

# Abraham, what kind of an ancestor is he ?

## A new look at Biblical traditions

As we all know — be we Muslims, Christians, or Jews — Abraham is a much loved, much coveted, much invoked, and therefore perhaps disputed ancestor<sup>1</sup>. Our respective traditions are well known to us, even the traditions of the families of faith to which we do not belong. We know, for instance, that for Muslims<sup>2</sup>, Ibrahim (who says: *aslantu li-rabbi l-'alamin* (Sur 2,31)) is held to be the first Muslim in history, and that in Mecca the pilgrim is the guest of Ibrahim and Isma'il even more so than he is of Muhammad. Ibrahim is held in such high esteem, that in the medieval Bâb el Khalîl of Jerusalem, the gate that opens the road to Hebron, an Islamic inscription of the *shahada* allows the confession of Muhammad as the rasûl'Allah to be replaced by the words : 'ashhadu 'an Ibrahim khalîl-'allah<sup>3</sup>.

We know that for the first Christians<sup>4</sup> as well as for many Jewish proselytes, Abraham came to be the human father par excellence, the “father of faith” and the “father in faith” : having accepted the call of God, Abraham became the model of the convert, the model of the believer (1 Macc 2,50-52; James 2,21-23), and, being himself justified by faith rather than by his own righteousness or obedience (Rom 4,1-5), Abraham becomes the “father” of all believers, whether they be his physical descendents or not, whether they follow or not the law of Moses, and even, at the limit, whether they be righteous or sinners. In the New Testament, it is Paul, especially (see Gal 3-4 and Rom 4), who claims Abraham as the father of those who believe in Christ (without denying that he is also the father of the Jews), a claim that, of course, was not accepted by the Jews.

There would be much to say, also, about the role of Abraham in Jewish tradition<sup>5</sup>, and, hopefully, this aspect will be taken up other contributors, and I will not delve into the subject. Except to say that, curiously, Abraham has become the Jewish ancestor par excellence, much more so than Jacob, who is the proper father of the twelve tribal eponyms of Israel. To call somebody a “son of Abraham” has become, in Jewish terminology, equivalent to saying of him

<sup>1</sup>K.-J. Kuschel, *Streit um Abraham. Was Juden, Christen und Muslime trennt - und was sie eint*, München 1994; English translation : *Abraham : Symbol of Hope for Jews, Christians and Moslems* , London 1994; cf. also A. Segal, *Abraham. Enquête sur un patriarche* (Le doigt de Dieu), Paris 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Y. Moubarac, *Abraham dans le Coran. L'histoire d'Abraham dans le Coran et la naissance de l'islam* , Paris 1958; R. Martin-Achard, *Actualité d'Abraham*, Neuchâtel 1969, p. 161-175; J.-C. Basset, “Ibrahim à la Mecque, prophète de l'islam”, in T. Römer (ed.), *Abraham. Nouvelle jeunesse d'un ancêtre* (Essais bibliques 28), Genève 1997, p. 79-92.

<sup>3</sup> On the history of Islam's ties with the Haram al-Khalil, see the recent article of H. Busse, “Die Patriarchengräber im Hebron und der Islam”, *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 114, 1998, pp. 71-94.

<sup>4</sup> R. Martin-Achard, *Actualité d'Abraham*, p. 137-160; D. Marguerat, “Fils et filles d'Abraham selon le Nouveau Testament”, in T. Römer (ed.), *Abraham. Nouvelle jeunesse d'un ancêtre*, Genève 1997, pp. 61-77.

<sup>5</sup> On Abraham in Jewish Tradition, see R. Martin-Achard, *Actualité d'Abraham*, p. 112-137; M. Collin, *Abraham* (Cahiers Evangile 56), Paris 1986; P. Geoltrain, “Abraham, notre Père" et le problème de la filiation”, *Canal-Info* 7, 1990-91, pp. 11-23; A. Segal, *Abraham. Enquête sur un Patriarche* (Le doigt de Dieu), Paris 1995; J.-D. Kaestli, “Abraham, visionnaire apocalyptique. Lectures midrashiennes de Genèse 16”, in T. Römer (ed.), *Abraham*, Genève 1997, pp. 35-52; D. Banon, “Abraham l'Hébreu ou l'expérience du passage”, *ibid.*, pp. 53-60.

that he is “a Jew by birth”. In a way, that is surprising, since Jewish tradition has its roots in the Hebrew Bible — the Old Testament of the Christians — and there, Abraham never appears as the exclusive ancestor of the Israelites, Judaeans or Jews. He is the ancestor of a whole series of other people as well, and therefore has always had something of an “ecumenical” flavor. One of the aims of our enquiry will be to find out why, for what purposes, in what kind of a historical context, in what kind of theological climate, the authors of the Book of Genesis have been so insistent on the pluri-ethnic nature of the Abrahamic ancestorship, preparing the way, perhaps more obviously than we would have expected, for our current situation, between Muslims, Christians and Jews, where Abraham has reclaimed what might have been his true status from the beginning, that of an “ecumenical patriarch”.

Before trying to give an answer to the question announced in the title — Abraham, what kind of ancestor is he? — I will have to ask a few other questions, all of them at the same time preliminary and fundamental.

### 1. *First question : What do we know about the historical Abraham ?*

For historians, the historical Abraham, whoever he was, is considered to be entirely out of reach<sup>6</sup>. Of course, much is told about Abraham in the Old Testament, in Jewish literature of Hellenistic and Roman times, in the New Testament and ancient christian literature, as well as in the Qur'an and in muslim literature, but all these writings belong to times much later than the one Abraham is supposed to have lived. No document referring to him that could possibly be contemporary, has come down to us.

