

The God of Abraham

By G. T. MANLEY¹

ACCORDING TO GENESIS 12: 8 Abram, when he reached Shechem, built an altar and 'called upon the name of Yahweh'. Many of those who still uphold the documentary theory challenge this. On the basis of the analysis and of a special interpretation of Exodus 6: 2f. they assert that the Patriarchs used *el shaddai* as the name of God, and that the name of Yahweh was not known before the time of Moses.

It is the purpose of this paper to give some reasons for thinking that the author of Genesis has the better of the argument.

We shall assume that Abraham was a real person, and that, as Albright says, 'there is no reason to doubt the general accuracy of the biographical details and the sketches of personality which make the Patriarchs come alive' in the book of Genesis.²

Let us consider first the contents of Genesis 1-11. The opening account of the creation bears little mark of date or of authorship. It is different, however, with Genesis 2: 4-11: 32. Here the Babylonian background is unmistakable. The early character of these chapters has been vindicated. Hence there is no escaping the conclusion that they represent the ancestral beliefs and traditions which Abraham brought with him from Ur, and which were passed down by him to his descendants (whatever changes may have been made since). This collection is divided into five sections, described as 'the generations' (*tôldôt*) of the heavens and the earth (2: 4), of Adam (5: 1), of Noah (6: 9), of the sons of Noah (10: 1), and of Shem (11: 10).

Let us first examine the two which consist of lines of descent, namely the *tôldôt* of Adam and of Shem. These have some striking points of similarity and also some differences. First, there are some likenesses:—

1. Both consist of ten links.
2. Both give the age of each member when his son was born, and the number of years longer that he lived.
3. Both end with the name of a father and three sons.

¹ Among the papers left by the late Rev. G. T. Manley was this note written for the *Tyndale House Bulletin*. Many will be interested in these words of the doughty Old Testament scholar.

² *The Biblical Period*², p. 5.

This likeness can scarcely be fortuitous. On the other hand:—

1. The second list omits the sentence which gives the total life-time of each member, and the words 'and he died', whereas it adds, 'and begat sons and daughters'.
2. The second is a mere list of names and ages, whereas the first has something to say concerning relationship to God in the cases of Enoch and Noah.
3. The first is entitled *sēper tōldōt*, 'the book of the generations', but the second is merely, *tōldōt*.

There must be a reason for this last point. The most simple and obvious explanation would be that Abraham had possessed chapter 5 in a written form before his departure from Ur. If this be granted it would also afford a reason why Abraham modelled the account of his own descent from Shem on the lines of the old tablet. Writing was common when Abraham lived in Ur, and there is much in the arrangement of Genesis 2–11 to suggest that it was committed to writing either by Abraham, or by a scribe attached to his company. The inclusion of chapter 10, evidently once a separate composition, with its *tōldōt* heading, supports this.

Even more significant is the way in which the second line of descent ends with the names of Abraham and his two brothers. These appear in the subsequent story, and there was good reason why *Abraham* should include them. A later writer would almost certainly have carried on the line to Isaac, omitting Abraham's brothers. This in fact is exactly what we find in 1 Chronicles 1: 21–28.

We are now in a position to consider the occurrence of the name Yahweh in some of the older material, beginning with chapter 10 and working backwards.

In Genesis 10 we meet with a traditional saying, 'Even as Nimrod the mighty hunter before the Lord (Yahweh)' (Gn. 10: 9). Professor Donald Wiseman, in a paper read before the Victoria Institute,³ has examined this chapter and has shown that it could represent a picture of the world as seen from Ur as a centre at the beginning of the second millennium BC, and before the destruction of Sodom (Gn. 10: 19). Now if this popular saying was known in Abraham's day, our case is proved. If not, we may well ask, 'How did it get there?'

The story of the flood (Gn. 6: 9–9: 27) is sandwiched in between chapter 5 and the two closing verses of chapter 9, which evidently belonged to the old tablet and formed its close. Genesis 6: 1–8 is

³ *J.T.V.I.*, LXXXVII, 1955, pp. 14–25.

introductory; the story itself begins in verse 9, where it is said that Noah ‘walked with God’, a reflection of Genesis 5: 24. The narrative has a Babylonian colouring, and it is noteworthy that the writer puts no words into Noah’s mouth until the very end. He closes with a poetical fragment which was already ancient. This contains a curse and a blessing: the curse is on Canaan; but the blessing takes the form—‘Blessed be Yahweh, the God (*elohîm*) of Shem.’ Are we expected to believe that this bit of poetry was an invention of the post-Mosaic period?

Let us now turn to the naming of Noah recounted in Genesis 5: 29, including the reference to the ground which ‘Yahweh had cursed’. This verse is not so deeply imbedded in the framework of the tablet as is the preceding reference to Enoch, who walked with God (*elohîm*). Indeed it looks like an insertion—but if so, by whom? By Abraham or by the post-exilic editor RPJ? We think the former more probable; he at least was a real person.

It will be convenient to consider next the story of Eden in chapters 2 and 3. It is a complete entity in itself, the narrator (at least in the Massoretic Text) using Yahweh Elohim throughout. The composer lived to the west of Eden (2: 8). It belongs to a dim, distant past, and Abraham (or one of his forbears) may have translated it from the old Sumerian tongue.

S. R. Driver explained the use of the double name Yahweh Elohim as follows: The section belonged to J and used Yahweh only, but RPJ added Elohim to show that Yahweh was the same God as the Creator in the P version of Genesis 1. Yet after the exile would seem late in the day for this identification to be necessary. And did not the serpent and Eve both use Elohim?

If we are allowed to think of Abraham as making a translation of an old story, may we have in this *his* version of some old Sumerian expression?

