

## PENRALLT BAPTIST CHURCH: NOTES FOR THEOLOGICAL STUDENTS

### ABRAHAM

These evening sermons are intended to be mainly inspirational, so I will not be delving too deeply into the theological debate behind the Abraham story. But here is the background as I see it.

The understanding of Genesis was greatly influenced by two works, written around a hundred years ago: Wellhausen's documentary hypothesis in which the Pentateuch is viewed as being comprised of several sources (J, P, E, and D), and Gunkel's suggestion that the material of the book should be read as a saga, an ancient poetic story dealing with persons and events in the past which was passed along orally through the generations. Of course, the material is prose literature, not oral poetry, nevertheless much modern commentary is still based on those two hypotheses. From these two ideas has come the modern dissection of the text into ancient sources which, it is argued, were put together at a much later date. They represent later Israel, not early Israel. This has helped fuel the abandonment of belief in any element of historicity at all. The stories are seen as myths.

There was a reaction to that view, notably from Alt, Noth and Albright, seeking the events behind the texts, even if the events were rather different to what was recorded. A further development looked at Biblical theology as being rooted in history : a salvation-history driven by A God Who Acts. Wright, von Rad and de Vaux were prominent in this viewpoint. But this view has not prevailed. Weippert and Gottwold, for example, argued that Israel never arrived in Palestine at all because it had never left. The Exodus and Conquest was really just a peasant revolt against Canaanite overlords. This and similar points of view are reflected in much modern Old Testament writing and have even reached our TV screens in the recent series "It Ain't Necessarily So", trashing any idea of historical events behind the Biblical stories.

#### Maximalist v Minimalist.

I find it helpful to make a mental line. At one end I put the most ardent of fundamentalists who declares that the Old Testament stories are literal, infallible truth and every single detail is pure history exactly as it happened. At the other end I put the theologians who declare that there are no useful historical facts to be gleaned from the Old Testament texts at all.<sup>i</sup> Most of us fit somewhere in between.

Nevertheless, it is true to say that most of the books we read as theologians remind us that "it ain't necessarily so." There are the odd anachronisms, also the difficulties in finding archaeological evidence for the conquest, the fall of Jericho, the Davidic and Solomonic Empires, etc. We must compare them, also, with epic poems in the style of Aghat or Kirta (Ugarit), the Gilgamesh Epic (Mesopotamia) or Homer, although the differences might well be more important than the similarities. In such a climate, the Genesis stories are seen, in some way, as purely mythical. That, of course, is very postmodern. Compare it with the Booker-winning prize *Life of Pi* which tells both a "story which will make you believe in God" and a parallel modern one.<sup>ii</sup> Having abandoned any concept of absolute truth we find truth, partially, everywhere. There is not the need to see the Biblical tales as anything other than literary masterpieces. So they are, but it will become clear during the course of the studies that I believe them to be rooted in history. Yes, I do agree with Brett when he claims that "the laconic style of Genesis, and its opacities and ambiguities, suggest that we can engage with it only partially: we can never exhaust the peregrinations of its meaning."<sup>iii</sup> But Childs is surely correct when he argues that "no part of Genesis can be called "history" in the narrow, modern usage of the term because of the tangential relationship to objective reality, even though different historical elements are evidenced throughout the book in varying degrees."<sup>iv</sup>

And there are plenty of theologians, historians and archaeologists around who find ample evidence for the essential historicity of biblical stories. You will find me referring to the New Chronology proposed by David Rohl who redates the history of the ancient world. He argues that the generally accepted chronology of the ancient times has two main difficulties: it produces a "dark age" from which very little material is found and it bases itself on a very questionable identification of Pharaoh Shishak of the Bible with

Shoshenk I of the 21st Dynasty. Many of the Egyptian dynasties, he says, were co-existent and not consecutive. This shortens the period by about 300 hundred years, explains why there is a “dark age” ( it represents decades rather than centuries) and places Solomon in the late bronze age rather than the iron age IIA, while the Exodus comes out at around 1450 B.C. when there is evidence of substantial destruction in Palestine, including Jericho. You can buy his ( expensive books ) or visit his very beautiful web site, and even join the usergroup and eavesdrop on PhD students around the world as they struggle to make it all work.<sup>v</sup> It doesn't. At least not yet.<sup>vi</sup> I find his arguments against the Old Chronology to be powerful, but his reconstruction unconvincing. It is one of the facts of life that if you use his material in an essay it will be marked down and if I use it in the pulpit I will be congratulated!

In Abraham's case the evidence against his existence is non-existent. He left no physical reminders of his passage through the Promised Land, but we could not possibly expect him to have done so. It is widely acknowledged that the general details of the story fit well into what we know of the times he lived in. To claim he is some kind of mythological figure is a gratuitous claim with no basis in evidence. I am happy to admit that the occasional detail needs careful examination ( the appearance of camels, for example is a contentious subject because of uncertainty concerning the date of their domestication ), but I will not waste time trying to prove the existence of a character so central to the Biblical story.