Under its short form — Abram — his name (which means “The father [i.e. the Deity] is exalted”) has been worn by many individuals throughout the second and the first millennium before the Christian era, and thus does not offer much of a clue. The long form — Abraham<sup>7</sup> — is unattested outside the reception of the Abrahamic tradition. There is however mention of a tribe called *rhm* in a stele found at Beth-Shean from the time of Seti I (ca 1294-1279 B.C.E.), and some have concluded Abraham could be the eponymous ancestor (Abu-Rahami) of that tribe, the *banu rahami*<sup>8</sup>. This seems doubtful, however, since the long form of the name might just reflect a popular etymology (“father of a multitude” Gen 17,4-6). The short form, though, appears in a place name in the victory stele of Pharaoh Sheshonq (ca 925 B.C.E.) : *p.hqr 'brm* , which could refer to a “field” or “castle of Abram”. It would be located in the Negev, perhaps not far from Hebron. Provided this is not a coincidence of names, we could have here an indication that at least the memory of a figure called Abram was already linked to that region in the 10th cent. B.C.E. But nothing more can be said.

If we want to know what was told about Abraham some centuries later, we are left with what

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<sup>6</sup> For an extensive discussion of the data and the problem, see Th. L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives. The Quest for the Historical Abraham* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 133), Berlin - New York 1974; J. Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* , New Haven - London 1975 (for a critical review of these two books, see also A. de Pury, in *Revue Biblique* 85, 1978, p. 589-618); G. W. Ahlström, *The History of Ancient Palestine from the Palaeolithic Period to Alexander's Conquest* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Supplement 146), Sheffield 1993, p. 180-187.

<sup>7</sup> In Genesis 17,5 the patriarch's name is changed from Abram to Abraham.

<sup>8</sup> See M. Liverani, “Un ipotesi sul nome di Abramo”, in *Henoch* 1, 1979, p. 9-18.

the Bible tells us. Mainly, we have the biblical traditions — which scholars think to be of different strands — that form the story of Abraham in the chapters 11 to 25 of the book of Genesis; then we have two mentions of the father Abraham in Ezechiel 33,24 and Isaiah 51,2, a few mentions in the Psalms and Chronicles, and that is about all. None of these texts seem to be older than the sixth century B.C., and many of the stories should be dated more likely to the 5th, some of them even later. That means that the written stories we know are at least three centuries later than the foundation of the kingdoms of Israel and Juda, and six or seven centuries later than the emergence of the future Israelite tribes in the hill country of Palestine.

What we are here confronted with is a situation quite typical of nearly anything that pertains to the history of the origins of Israel. Very important and colorful figures like Jacob, Moses, Gideon, Samson, or even the first kings Saul, David and Solomon cannot be historically documented. This, of course, does not mean that the individuals from which Biblical traditions are derived are not historical or that everything the Bible tells about them is invented, but it means that *the* figures that are so familiar to us from Biblical stories are mainly *literary* figures. This also applies to Abraham. Whatever his historical life may have been, the *true* Abraham is the one that comes to life in the stories which each generation had woven around him, in the short statements or literary masterpieces which the Biblical authors wrote about him, each one adding his own issues and questions to the growing story, and then, after the canonical Scriptures were declared closed, in the many ways early Jewish, Christian and Muslim interpreters understood these stories, and finally, in the way Abraham lives on in our own hearts and minds. The “real” Abraham cannot be retrieved from the sands, and yet, the “true” Abraham accompanies us through time. Historical questioning is present at every level of our inquest : How, when and why did this or that witness give the story this or that new twist ? We keep asking the same questions at every level of the transmission of the stories.

The relationship between the historical person and the literary figure could be compared to the link between a grain of sand and the pearl that has grown around it. Without the grain of sand there can be no pearl, but the grain, even if it could be retrieved, would not reveal to us any of the pearl's multiple shades, would not explain to us its centuries' old fascination, and would give us none of it's truth.

## 2. *Second question : What do we know, historically, about the origins of the people of Israel ?*

If we take the results of current historical research — based both on archaeology<sup>9</sup> and on a critical evaluation of Biblical and all other available written sources<sup>10</sup> — one can situate the

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<sup>9</sup> On the archaeological evidence, see especially the contributions of I. Finkelstein, *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement*, Jerusalem 1988; id., “The Emergence of Israel in Canaan: Consensus, Mainstream and Dispute”, *SJOT* 2, 1991, p. 47-59; id. and N. Na'aman (ed.), *From Nomadism to Monarchy. Archaeological and Historical Aspects of Early Israel*, Jerusalem 1994; id., “Ethnicity and Origin of Iron I Settlers in the Highlands of Canaan : Can the Real Israel Stand Up ?”, *Biblical Archaeologist* 59, 1996, p. 198-212.

<sup>10</sup> For a good overview, see M. Weippert and H. Weippert, “Die Vorgeschichte Israels in neuem Licht”, *Theologische Rundschau* 56, 1991, p. 341-390. As fairly reliable over-all histories of ancient Israel, one should consult H. Donner, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel und seiner Nachbarn in Grundzügen*, 2 vols, Göttingen 1984; 1986; or J. M. Miller and J. H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, London 1986. For the later period, see P. Schäfer, *Histoire des Juifs dans l'Antiquité* (Patrimoines. Judaïsme), Paris, 1989 (the original edition appeared in German in 1983).

“emergence” of the future Israelite tribes in the hill country of central Palestine around the 12th/11th centuries B.C. If I use the word “emergence”, it is because we do not know exactly how to explain the sudden presence of these groups in this area. It is out of question to think of any military conquest, since the archaeological surveys have established that the numerous small rural settlements we are talking about in the mountainous region were inhabited by people with no military technology, no fortifications and that none of the cities of these areas whose conquest is reported in the book of Joshua had been effectively conquered at that time. In the twenties and thirties of our century, some German scholars like Albrecht Alt<sup>11</sup> and Martin Noth<sup>12</sup> tried to explain the arrival of the settlers as a long drawn out process of peaceful sedentarization in formerly sparsely inhabited regions of nomadic and semi-nomadic groups infiltrating from the Syrian desert. But this theory is based on an outdated vision of ancient nomadism. According to Israel Finkelstein, who belongs to the new generation of Israeli archaeologists, most of these new settlers in the mountains probably did not come from outside Palestine, but simply from the plains within the same region. Indeed, they have the same material culture (same pottery and artifacts, etc.) and obviously the same language as the inhabitants of the coastal regions. The hill country offered space and could not be easily controlled by city-states. Thus, whenever the economy of the city states foundered or the cities became oppressive towards the peasants, the escape to the mountains was the ultimate recourse. Finkelstein shows that there is, beginning already in the third millennium B.C., a cyclical movement of populations between the plains and the mountains, depending on the flourishing or the downfall of the city-states that dominated the plains. He also renders plausible that it is in their new surroundings that the settlers tend to develop clan and tribal structures, to differentiate themselves from the city-dwellers (the “Canaanites”) and only after one or two centuries that they begin to form state-like kingdoms (Saul, David) and finally to nurture a specific “national consciousness”. At that time, the tribal population of the mountains had become strong enough also to impose their control on the few cities that were situated in the mountains, mainly Shechem and Jerusalem<sup>13</sup>.

