

Lecture 19: Genesis 11 & P History-telling in the Bible

Today we wrap up the first 11 chapters of Genesis, typically called the Primeval History. At the end of last session I pointed out some of the similarities between themes and motifs in J's flood story and its table of the nations, on the one hand, and what we find in Hecateus and the pseudo-Hesiod work, *Catalogue of Women*, on the other, that indicate J was not only familiar with such ideas, but explicitly sought to counter them.

John Van Seters argues persuasively that J, working against this tradition, cast the primeval age as an era of rebellion against God that culminated in what Greek literature portrayed as the origins of what was noblest in humanity: the heroic age. For early Greek literature such heroes were the forebears of humanity. For J, by contrast, the nations are descended from the one righteous man rescued from a flood that destroyed the world which had been corrupted by, above all, offspring of Greek-style divine-human liaisons.

More than that, J seems to have composed his account in order to assert the primacy of a different story: that of Abraham, Sarah and their descendants. There is, of course, one more contribution by J we need to consider before we get to that: the story of the Tower of Babel. Like the rest of J's narratives, this one features the theme of crime and punishment and is etiological – in fact, multiply so. On the one hand, it explains why humans speak different languages. While everyone in the story speaks one tongue at the outset, by the end God has imposed diverse languages, introducing confusion into the community and causing it to disperse.

But a second etiology is more important. In fact, J has already incorporated the themes of dispersion and different languages into his Table of the Nations, concluding each of the three segments of his table with, “These are the descendants of ‘X,’ by their families, their *languages*, their lands, and their nations.” Nations were already differentiated by language. Moreover, the summary of the entire genealogy reports, “These are the families of Noah’s sons, according to their genealogies, in their nations; and from these the nations *spread abroad* on the earth after the flood.” In J’s “Table of the Nations” the nations’ dispersion is a byproduct of the proliferation of Noah’s offspring. What use, then, would J have of an etiology that attributes the dispersion of the peoples to the imposition of diverse languages?

The key to J’s purpose is in the way it uses the geographical setting of the story. Notice that all the peoples (“the whole earth”) migrate to one place – a different circumstance than is given by the dispersion of peoples in the genealogy. They settle on a plain in the land of Shinar. So where’s Shinar? We find a clue in the genealogy of chapter 10, which says of the warrior Nimrod, “The beginning of his

kingdom was Babel, Erech, and Accad, all of them in the land of Shinar.” The mention of Babel (= Babylon) and Accad as places within Shinar clues us in that this story is set in southern Mesopotamia.

While we know of lofty cultic towers built in that region, called ziggurats (like this partial one archaeologists have uncovered at Ur [accompanied by an artist’s reconstruction of how it likely appeared]) – what’s peculiar is that the proposal to build involves not just a tower, but also a city. While ziggurats were built *in* cities, the proposal to construct a ziggurat *and* a city as a unit is peculiar.

The inclusion of a city in the proposal becomes intelligible, however, if we note the use to which J puts this story in v. 9: “Therefore it (viz. the city) was called Babel (= “Babylon”), because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and *from there* the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.” The relationship between this episode and this explanation of the name of Babylon invokes a rather strained play on words. The name בָּבֶל, which in Akkadian means “gate of the gods,” is related in this explanation to the Hebrew verb בָּלַל, which is translated “confused.”

Apparently J inherited this story as an etiology of the differentiation of human languages, but pressed it into service to root the city of Babylon in another skirmish with Israel’s God, thereby casting disrepute on Judah’s nemesis in Mesopotamia. Indeed, the fact that J relates this story to the city of Babylon, in particular, is again suggestive that J wrote after the fall of Jerusalem, when Babylon had shown itself Judah’s greatest foe.

Having surveyed J’s contributions, we can now take stock of what this author is trying to accomplish in his “Primeval History.” One of his purposes is obviously etiological.

At least one etiology is positive: his description of woman’s derivation from man as the explanation for male-female attraction. Most of J’s etiologies, however are negative, such as his rooting of men’s difficult daily labor and women’s difficulty in giving birth in divine punishment for human misdeeds. Crime and punishment is the main framework for his etiologies. In fact, J’s assessment of humans and their characteristics throughout is negative.