### The Documentary Hypothesis

There certainly do seem to be several sources to the book of Genesis, each with their own vocabulary and original storyline. Later texts such as the books relating to the monarchy often refer the reader back to other texts which have clearly formed the basis for the canonical scriptures. There is no reason to suppose that everything in any book of the Bible had one, single source. The only objection that I can see an evangelical having to the general assumption of the documentary hypothesis is the association of the Pentateuch with Moses. If you believe that the Book of Moses was written by him rather than just associated with him, then I guess you have no choice but to reject the hypothesis and suggest some other explanation for the apparent presence of different sources in the text. For myself, I never believed that Moses wrote about his own death (although I have heard someone passionately defend that Moses did describe his own demise before walking off up the mountain and dying), and therefore I always assumed that there was a canonical editor or editors involved. Just how or when the material came to form the Pentateuch as we know it is another question, and no date impresses itself upon me as being the obviously correct one. If you don't mind, I will not even hazard a guess at when the Pentateuch came into being as canonical scripture. It may well have undergone a complex development over a long period of time.

### The Structure of Genesis 12-25

The section fits into the structure of the book of Genesis based around the genealogical formula, "these are the generations (toledoth) of . . ." You will find the formula, with some variation in 2:4, 5:1, 6:9, 10:1, 11:10, 11:27, 25:19, 36:1(9) and 37:2. Sitting firmly in the middle of the book is the generation of Abraham. You can take either Von Rad's view that the Genesis 1-11 forms a prologue for Abraham's story,<sup>vii</sup> or follow Westerman and see them as independent sections.<sup>viii</sup> I will be following Von Rad's line because of the centrality of the “promise and blessing” theme. No one, in my opinion, has brought this out more clearly than Walter C. Kaiser Jr whose book I warmly commend to you.<sup>ix</sup> This promise of God dramatically narrows down to just one family in Genesis 12. By telling the story of exile in Egypt and struggles in the Promised land, the canonical authors firstly lead us to identify with the “chosen family” as to imply that we, too, are the family of faith, the chosen ones inheriting God's promise and blessing. The reason is plain: the promise to the patriarchs was not fulfilled and so became eschatological, looking forward to the Exodus and beyond. Beyond to what? To when the canonical form of the Pentateuch came into being, certainly, but beyond, to its readers and eventually to the New Testament's startling announcement that as people of faith we, too, are heirs of the promise like Abraham.

It is my opinion, that the “narrowing down” of the promise in the book of Genesis makes the canonical shape pivot around the call of Abraham, and, therefore, subjugates the first eleven chapters to this moment. Put simply, I think von Rad was correct, Westerman wrong.

### Conclusion

These chapter recount the birth of a nation, the birth of a monotheist faith which is followed today by Jews, Muslims and Christians. At the heart is a remarkable man of faith. Yet his story is one of struggles and trials as well as blessing. These tales were written down to inspire the same faith in us as Abraham found when he responded to the promise of God. I hope you find the sermons do the same for you.

**Peter James Cousins, Bangor, January 2004**

---

<sup>i</sup> For example, “The pentateuchal narratives are of little use for the study of the history of ancient Palestine.” Niels Peter Lemche, *Prelude to Israel's Past: Background and Beginnings of Israelite History and Identity* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998) p. 227

<sup>ii</sup> Yann Martel, *Life of Pi*, British Edition (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2002) p. x

<sup>iii</sup> Brett 2000, p4

<sup>iv</sup> Childs 1979, p158

<sup>v</sup> David Rohl, *A Test of Time* (London: Century, Random House, 1995), *Legend: The Genesis of Civilization* (London: Random House, 1998), *The Lost Testament: From Eden to Exile - the Five Thousand Year History of the People of the Bible* (London: Century, Random House, 2002 ). His homepage is <http://www.nunki.net/>. You may like to read Kenneth Kitchen's denouncement of Rohl ( *You are 98% rubbish. Go Away*) on <http://www.nunki.net/PerRenput/index.html>. To join the New Chronology Discussion Group go to <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/NewChronology/>

<sup>vi</sup> Strangely enough, the determination of Iron or Bronze Age is not defined by the metal but by types of pottery. Iron was used in the Bronze Age and vice versa. Pottery cannot be carbon dated, so it comes down to the style of pottery used. Even then there was overlap of style between cultures. And as pottery can turn up in later strata, a statistical analysis is needed. I think we have to leave the final conclusion to the experts!

<sup>vii</sup> G. von Rad *Genesis* London and Philadelphia: Old Testament Library rev. ed 1972

<sup>viii</sup> C Westerman *Genesis 1-11* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House and London:SPCK 1984)

<sup>ix</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testamanet Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979). It is available from <http://www.amazon.co.uk> at £13.98 plus postage. I have failed to locate it in the UK for inter-library loan, but I suggest you try if you feel you would like to read it. You are welcome to borrow my copy, but it is the Portuguese translation!