If the main conclusions of this research are sound, this has following consequences for our understanding of Biblical history : Historically speaking, there never has been an “entry” of Israelites into the land of Canaan. Of course, there still may have been movements of some groups coming from Transjordan or the Hauran or even the Euphrates-region. Nor does it exclude that, on one occasion, a specific group of "Asiatics" (i. e. inhabitants of Syria/Palestine) was expelled from Egypt<sup>14</sup> and then joined the tribes of the mountains. But demographically

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<sup>11</sup> A. Alt, “Die Landnahme der Israeliten in Palästina” (1925), in *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel*, vol. I , München 1953, p. 89-125; id., “Erwägungen über die Landnahme der Israeliten in Palästina (1939)”, *ibid.*, p. 126-175.

<sup>12</sup> M. Noth, *Geschichte Israels* , Göttingen 1950, 2nd ed. 1954; French translation : *Histoire d'Israël* (Bibliothèque Historique), Paris 1970.

<sup>13</sup> This phenomenon may be reflected in some biblical stories. For Shechem, see Genesis 34 and Judges 9, for Jerusalem 2 Samuel 5,6-10. The precise historical kernel of these stories is difficult to determine, but both of them show how an external tribal group takes control of a city, usually without replacing its habitants.

<sup>14</sup> After years of scepticism on any possibility to grasp the historical event that might have given rise to the Biblical tradition of exodus, there are now some scholars who have shown that there is a particular analogy between the exodus story and the expulsion of Asiatics under the Pharaoh Sethnakht (1188-1186), the founder of the XXth Dynasty. Sethnakht imposed himself against Beya, the Asiatic vizir of Queen Tawseret (Tewosret) who had tried to take the power into his own hands. Cf. E. A. Knauf, *Midian. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte Palästinas und Nordarabiens am Ende des 2. Jahrtausends v.Chr.* (Abhandlungen des Deutschen Palästina-

speaking, these arrivals are insignificant, and do not alter the fact that the ancestors of the first Israelites were autochthonous in Palestine. This means that on the whole, neither the story of the Patriarchs, neither the story of the Exodus, nor the story of the conquest under Joshua can claim to give a credible explanation of the presence of Israel in Palestine. Even if each of these stories probably does have a historical kernel, they have been combined in literature in such a way as to suggest a continuous history, much as pearls are combined on a string to produce a necklace. Taken as a whole they are literary constructs, legends made into history. One could even say : they are “myths”, myths of origins. But having said that, I have said nothing negative and nothing pejorative. Indeed, we will see now what major role and what important historical function these *stories* played, and even how they could compete with each other.

*3. Third question : Why did one tell stories about ancestors in ancient Israel ? The case of the Jacob-cycle.*

One thing remains from the traditional view that the Bible has given us : ancient Israel was indeed a tribal society. Monarchy was perceived at best as a necessary evil. Clans and tribes were very attached to their territories (from which some of them had taken their names : Ephraïm, Juda, for instance), proud of their renown, and jealous of their autonomy; and as soon as kingship vanished, the tribal loyalties resurfaced.

A tribal society thinks of itself as a family, and genealogy is the main system which allows each group to connect with other groups, to explain the structure of the over-all society and to know its place within it. Many stories or anecdotes are linked to genealogy, and they serve to legitimize this or that right, custom or peculiarity. As we know from the genealogies of Arab tribes, it is mainly the segmented, i. e. laterally spread genealogies — and not the linear, vertical genealogies used for dynasties — that are typical of that society<sup>15</sup>. Genealogies may be readapted to the current needs. When one group, for instance, has gained some ascendancy over a rival group, it may obtain — or impose — a rearrangement of genealogy, his ancestor evolving from a younger to an elder son or being promoted to a higher generation in the overall system. Such "rearrangements" are presupposed at many points within Biblical narratives (e.g. Gen 48,13-20, the interversion of Ephraïm and Manasseh, or Gen 38,27-30). In the genealogical system nobody is quite equal to the other, there are elders and youngers, brothers and cousins, born sons and adopted ones. But it is precisely in its suppleness that lies its strength. The genealogical concept fits best loosely organized, acephalous societies that have not been touched yet by the emergence of centralized states. City-states and centralized kingdoms will try to weaken the tribal and clanic allegiances and to impose new hierarchies.

The oldest, and to our knowledge most important genealogical tribal story, is the Jacob-cycle, which we find related in Genesis 25-35. Jacob — who will take on the name of Israel (Gen 32,29; 35,10) — is the first common ancestor the Israelites have given themselves. Even though the biblical story of Jacob is now embedded in a wider narrative context, coming from

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Vereins), Wiesbaden 1988, p. 125-141; M. Görg, *Die Beziehungen zwischen dem alten Israel und Ägypten. Von den Anfängen bis zum Exil* (Erträge der Forschung 290), Darmstadt 1997, p. 63-67.

<sup>15</sup> On these points, see especially the excellent work of R. R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World* (Yale Near Eastern Research 7), New Haven / London 1977.

Abraham and leading to Joseph and Moses, and even though it may have integrated a few elements of later provenance, in its substance it seems to have been written down at the end of the 8th or the beginning of the 7th century. Jacob's story is rooted entirely in the region of primitive Israel, i.e. in the northern kingdom with its extensions to northern Transjordan (today's region of the Adjlûn). Juda and its region stays completely outside its focus<sup>16</sup>. It could be that the redaction of the Jacob cycle was undertaken by northern Israelites shortly after the destruction of the kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 721 B.C. But the many stories of Jacob and the cycle as a whole may have been told orally long before that time and must have been very popular with the tribal populations.