The first humans acquired god-likeness in an act of disobedience. Ultimately God comes to the conclusion that humans are engrained with evil from day one; there’s nothing that can be done about it. Thus Able is unable to overcome sin crouching at the door, and so murders his brother. Repeatedly God feels himself compelled to limit human attempts to grasp at equality with him, whether in the garden or on the plain in Shinar. J’s verdict throughout is negative on the human race.

Finally, it is noteworthy that J takes special pains to denigrate the pedigree of three nations or peoples in the world he knows: the world of Mesopotamia, particularly Babylon, through the story of the tower of Babel. Similarly, J's story of divine-human liaisons at the start of chapter 6 undercuts Greek notions about the nobility of the earliest ages of its history, while Noah's curse of Canaan, subordinating it to Shem's descendants, takes aim at the Canaanite culture that surrounded Israel, a descendant of Shem.

Now mixed in with this narrative we find contributions made by P that give a notably different tenor to these chapters.

As part of your reading assignment for today, you read Hurowitz' article on P, which represents a classical approach to P, including the postulate that P was a narrative composed for its own purposes.

It's important to distinguish between the cultic law codes – which are fundamental to P and certainly composed written sources prior to being incorporated into the Torah – and the narratives we can identify as stemming from P, which are harder to conceive of as having existed as a written source. In fact, Hurowitz is forced to admit that P's narrative “does not flow evenly and smoothly,” especially because “the passage of time...is expressed through the use of chronological statements and genealogies, rather than by the narrative action.” But if that's true – as it is – then in what sense is P a narrative? That's like saying that highway 14 is still a road, even though some of it is a grassy field and other parts of it are a lake one must cross however one can. You cannot declare P a narrative by redefining what constitutes a narrative. Rather, P's narratives are occasional and sporadic rather than continuous. (And by the way, contrary to Hurowitz, most scholars would no longer allow that P continues into Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings.)

So, while Hurowitz provides a good characterization of P's concerns, I agree with many others that P's narratives are primarily *supplements* to J. I've already noted the different setting P's creation story provides for reading chapters 2-4 by depicting the world optimistically as an ordered by God's word for humans to inhabit, who are created in God's image from the start and given charge over the rest of God's creation.

Let's note briefly the effect of P's additions to J's flood narrative. Many of the verses the Documentary Hypothesis assigned to P can easily be aligned with J, resulting in a handful of supplements P made to J's basic narrative.

The most significant among them is the emphasis on God making a covenant with Noah: “¹⁸I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you.”

This covenant is an obligation on God's part to rescue Noah. And with that P injects a positive note into J's dark narrative of crime and punishment. J acknowledges that Noah found favor in the LORD's eyes as the sole righteous man in his generation, for which reason he is rescued. P's theme of God's self-obligation to Noah goes beyond this and anticipates a broader commitment God will make in P's epilogue to the flood story in 9.1-17.

That covenant is established in vv. 8ff.: “⁸Then God said to Noah...⁹“As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰and with every living creature that is with you...¹¹I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” ¹²God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.”

The obligation God takes on here runs parallel to a promise the LORD utters in J, in response to smelling Noah's sacrifice: “And when the LORD smelled the pleasing odor, the LORD said in his heart, “I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.” — The difference between these statements involves more than just the use of the word “covenant” (connoting a binding obligation), or even the giving of a sign to confirm it (the divine warrior's bow hung up in the heavens).

The prime difference between the two promises is linked to the fact that in J the LORD speaks out of despair that the human inclination to sin is incurable, making any additional annihilation of life senseless. In P, however, God's self-obligation is part of a different sort of epilogue, in vv. 1-7 of chapter 9: ¹God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. ²The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. ³Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. ⁴Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. ⁵For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from human beings, each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life. ⁶Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind. ⁷And you, be fruitful and multiply, abound on the earth and multiply in it.”

Quite noticeable in these verses are links to chapter one, such as the command to “be fruitful and multiply,” which never appears in J, but twice in P’s creation story, the most similar of which are the words addressed to the just-created humans: “God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.”

