get a son.
 - Note: Just because God tells us how things happened, does not mean he endorses them. God is clear that this practice is wrong. And in fact, the story seeks to show us the harmful consequences of it.
- Adoption of an heir was a common practice at the time for couples with no children (as in other periods).
- Adoption by proxy, though it may seem very strange to us, was also a common cultural practice at the time. In fact, sometimes when a woman was married off, she came with a handmaid as "insurance" against possible infertility.