What does the Jacob-story attempt to do ? What is its function ? On the surface, it just looks like the more or less incoherent life-story of one individual, and the sense of what is told or the reason why it is told is rarely visible at first sight. Jacob's life is marked by conflict : he is born second after having struggled with his twin brother in the womb of his mother (Gen 25,21-28), he cheats Esau, his twin-brother, of his birth-right (Gen 25,29-34) and of his father's blessing (Gen 27). He then has to flee his brother and seek refuge wherever he will be welcomed. On his way, he has a dream and discovers the holy place of Bethel. The God who speaks to him there promises to make him return, to give him the land to settle and to make a big people out of him (Gen 28,10-22). He reaches the land of the Aramaeans where he is received in the clan of Laban, the Aramaean. There he makes himself useful, gets to marry the sheikh's two daughters, acquires herds of sheep and goats, and begets a dozen sons through his two wives and two of their maids (Gen 29-30). The turning point of the whole cycle comes when Jacob sets out to take his family and his stock and to have it recognized as an independent clan. He breaks away from Laban, is reached again by him, they argue bitterly, negotiate and finally conclude a formal treaty which gives Jacob the official recognition he has been fighting for all along (Gen 31). His family is now autonomous, the "people of Israel" exist. The final chapters of the Jacob story relate the return to central Palestine, to its holy places in Shechem (Gen 33,18-20) and Bethel (Gen 35,1-15), but before that, on the way, Jacob will have had to reconcile himself with Esau (Gen 33) and even to survive a nightly struggle with God or its angel (Gen 32,23-33).

What the Jacob-story offers is in fact a full-fledged legend of the origins of Israel, a legend that needs no other stories, be it the stories of Abraham, Joseph, Moses or Joshua<sup>17</sup>. What the Jacob-story does is to explain everything that needs to be explained, justified or founded : the existence of the tribal society of the sons of Israel, its internal structure, with its more and its less important tribes, its origins, its rights to the hill country of central Palestine, its main sanctuary at Bethel (with other holy places at Shechem, Penuel and Mahanaim), its intermarriage rights with Aramaean tribes, etc. etc. The Israel that defines itself with the Jacob story is of course not yet the orthodox Israel we know from Deuteronomy or Leviticus : Yahweh, the God of Sinai, is not present in these stories, neither is the theological exclusiveness that goes with later Yahwistic orthodoxy. In fact, strict monotheism is not yet in the air. We can observe, for instance, that the treaty between Laban and Jacob is guaranteed by the two tribal deities involved (the present text

<sup>16</sup> The fact that, according to Gen 28,10, the early episodes of the cycle, are located in Beersheba, is due to the overall redaction of the Genesis stories. According to Gen 26, Beersheba is the original setting of the Isaac traditions.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. A. de Pury, "Le cycle de Jacob comme légende autonome des origines d'Israël", in *Congress Volume Leuven 1989* (Supplements to *Vetus Testamentum* 43), Emerton, J.A. (ed.), Leiden 1991, p. 78-96.

of Genesis calls them “the God of Abraham” and “the God of Nahor”, Gen 31,53, and for the final redactor these two designations of course refer to the same and one God), but this text, as several others, show us that a segmented genealogy goes with a segmented theology. The Israel of the Jacob cycle does not see itself as a community of believers, nor does it see itself as a warring nation, but rather as a tribe struggling for recognition.

There is one final feature in the cycle of Jacob which I would like to point out. Through the figure of its ancestor, Israel also defines its relationship to other groups. As main partners or rivals of Jacob we find Esau (Gen 25;27;32;33), Laban (Gen 29-31) and the Shechemites (Gen 34). Even though it is not sure whether Esau has been considered the ancestor of the Edomites from the beginning, we see the emerging Israel dealing with two of its transjordanian neighbors, the Aramaeans and with the Edomites, and on the Palestinian side, with the city-dwellers (Gen 34). In all instances, devising, trickery, cheating, bargaining and finally compromise are the rules of the game. Bloodshed is usually avoided<sup>18</sup>. It is not sure whether Jacob's frauds are “applauded” by the narrator, nor whether Esau and Laban are meant to be disparaged. In any case, the ancestor is not a model of virtue, but this precisely is what makes him so life-like, and in the end, perhaps, so likeable.

With the story of Jacob, we were dealing almost exclusively with northern Israel and with preexilic times. Without leaving this geographical sector and this period of history, we must now confront ourselves with another kind of “ancestor” or founding hero : the hero of the prophetic type — and we must take a few minutes to talk about Moses and the Mosaic legend of origin.

#### *4. The Prophetic Ancestor : Moses as Rival of Jacob*

Israel has indeed another legend of origin, another definition of itself, that is much better known and that has exerted a much greater influence on the history of mankind : the story of Moses. According to the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy, Moses is born and raised in Egypt, and there he stirs up important numbers of enslaved Asiatics, leading them to revolt against the Egyptians and finally to leave the country, crossing the “Sea of Reeds” and entering into the desert where God will meet them. The meeting with God in the desert will be described by the different schools of Biblical writers in different ways. For the author whom the Old Testament scholars call the “Priestly Writer” and whom we shall meet again, the object of the Revelation is mainly to give instructions on how to build the Temple, first in the form of a mobile desert sanctuary (Exodus 25-31\*; 35-40\*) and then to ensure all the rules of purity and atonement that will allow an inevitably sinful Israel to subsist in the presence of its most Holy God (Leviticus 1 to Numbers 9\*)<sup>19</sup>. For the writers of the “Deuteronomic” school, the focus is more on juridical and moral matters than on ritual and purity (Deuteronomy 12-26).

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<sup>18</sup> For different views on the case of Gen 34, see A. de Pury, “Genèse XXXIV et l'histoire”, *Revue Biblique* 76, 1969, pp. 5-49; B. J. Diebner, “Gen 34 und Dinas Rolle bei der Definition "Israels"”, *Dielheimer Blätter zum Alten Testament* 19, 1984, pp. 59-75; N. Wyatt, “The Story of Dinah and Shechem”, *Ugarit Forschungen* 22, 1990, pp. 433ff.; J.A. Soggin, “Genesis Kapitel 34. Eros und Thanatos”, in A. Lemaire and B. Otzen (ed.), *History and Tradition of Early Israel: Studies Presented to Eduard Nielsen* (Supplements to *Vetus Testamentum* 50), Leiden 1993, pp. 133-135.