What makes this parallel even more striking is that just as that blessing is followed by the command, “and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” — so the blessing of 9.1 is followed by, “²The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered.” The parallels between the two texts continue with a reassignment of food that expands the human menu: “³Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything.” — This harkens back to the command to the first humans in chapter 1: “God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.” In chapter 9 this permission is broadened to include animals.

God does add a restriction to this permission, however: “⁴Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.” But that restriction doesn’t stand on its own. It is developed into P’s response to the topic of murder introduced in J’s story of Cain and Abel: “⁵For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from human beings, each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life. ⁶Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind.”

Note that P grounds this statement about homicide in another theme from its creation narrative: the forming of human beings “in his own image,” thus reminding the reader of the intrinsic worth of humans, over against J’s dire judgment that humans are corrupt through and through.

The charge to Noah concludes with a repetition of the command to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. In effect, P’s epilogue to the flood sees Noah and his descendants as a fresh start in the world. And this is accented for the creatures, as well, which Noah is commanded to bring out of the ark so that they “may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply the earth,” recapitulating the blessing of Genesis 1.22.

Consequently, when P includes in its epilogue to the flood God’s commitment not again to bring a flood on the world to destroy humans and creatures, it is not due to resignation to the human condition, but with the confidence that a new page has actually been turned and a new world born.

This, in turn, helps us understand some of the language P uses in describing the flood. In particular, whereas J simply has rain fall from the sky for forty days and forty nights to create the flood, P portrays a convulsion of the earth, such that “all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened.” Not only does water fall from heaven, but the waters from beneath the earth pierce the crust, inundating the land. In essence, this is a reversion of the world to its pre-created state, when water dominated everything and was not gathered above the heavens nor into collections distinct from the land. This feature of P’s flood story underscores that, for P, the flood is not simply about punishment for human wrongdoing, but about starting over, reverting to the pre-created state and then inaugurating a new creation with Noah and his family, granted a divine commitment to preserve life.

The other P supplement to the flood story I want to highlight is the peculiar series of dates it inserts. As you’ll recall, in J the rains fall for forty days and forty nights, followed by 14 days of testing for dry land by releasing doves. The total length of the flood in J, then, is 54 days. P, on the other hand, says that Noah entered the ark on the 17th day of the 2nd month of his 600th year. And he emerges from the ark on the 27th day of the 2nd month of his 601st year, for a total of 1 year and 10 days. If P is supplementing J’s story, why does he quibble over the length of the flood?

While the date on which Noah emerges from the ark marks 1 year and 10 days, more significant still is the date given in the preceding verse, which marks the end of the flood in terms of waters dissipating and the earth drying: “In the six hundred first year, in the first month, the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from the earth; and Noah re-moved the covering of the ark, and looked, and saw that the face of the ground was drying.”

This day is, in effect, the beginning of the new world, and it falls on the first day of the first month of Noah’s 601st year. What’s peculiar here is that even though these dates are correlated with the year of Noah’s life, they are also dated by the *month* of each year. And not only does the beginning of the new year begin in the 601st year of Noah’s life, but also on the *first* day of the *first* month! P has structured the flood narrative so that the end of the old world and the beginning of a new creation is effected on New Year’s day, another indication of P’s more positive view of the flood as prelude to a new beginning.

The consideration of the dates in P leads us, finally, to consider the two genealogies P contributes: the one from Adam to Noah in chapter 5, and the genealogy from Noah’s son, Shem, down to Terah, Abram’s father, in the final half of chapter 11.

As I've mentioned previously, P's genealogies provide a chronological structure to the Primeval history. And that's not terribly surprising since P's creation story makes chronological structure the underlying issue and then replaces the round numbers of 40 days of rain and two 7 day waiting periods in J's story with an elaborate dating of months and years.

Moreover, we earlier noted the similarity between the long years attributed to the earliest rulers in the Sumerian King list and the hoary old age assigned men in Genesis 5. We also saw that while the ancient Egyptian inscription of the Palermo Stone (from ca. 2350 B.C.E.) recalls the names of human rulers prior to Egyptian unity and the establishment of dynasties (i.e. prior to ca. 3100 B.C.E.), the Turin King list (from ca. 1300 B.C.E.) puts in their place gods and other divine beings, even as the Greeks imagined their earliest ancestors deriving from the gods. Each of these traditions reflects a tendency to think of the earliest dawn of human society as qualitatively different from the present, whether through the presence of divine beings on earth, or lives extraordinarily long, or both. It is in this tradition that P's lengthy years for the earliest ancestors is best understood.