There is little to add from chapter 4, the style of which differs from what precedes and what follows. It has been described as the ‘J genealogy’ parallel to the P genealogy in chapter 5. It is not, however, a genealogy either in form or substance, though it contains scraps of genealogy and other ancient lore. Verses 25, 26, which form a link with chapter 5, contain the words, ‘Then began men to call upon the name of Yahweh’. These are the words used later of Abraham himself when he built an altar at Bethel (Gn. 12: 8; 13: 4) and Hebron (Gn. 13: 18). The previous verses had told of the origin of music and industry. Was this Abraham’s way of telling of the beginnings of ceremonial worship?

The Divine Names Used by Abraham

Although many sayings of Abraham have been preserved there is not one in which he uses *el shaddai*. His first recorded words about God are found in Genesis 14, where Melchizedek says, 'Blessed be Abram of *el Elyon*, possessor of heaven and earth', to which Abram replies, 'I have lift up my hands to Yahweh, *el Elyon*, the possessor of heaven and earth.' Archaeologists attribute this chapter to patriarchal times. Driver calls it an 'independent source'. Do the critics seriously suggest that Abraham's words really were '*el shaddai, el Elyon*', and that Yahweh was substituted for *el shaddai* by the redactor?

In chapter 15 Abraham addresses God as '*adonai* Yahweh' (Gn. 15: 2, 8); in conversations with Abimelech he uses Elohim (20: 11, 13).

In chapter 22 he tells Isaac that Elohim will provide a sacrifice, and subsequently names the place 'Yahweh Yireh'. Is it necessary to regard this ancient monument as a post-Mosaic invention?

The last recorded words of Abraham are found in chapter 24 as he sends his servant in search of a bride for Isaac. He makes the servant swear by 'Yahweh, the Elohim of heaven and the Elohim of earth' (Gn. 24: 3) and speaks of 'Yahweh the Elohim of heaven' who brought him forth out of the land of his fathers (Gn. 24: 4). It is worth adding that when the servant meets Laban, he speaks of 'Yahweh, the Elohim of my master Abraham', and Laban uses the name Yahweh in return (Gn. 24: 48, 51).

Such is the positive evidence of Abraham's knowledge of and use of the name Yahweh.

The only place where the words '*el shaddai*' occur in Abraham's life history is Genesis 17: 1, and here the documentary theory runs into trouble. For the speaker is not Abraham but Yahweh Himself. This clearly does not fit, and Driver considers Yahweh to be a scribal error; it must have originally been Elohim. Yahweh opens His word of wonderful promise to Abraham, by saying, 'I am *el shaddai*', which RV translates with 'God Almighty'. But *el* is not the same as Elohim. It is a common noun and the literal translation would be '*an almighty god*'. In Ruth 1: 20 the LXX translates *shaddai* by *ikavos*, an adjective meaning 'competent' or 'able to perform a thing'. Whatever adjective is used, the expression is not a new 'name'. Indeed, it is not a name at all, but a claim to be able to perform the promise which follows.

Where, then, is there documentary evidence that Abraham used *el shaddai*? There is absolutely none, whether in J, E or P. He spoke

of God as *el Elyon*, and as *el 'olam* (21: 33), but never, so far as we are told, as *el shaddai*.

Coming now to the Book of Exodus, we find that Genesis 17: 1 and the words of Yahweh to Moses in Exodus 3 and 6 form a good and intelligible sequence if allowed to speak for themselves without being manipulated and dissected. The documentary theory assigns Exodus 3: 1–6: 1 to J, and Exodus 6: 2–7: 13 to P, and Driver says that the latter passage ‘does not describe the *sequel* of Exodus 3: 1–6: 1, but is *parallel* to it’.⁴ But where is the parallel? What has become of the desert and the burning bush? In Exodus 6 we are in Egypt. Again, in the former passage Moses shows great reluctance, raising one difficulty after another; in the latter, the Lord’s word is no sooner spoken than it is obeyed.

Rejecting this, let us consider the passages in the order in which they stand in the text. In Genesis 17 Yahweh appears to Abraham, makes wonderful promises, and declares Himself at the outset as a ‘God able’ (*el shaddai*) to fulfil them. In later years Elohim appears to Jacob, repeats the promises made to Abraham, and assures him in like terms, that He is able to fulfil them (Gen. 35: 11f.).

As the book of Exodus opens the promise of a numerous seed had been fulfilled, but that of the land seemed to have failed. In the burning bush Moses recognized the messenger of Yahweh, and then Yahweh Himself speaks.

God introduces Himself successively as: 1) the God (Elohim) of thy father; 2) the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and 3) Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. There is nothing new in this; Moses is expected to recognize these descriptions. They are followed by a revelation, not of a new name, but of a new *meaning* to be read into the Name.

The enigmatic words, *ehyeh* ^{asher} *ehyeh* can be translated as in E.V. ‘I am that I am’, or as M. Buber suggests, ‘I will be as I will be’. There is an underlying play upon words. *ehyeh* belongs to the root *hyh* ‘to be’; Yahweh to another form *hw*h also meaning ‘to be’.

∴ The Lord is telling Moses that His very name ensures His constancy, His self-sufficiency, and the guarantee of His presence.

In the two following chapters we read how Moses was encouraged by the Lord who showed him signs of His power, and then discouraged by the attitude of the people and Pharaoh’s refusal to listen.

So Yahweh again speaks to Moses—He had revealed to the fathers great promises and Himself as able (*shaddai*) to fulfil them; but had not then, as now, revealed to them all that was involved in His ‘Name’. That *name* is Yahweh, *el shaddai* is not a name. P knew this better than the critics, and preserves the distinction.

⁴ *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* p. 23.