<sup>19</sup> For a more precise attribution of the texts that belong to the original level of the Priestly writer, see below, note 25.

How is the hero of this founding story described? At first sight, his story looks strangely similar to that of Jacob. He, too, has to flee after having been involved in fight with another man. He too will reach the desert and be welcomed by a desert sheikh. He too, will marry the daughter of the sheikh and return to his point of departure, after having received his mission in the episode of the burning bush and after having faced death in a nightly encounter with God (all this narrated in Exodus 2-4). And yet, the stories of Jacob and Moses differ on all fundamentals.

These fundamental differences are measured best when one compares the dangers that menace the hero and his community. In the case of Jacob, these menaces pertain first of all to the reproduction or the growth of the group. What endangers Jacob is the sterility of women (Gen 25,21; 29,31; 30,1-24), difficult childbirth (Gen 25,22-23; 35,16-20), rivalry, with unforeseeable consequences, between women (Gen 29,31—30,24) or between brothers (Gen 25,23.26; 27; 32,4-21; 33,1-16; 34,25-26.30; 38,27-30), the kidnapping (Gen 34,2), sequestration (Gen 26,6-11; 31,17-42) or rape of women (Gen 34,2; 35,21-22; 38,12-26). What endangers Jacob also is everything that could hinder his access to fertile land: the expulsion out of the territory (Gen 26,1.16; 27,39.43-45; 34,30; 35,5), the right to use cisterns and wells (Gen 26,19-22.32-33; 29,2-8), the obstruction of wells (Gen 26,15; cf. Ex 2,17), the growth (Gen 26,14; 30,28-43; 31,8-10; 34,23) or the decline (Gen 32,4-8.14-22; 33,13) of the herds. And then: honesty or fraud, keeping one's word or treachery, and so on. Jacob's story is a permanent struggle for life.

But if we take the Moses' story, nothing of the sort happens. For the Hebrew women in Egypt, there are no problems of childbirth: the proliferation of their children is a problem only for the Egyptians (Ex 2,8-22). Surviving in the desert is no problem either: every day God delivers manna and quails to eat or strikes the rock to let fresh water gush out (Ex 15,25; 16; 17,5-6; Nb 11,4-23.31-34; 20,6-11; Dt 8,2-3). The only and main problem is the possible revolt of the people against Yahweh (Ex 15,24; 16,2-3; 17,2.3; 32,1-6; Nb 11,1-9; 14,1-4.10.39-44; 16,1-3.12-15; 20,1-5; 21,4-5; Dt 1,26-28; 9,8-12.22-24), or against his representative. The only menace for the survival of the Israelites is their own disobedience (Ex 16,20.27) and lack of faith (Nb 13,31-33; 14,36-38; Dt 1,32). The failing behavior of the people unvariably provokes the anger of Yahweh and is the cause of the terrible punishments that follow (Ex 32,9-10.35; Nb 11,1.10.33; 14,11-12.27-35.45; 15,35-36; 16,20-35; 21,6; 25,4-5; Dt 1,34-37; 4,3).

It is not difficult to grasp that we are here in a completely different "climate" from that of the Jacob stories. The real theme of the Moses tradition is the question of *mediation* between the people and Yahweh. Moses is shown to be the only mediator: he is both the intercessor for the people towards Yahweh (Ex 15,25; 17,4.10-13; 32,11-13.31-32; Nb 11,2.11-15.21-22; 14,13-19; 21,7; Dt 9,18.25-29; 10,10-11), and he is the communicator of Yahweh's will towards the people. The Moses story, quite obviously, is the model of the *prophetic* conception of Israel's origin and of Israel's true nature. In this conception, Israel is not born from an eponymous ancestor, but comes to existence on the day it hears the call from Yahweh through his prophet Moses. The physical father may and even must be forgotten: "My father was a straying Aramaean when he went down to Egypt!" (Dt 26,5). Thus speaks the only passage in Deuteronomic tradition which refers to Jacob: He was an Aramaean, not an Israelite, he was straying, lost as always, a miserable, despicable nobody! One does not even mention his name! Never again will be heard of him in Deuteronomic literature, because for this school of thought,

Israel exists only from the moment on, the God Yahweh has revealed himself to him<sup>20</sup>. Therefore, in that view, the origin of Israel lies in Egypt and in the desert, not in the tents of Laban. In that view, the nature of Israel is not genealogical or “ethnic”, but it is “vocational” : is an Israelite who has heard the voice of Yahweh through his prophet Moses. In that conception, genealogy has no part any more. Moses himself has two sons, but they are not destined to play any particular role. In one desperate moment, when the people have started to revere the golden calf, Yahweh even ponders the idea to wipe out the people and to start anew, this time by turning Moses into a patriarch (Ex 32,10), but Moses himself, in a great intercession, talks him out of it. In the books of Exodus to Numeri, one hears often about the “fathers”, but these fathers are never named, individualized or differentiated. The Israel they represent is not seen any more as a genealogically structured society, but as a “degenealogized” assembly whose members will be judged only according to their fidelity or infidelity towards Yahweh. That is why this description of Israel is not really the reflection of a historical episode in the history of Israel : it is a “prophetic utopia”. But similarly to the Jacob cycle, the story of Moses means to present Israel with a full-fledged legend of its origins. It needs neither prologue nor epilogue (except for the fact that the books of Joshua to Kings precisely offer one<sup>21</sup>). Initially, this story intended to stand for itself, alone. The milieu that stands behind this version are the circles of prophetic brotherhoods — like the ancient Levites — who can be in conflict both with the royal authorities and with the tribal elites.

There is one prophetic text, of the book of Hosea (12,1-15), which dates probably to the end of the 8th century, and which quite explicitly opposes the story of Moses to the story of Jacob, and openly invites his Israelite listeners to choose between the two conflicting and rival legends of origin<sup>22</sup>. This poem, which scolds the Israelites for being no better than their miserable, fraudulent and unstable father Jacob, closes on the following, programmatic statement :

13. Jacob fled to the plains of Aram,  
Israel served for a woman,  
yes, for a woman he made himself a keeper !  
14. But through a prophet has Yhwh brought Israel up from Egypt,  
yes, through a prophet has it (Israel) been kept !