But there is more to be noted regarding P's earliest genealogy than this. Equally striking is its introduction to this list: ¹"This is the list of the descendants of Adam. When God created humankind, he made them in the likeness of God. ²Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them "Humankind" when they were created." As you can easily recognize, P again tags into language he used in his creation account of chapter 1: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." – To the degree that we've seen P do that elsewhere in his contributions to the Primeval History, that's almost unremarkable, but does reflect the kind of cross-references P builds into its supplements.

Equally noteworthy is how P reports the birth of Adam's son, Seth: ³"When Adam had lived one hundred thirty years, he became the father of a son in his likeness, *according to his image*, and named him Seth." Again P reprises a piece of his creation narrative, this time the verse prior to the one he used to introduce this genealogy: "Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness." With this echo P sends the message that the image of God, bestowed on the first humans as a gift, is transmitted from generation to generation, over against the portrait J has just painted in chapter 4 of Cain's line running amok, especially by leading to the boastful and belligerent Lamech.

Moreover, by beginning the succession with Seth, P effectively makes the story of Cain's murder of Abel a diversion. Indeed, given the emphasis on the transmission of the image of God from Adam to Seth and, implicitly, to each descendant down the line, P is able to give the impression that Cain and his line were something of an anomaly. While J's narrative more consistently shows a

downward spiral leading to punishment by flood, P creates a space in the narrative for a positive portrait of human beings through their divinely implanted genetic code. There is something noble about them. And, of course, that nobility is stressed again by P in his epilogue to the flood episode.

Before turning to the genealogy of the last half of chapter 11, let's notice that central to the dates P adds to the flood narrative is Noah's age, about which J is silent. Not only does P specify Noah's age when he entered the ark and at the conclusion of the flood, but he also inserts the following two verses into the ethnographic genealogy of J, just after the story of Noah's curse of Canaan: “²⁸After the flood Noah lived three hundred fifty years. ²⁹All the days of Noah were nine hundred fifty years; and he died.” — Needless to say, this is the only place in the ethnographic genealogy of 9:18-10:32 that a notice of the total years of a man's life are given, and thus have clearly been supplied by P, who is concerned to document the chronological progression of humanity.

For the same reason, following J's story of the Tower of Babel, P presents his final genealogy, focusing on the descendants of Noah's son Shem, the ancestor of Abram. This genealogy agrees with J's Table of Nations until it reaches Eber, of whom J's genealogy reports, “To Eber were born two sons: the name of the one was Peleg, for in his days the earth was divided, and his brother's name was Joktan.” — J's genealogy then follows Joktan's line, leaving Peleg's to the side, which is the branch P, by contrast, follows. It is difficult to believe, however, that J would simply abandon the track that led to Abram.

Most likely, in fact, he didn't. It is a reasonable suspicion that P's genealogy leading from Shem down to Abram has been built out of J's — with which it is parallel until it focuses solely on Peleg, not even mentioning Joktan. It is likely J's original genealogy of Peleg's line that has been taken up by P and refashioned into the same kind of chronological genealogy he provided in chapter 5.

In fact, evidence of the original J story appears late in the genealogy, in vv. 27-31: “²⁷Now these are the descendants of Terah. Terah was the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran was the father of Lot. ²⁸Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans. ²⁹Abram and Nahor took wives; the name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah. She was the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah. ³⁰Now Sarai was barren; she had no child. ³¹Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram's wife, and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there.” — Then not surprisingly, given what we've seen, P adds the concluding note of the chapter: “The days of Terah were two hundred five years; and Terah died in Haran.”

In this way, then, P is able to transmute J's narrative about human crime and punishment into a purposeful flow of history that conveys the image of God in humans throughout the generations, and guarantees God's commitment to them, in spite of sin and flood. Thus it is that we arrive at the story of Israel's patriarchs, beginning with Abraham.

Just to make certain we're all on the same page, the "Patriarchs" are the progenitors of Israel: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's 12 sons, progenitors of the 12 tribes of Israel.