It is as if Hosea was telling his auditors : You have the choice between two “ancestors” : but between the *woman* (genealogy) and the *prophet* (the call) you must choose ! It will be Jacob or Moses, but you must determine yourself !

If Israel had heeded Hosea's invitation, history of religion would probably have taken a

<sup>20</sup> See T. Römer, *Israels Väter. Untersuchungen zur Väterthematik im Deuteronomium und in der deuteronomistischen Tradition* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 99), Freiburg (CH) / Göttingen 1990.

<sup>21</sup> On calls these books the “Deuteronomistic Historiography”. See on that subject : A. de Pury, T. Römer and J.-D. Macchi (ed.), *Israël construit son histoire. L'historiographie deutéronomiste à la lumière des recherches récentes* (Le Monde de la Bible 34), Genève 1996.

<sup>22</sup> See A. de Pury, “Las dos leyendas sobre el origen de Israel (Jacob y Moisés) y la elaboración del Pentateuco”, *Estudios Bíblicos* 52, 1994, pp. 95-131; id., “Erwägungen zu einem vorexilischen Stämmejahwismus. Hosea 12 und die Auseinandersetzung um die Identität Israels und seines Gottes”, in W. Dietrich and M. A. Klopfenstein (ed.), *Ein Gott allein ? JHWH-Verehrung und biblischer Monotheismus im Kontext der israelitischen und altorientalischen Religionsgeschichte* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 139), Freiburg (Schweiz) - Göttingen 1994, pp. 413-439.

different course. Had it chosen to forget about Moses and to remain with the Jacob story as its founding document, the Israelite religion would have stayed a local variant of all West-semitic religions, as we are beginning to document them. Probably nobody would specifically remember it to-day. Had it chosen to opt for the Mosaic version of the legend of origin, the Israelite religion would have become something very close to Islam. The Islamic message was first addressed to the people of Arabia, but it did not stay confined to Arabs, and the Islamic *umma* is composed of all peoples and any individual that have adhered to the message relayed by the prophet Muhammad. Close also in this respect to Christianity, because the Church, too, as it understands itself, is not limited by any ethnic or genealogical boundaries.

Curiously, Judaism, about two centuries after Hosea, decided *not* to choose and to keep both legends of origin. The story of Jacob was integrated into the book of Genesis and instead of being rejected, it became the prologue to the story of Moses<sup>23</sup>. Therefore, according to the Jewish halakhah still to-day, to be recognized as a Jew, you must be *both* a son of Jacob and a disciple of Moses.

### 5. *The Abrahamic ancestor*

It is high time that we return to Abraham. What kind of ancestor is Abraham and what is his role in the Old Testament ?

Some observations can be made quite easily :

Except for his big initial journey that takes him from “Ur in Chaldaea” (Gen 11,27-32) to southern Canaan, passing by Shechem (Gen 12,6-7) and Bethel (Gen 12,8; 13,3-4.14-18), with a short intermezzo in Egypt (Gen 12,10-20), the tradition locates Abraham entirely in the South of Palestine, between Hebron and Beersheba. Since the tomb of Abraham is in Hebron, and since his memory is also associated to a holy place near by, Mamre (Gen 13,18; Gn 18), it appears that this patriarchal figure is firmly rooted in that area. Hebron being the center of the tribe of Judah, some scholars have concluded that Abraham was originally the ancestor of Judah and of the Judaeans, just as Jacob was the father of Israel and the Israelites. But curiously, no text gives any hint in that direction. And, what is more important : we find no segmented genealogical system associated with Abraham as we have with Jacob, no system of the sons or clans of Judah which could function as the explanatory system of a Judaeon society as it does for the Israelites with the sons of Jacob. Abraham has two sons, to be sure, — and then he has many sons through his wife Qetura (Gen 25) — but apparently, only one belongs to Israel or to Judaism. This is the fundamental difference between Abraham and Jacob, and this explains why, in spite of the many analogies, the thematic of the Abrahamic stories is completely different from that of the Jacob narratives. In the Jacob stories, the theme is : how will all these different sons be brought home to constitute “Israel” ? In the Abraham stories, the theme is : Who is the legitimate son and heir ? And what is the status of the son or the sons who are not the legitimate heir ?

In other words, Abraham is placed from the beginning in an inter-tribal, inter-communitarian, "ecumenical" perspective. And there is no sense talking about Abraham, if one is not going to

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<sup>23</sup> This phenomenon is not quite unlike what happened in the Christian church : the Old Testament was not abandoned but became the prologue to the New Testament.

address the issue Ismael / Isaac<sup>24</sup>.

In the Genesis story of Abraham, there are different strands, also among the chapters that deal with Ismael (Gen 16; 17; 21; 25), and all these stories do not exactly share the same perspective. Especially the stories of the expulsion (the expulsion of the pregnant Hagar in Gen 16, and the expulsion of Hagar and her son in Gen 21) have been deemed cruel against Hagar and Ismael, but even these two versions include very explicit promises of blessing and innumerable posterity (Gen 16,10-12; 21,18-19), as if the established tradition had not allowed hostile redactors to exclude Ismael entirely from the line of divine blessing.

This begrudging recognition of Ismael's divine protection, proud demeanor and great descendance is in fact quite remarkable, especially in strands of tradition that obviously are primarily concerned with establishing the claim to uniqueness for the descendance of Isaac, in a tradition and in canonical writings that are, in their final status, entirely Jewish.

But even more remarkable is the version of the “Priestly writer”<sup>25</sup> whom we had encountered when presenting the tradition of the desert. In Genesis 17, when Isaac is not even born yet, this writer goes to great lengths to relate to us the very elaborate scene of God's covenant with Abraham and Ismael. In that covenant, which is mainly a solemn divine commitment, God takes upon himself to make a gracious promise : Abraham will become the father of a “multitude of nations” (Gen 17,4 and 5), “nations and [including obviously non-Israelite] kings<sup>26</sup> will come out of him” (17,6), and an eternal covenant will be established with him and his descendance after him (17,8 referring again obviously to the “multitude of nations”), to whom the whole of Canaan will be given as a perpetual possession (17,8). The only thing that is asked of Abraham and of his descendance as a sign of remembrance of this covenant is to practise circumcision. Circumcision must be performed at the age of eight days for every male in the community (of this innumerable, multi-ethnic descendance), be he born in the house or acquired as a slave (17,9-10). And the story ends with Abraham performing on

<sup>24</sup> For the historic, archaeological and linguistic evidence on Ismael and the Ismaelites, see E. A. Knauf, *Ismael. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte Palästinas und Nordarabiens im 1. Jahrtausend v.Chr.*, 2., erw. Aufl. (Abhandlungen des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins 7), Wiesbaden 1989; for the theological implications of the theme of Ismael in the Abraham-stories in Genesis and Jewish and Christian exegesis, see T. Naumann, *Ismael. Theologische und erzählanalytische Studien zu einem biblischen Konzept der Selbstwahrnehmung Israels im Kreis der Völker aus der Nachkommenschaft Abrahams*, 1998, forthcoming.

<sup>25</sup> Since his style, his vocabulary and his theological thematic are easily recognizable, there is a fair consensus about which texts must be attributed to him. According to the most recent analysis by E. A. Knauf (forthcoming), the “Priestly writer” (designed as P), in the Pentateuch and in the book of Joshua (a few verses only), can be traced in following passages : **Genesis** 1,1-31; 2,1-4a; 5,1-32; 6,9.11-22; 7,6.11-21.24; 8,1.2a.3-5.13-19; 9,1-17.28-29; 10,1-7.20.22-23.31.32a.33b; 11,10-28.31-32; 12,4d-5; 13,6.11b-12; 16,3.15-16; 17,1-13.15-27; 19,29; 21,1b-5; 23,1-20; 25,7-17.19-20.26d; 26,34-35; 27,46; 28,1-9; 31,18a; 35,6.9-13.22d-29; 36,9.40-43; 37,2; ... 41,46a; ...46,6-7; 47,27b-28; 48,3-6; 49,1a.28-33; 50,12-13; **Exodus** 1,1-5.7.13-14; 2,23-25; 6,2-12; 7,1-13.19-20.21e-22; 8,1-3..11d-15; 9,8-12; 11,9-10; 12,37a.40-42; 13,20; 14,1-4.8-10.15-18.21ad-23.26-27a.28-29; 15,22.27ac; 16,1-3.6-7.9-14.15e.16c-17a.18d-21a.22-26.31a.35b; 17,1; 19,1-2.(3-5); 24,15b-18a; 25,1-2.8-9; 26,1-30; 29,43-46; 34,29c-32; 35,4-5.10.20-22a.29; 36,2-3.8; 39,32-33a.42-43; 40,17.33c-35; **Leviticus** 9,1-3.4b-8.12a.15a.21b-24; **Numbers** 1,1-3.19b.21.23.25.27.29.31.33. 35.37.39.41.43.46; 2,1-3.5.7.10.12.14.18.20.22.25.27.29.34; 4,1-3.34-37a.38-41a.42-45a.46-48; 10,11-13a; 12,16b; 13,1-3a.17.21.25-26.32a.cde; 14,1-2.5-7.10.26-29.35-38; 20,1...2.3b-5ac-8b.8ef.10.11c-12.22...23.25-29; 21,4a.10-11; 22,1; 27,12-23; 34,1-12; **Deuteronomy** 1,3a; 32,48-52; 34,1bc.5.7-9... **Joshua** 4,19a; 5,10-12; 14,1-2; 18,1; 24,29b. For a quite similar (but sometimes slightly differing) analysis, see N. Lohfink, *Les traditions du Pentateuque autour de l'exil* (Cahiers Evangile 97), Paris 1996, p. 5-25, esp. p. 14. See also N. Lohfink, *Theology of the Pentateuch. Themes of the Priestly Narrative and Deuteronomy*, Edinburgh 1994.

<sup>26</sup> It is, however, not sure whether the mention of “kings” belongs to the original wording of the Priestly writer — also in Gen 17,16; 35,11 — since those (or any other) kings do not play any role in that document.

himself and on Ismael and all the boys born in the house the rite of circumcision (17,23-27).

It is true that in v.15-22, God treats the problem of Sara and announces that she too will bear a son. This son also (yet to be born), Isaac, will be the ancestor of “nations and kings” (17,16), which reminds us that Isaac, like his father, is the ancestor not only of Jacob/Israel but of Esau/Edom and his numerous posterity as well (Gen 36). Isaac and his offspring, they too will benefit from a perpetual covenant (17,19,21), a covenant that does not concern Ismael (17,19), but the text does not specify which is the content of this particular covenant with Isaac and his offspring. Two questions must now be raised : 1) In the perspective of the Priestly writer, who is or who are the people to whom the promise of the land is addressed ? 2) And since a difference is postulated by 17,19 between the covenant that includes Ismael and his offspring and the covenant that is destined only to Isaac and his offspring, where lies the difference between the two “covenants” ?

Let us take the first question first! If we stay within the boundaries of the story as it is told by the “Priestly writer”, the same land that was promised by God to Abraham and to his multi-ethnic offspring (Genesis 17,8) is promised anew to Jacob and to his posterity when he comes back to the land of Canaan (Gen 35,11-12)<sup>27</sup>. Finally, that promise is taken up again by God when he reveals his name to Moses (and through him, to the Israelites in Egypt) in Exodus 6,4.8 : “I shall make you enter into the land that I raised my hand to give it to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob, and I shall give it to you as a heritage”. And, in the final part of the Priestly writer's work, the land of Canaan is shown to Moses (Numbers 32,1-12) and then opened to the entry of the Israelites. In the traditional interpretation, both by Christian and Jewish commentators, this has been therefore understood to mean that, since the Patriarchs' offspring is being refocused at every generation on the branch leading to Israel<sup>28</sup>, the gift of the land, too, is readdressed to the narrower circle, and that means, finally, to Israel alone. But is that interpretation really correct ?