Before launching into how this story has been written, I want to say a few words about the problems this segment of Israel's story presents for historians and why, therefore, many scholars are convinced that this material likely does not preserve reports of what happened to a particular family living early in the second millennium B.C.E.

The observation that the Bible is the only source – that these individuals and their activities are mentioned nowhere else in the literature of the ANE is hardly decisive for the question of whether they were historical figures. Other issues relating to the biblical narratives are more consequential.

First, let's note that the Bible speaks of the Patriarchs and their extended families as the forefathers not only of Israel, but also of nations who came to surround Israel. For example, when Abraham's nephew, Lot, flees Sodom at the time Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed by fire, he is accompanied by his two daughters (his wife turns to salt during their escape as punishment for taking a peek over her shoulder at divine judgment falling on the cities of the plain, thus violating a divine command against looking back). Lot and his daughters take refuge in a cave in the hills. It soon begins to dawn on his daughters that this cave is not a place to meet many men, significantly diminishing their chances of having children. And so they devise a plan. They get their father drunk on two successive nights and take turns with him while he's drunk. Genesis 19:36-38 reports the outcome: "Thus both the daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father. The firstborn bore a son, and named him Moab; he is the ancestor of the Moabites to this day. The younger also bore a son and named him Ben-ammi; he is the ancestor of the Ammonites to this day." — Notice that the names of each of these nations is traced back to one of the children born to Lot and his daughters: the Moabites to Moab, the Ammonites to Ben-ammi.

The Moabites were Israel's neighbors to the east, across the Dead Sea. The Ammonites were also on the east side of the Jordan river, but further to the north. So, according to Genesis 19, the hapless Lot became the progenitor of both these groups.

Another progenitor of a nation near Israel introduced in Genesis is Esau, the elder brother of Jacob. Jacob stole the birthright from him and thus became the patriarch through whom came the twelve brothers, and thus the 12 tribes of Israel.

But that is not the end of Esau's significance. In fact, here is what Genesis 36:6-9 has to say about what became of his descendants: "Then Esau took his wives, his sons, his daughters, and all the members of his household, his cattle, all his livestock, and all the property he had acquired in the land of Canaan; and he moved to a land some distance from his brother Jacob... So Esau settled in the hill country of Seir; Esau is Edom. These are the descendants of Esau, ancestor of the Edomites..."

The Edomites inhabited this area to the east and south of Israel, surrounding Mt. Seir. According to an earlier story, in Genesis 25, the name "Edom" became a nickname for Esau because one day Esau came in from the fields famished and found Jacob stirring a pot of red stew. According to v. 30, "Esau said to Jacob, 'Let me eat some of that red stuff (אֶדֹמָי), for I am famished!' (*[then the narrator tells us,] Therefore he was called Edom [אֶדֹמָי].*)" As in the story of the progenitors of the Ammonites and Moabites, the name of a people is traced back to a man of antiquity, Esau, who gained the nickname "Edom" because he asked his brother for some of the red stuff he was cooking in the pot.

Well, why not accept that these men are indeed the progenitors of these nations? The problem is that while the patriarchal period has been pegged either shortly after 1800 B.C.E. or in the middle of the 14th century, the archaeological evidence has turned up no evidence that any of these other nations existed before 1200 B.C.E. That makes especially problematic the assertion of Genesis 36 that Esau split off from Jacob and established the foundation of a country in the middle of the second millennium. There is no archaeological evidence to support that.

Given this dearth of data, the link between the nations who came to be Israel's neighbors and the patriarchs likely represents an effort to explain Israel's ethnic ties to the Moabites, the Ammonites and the Edomites by retrojecting kinship ties back into earliest time. I.e. these stories are of a sort we have seen before: etiological narratives, just like Gen 3, which explains the attraction of men and women that results in marriage. The narratives about Lot's daughters and Jacob's brother Esau answer the question "why do we have such striking similarities to the nations around us, especially the Edomites?"

A more distant kinship is posited for Moab and the Ammonites, they being descended from Lot, the nephew of Abraham. Nevertheless, a concern to account for the way things are in Israel's day is apparent here, especially in the use of the phrase "to this day." Most likely, these again represent concerns that arose only when Israel was settled in its land alongside the Ammonites, Moabites and Edomites. And so, it is likely that the names of those designated as their

progenitors are eponyms. That is, their names are simply retrojected from the names of nations that existed in the author's day and placed on fictive characters who represented their earliest life.

That is especially apparent in the case of Edom, a name that becomes attached to Jacob's brother, Esau, merely as a nickname arising from a relatively trivial incident. The notion that Esau should earn the nickname "red stuff" simply because he asked for some of the red stuff his brother was cooking is artificial. It would be like one of you earning the nickname "hamburger" because you asked for a hamburger one of your siblings was grilling. This feature is part of the artificiality of the story, suggesting again that it reflects a late attempt to ascribe the ancestry of Edom to the same ethnic stock as Israel.

Not surprisingly, such etiological narratives in the case of Ammon, Moab and Edom raise a similar question for the stories of Israel's patriarchs. Are these stories about actual individuals by the names of Jacob, Reuben, Judah, and the rest, or are we again dealing with eponymous figures. Are we perhaps dealing with characters who are developed to embody tribal stories told about the ancestors?

Lending credence to that possibility is a passage like Judges 1:17, which speaks of the exploits of two tribes, Judah and Simeon, *as if* they were two brothers: "Judah went with *his brother* Simeon, and they defeated the Canaanites who inhabited Zephath."

Could it be that the stories told about the patriarchs – at least some of them – are similarly movements of tribes or families or stories of unnamed ancestors that become attached to one of the patriarchs? As Whybray will agree in your reading for next time, that is a very real possibility. You'll recall we have seen previously indications that at least parts of Genesis may have been written from the perspective of the monarchy, as indicated by the statement in 36:31, "These are the kings who reigned in the land of Edom, before any king reigned over the Israelites."

Moreover, we have seen that the table of the nations in Genesis 10 lists as descendants of Noah's sons names which are either nations or ethnic groups with which Israel had to deal in the course of its existence.

One argument often brought forward as favoring some degree of "genuineness" for these narratives is how well they fit what we know about the second millennium B.C.E., when the patriarchs would have lived. It is certainly true that the narratives parallel customs we know of from other cultures of the ANE in that era. In particular, a cache of over 4,000 texts found at an ancient city called Nuzi, from around the middle of the second millennium (i.e. ca. 1500 B.C.E.), contained a number of legal documents dealing with family customs similar to what are mentioned for the patriarchs in the book of Genesis.

It is also true that the names of the Patriarchs fit well in the ANE during the second millennium. They are quite akin or even identical to some evidenced in lists of Semitic names from between 2000 and 1600 B.C.E. These sorts of similarities to evidence from elsewhere in the ANE have been cited as giving the narratives an “authentic ring.”

The problems with these pieces of evidence are, first, that emphasizing the names parallel to those of the patriarchs overlooks the fact that such names are found throughout every period for which we have lists of Semitic names. The attestation of such names in the 2nd millennium B.C.E. does nothing to establish that these stories could have originated *only* in that era. The names are not unique to the 2nd millennium B.C.E.

As for family customs in Genesis that parallel legal records found at Nuzi, closer study of these documents indicate that the parallels are not as specific or striking as was originally asserted. Part of the reason for that is that the scholars who noted the parallels simply assumed that scenarios in the Genesis stories *assumed* the detailed prescriptions found in the legal texts from Nuzi and elsewhere. And yet, further comparison has uncovered important differences from the legal records from Nuzi. In fact to make them match, the scholars who urged the similarities had to assume that the original versions of the stories had a plot different than the forms of the stories in Genesis and that those responsible for the stories as we have them now no longer understood earlier practices – a tenuous assumption.

Consequently, while the patriarchal narratives *approximate* some of the situations envisioned in the Nuzi documents, the parallels are too general to consider the Nuzi texts as authenticating the stories as originating in the early second millennium B.C.E. Indeed, the customs and transactions found in the patriarchal narratives find parallels, in general terms, with practices throughout the ANE in diverse periods.

So features of these stories sometimes urged as establishing them as historically trust-worthy are less secure than has been suggested. And yet, they are of great value because, above all, they convey Israel’s attempt to describe who they are, based on the past.