If we take the problem from the beginning, we must start with Genesis 17. And here, the whole structure of Gen 17 would indeed be incomprehensible if the covenant and its benefits were destined only to Isaac. Why would there be such an elaborate “first act” in the account of the covenant — with a threefold insistence on the “multi-nation”-posterity of Abraham (17,4-6) — if that posterity was then to be excluded from the covenant ? Never is there, in the subsequent parts of the Priestly narrative, a text that would state, let alone explain, the exclusion of the “non-israelite” posterity. And in the end of the account, why would the author insist three times on the fact that both Abraham and Ismael are circumcised (17,23-26), if Ismael was later to be excluded from the covenant ? Obviously, the purpose of Gen 17 is to show that the *whole* posterity will have Abraham's God as their God, that all will share the land of Abraham's

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<sup>27</sup> This solemn promise to Jacob is anticipated in the blessing given by Isaac to his son Jacob in Gen 28,4-5, and reflected in recall by the dying Jacob in Gen 48,4. In spite of what is implied by Gen 35,12 (“The land that I gave to Abraham and to Isaac, I give it to you; to your offspring after you I shall give this land”), there is no explicit reiteration of the promise of the land to Isaac himself, neither in 17,15-22 where it could have been expected, nor in the blessing of Gen 28,4-5. This probably is an indication that the Priestly writer knew of older traditions linking the promise to Abraham and to Jacob, but not to Isaac.

<sup>28</sup> This “narrowing down” of the circle, by the Priestly writer, is always transcended again, since even Jacob is not destined to become the father of one people only. In Gen 28,3, Jacob is said to become an “assembly of peoples”; in Gen 35,11 “a nation, an assembly of nations”; and in Gen 48,4 an “assembly of peoples”. Perhaps, the Priestly writer thinks here of the Samaritans and the Jews, which would make for at least two “peoples”. The usual interpretation, which says that the writer is envisaging the tribes of Israel, is not probable, since that writer never calls the tribes either ‘*am* (people) or *goy* (nation).

“migrations”, and that all will practise circumcision as a sign of membership of God's everlasting covenant. And why should the land, in particular, be excluded from the promised blessings ? Nothing in Gen 17 sustains such a reading : whereas the promise of multi-nation posterity is repeated to Sara and to her yet to be born son, the promise of the land is not restated (17,15-22).

If we take the problem from the end of the Priestly writer's work, it is important not to confound the very different views of the “entry into Canaan” that we find in the various strands of tradition. Whereas for the Deuteronomistic school, the entry of the Israelites takes the form of a war of conquest, which ends in the extermination of all of the land's former inhabitants<sup>29</sup>, the Priestly writer postulates that the land the Israelites are entering is empty, and that therefore there can be neither war nor dispossession. Indeed, in that work, the explorers sent to reconnoitre the country, return saying that “this is a land that eats its inhabitants!”<sup>30</sup>, which means it is an empty land ! But nothing is said implying that the Israelites are meant to remain the only inhabitants of this empty land. In fact, there is, or would be, plenty of room for other children of Abraham !

Two more observations can be made in this context : a) Gen 17 is the only text in Genesis in which the Priestly writer calls the land “the *whole* of the land of Canaan” (17,8). With this term he envisages a region encompassing not only to-day's geographical Palestine but nearly the whole of the Levant<sup>31</sup>. b) Within Gen 17, in the section that concerns Isaac, the son of Sara (verses 15-22), only the promise of a “covenant” (“my covenant” : verses 19 and 21) is repeated, not the promise of the land. And this, precisely, leads us back to our second question: what is the difference between the covenant with the whole of Abraham's offspring (including Ismael) and the covenant with the descendance of Isaac ?

If one takes the Priestly writer's contribution as a whole, it appears that its ultimate purpose, within a universalistic perspective, resides in establishing that the true worship of Yahweh has been revealed to Israel. In Exodus 25,8, God says to Moses : “They [the sons of Israel] will build a sanctuary for me, and I shall reside in their midst”. In Ex 19,5-6<sup>32</sup>, God addresses himself to Israel through Moses, saying : “You shall be my personal part among all the peoples (...); you shall be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation!”. Only Israel, and not the

<sup>29</sup> See, e.g., the epilogue given in Joshua 11,16-20.

<sup>30</sup> Numbers 13,32a: The second part of the verse, mentioning the Giants, does not belong to the Priestly account and leads to another version of the story. For an extensive argumentation of this view, see the forthcoming work of E. A. Knauf.

<sup>31</sup> The Priestly writer does not define the limits of Canaan in the book of Genesis, but one can see that it is opposed to the Euphrates region (Gen 12,5; 31,18) and to Egypt (Gen 46,6-7). The East bank of the Jordan river does not belong to it (Gen 13,12). The land of Abraham's “wanderings” (Gen 17,8; 28,4) seems to stretch out to the whole of Canaan from North to South, although the Priestly writer in the Abraham story does not mention a single place name within Canaan except the complex of Mamre and Hebron or Qiryat Arba (Gen 23,1.17.19; 25,9; 35,27). In Numbers 34,1-12, the Priestly writer finally indicates his idea of the boundaries of the “Land of Canaan” : its southern border starts deep in the southern desert, the western border is at the Mediterranean coast, the northern border seems to encompass the Lebanon and the Beqaa, the eastern border goes down from the Sea of Galilee down along the river Jordan and the Dead Sea. This geographical concept of the Levant covers a surface much larger than the territories the kingdoms of Israel and Judah ever controlled. It is also at least ten times the territory of the Persian province of Judah (Yehud) at the time of the Priestly writer. On the problem of the borders of the land, see O. Keel, M. Küchler, et C. Uehlinger, *Orte und Landschaften der Bibel. Ein Handbuch und Studienreiseführer zum Heiligen Land, Vol. 1. Geographisch-geschichtliche Landeskunde*, Einsiedeln Köln (Benziger) et Göttingen (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht), 1984, p. 206-288.

<sup>32</sup> This passage may belong to a secondary level within the Priestly writer's work, but it still expresses the same basic concept.

other descendants of Abraham, have received the revelation of God's name. In Ex 6,3, God says to Moses : “To Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob, I appeared as El Shadday, but my name Y(a)hw(e)h I did not let it be known to them”. And indeed, the Priestly writer does not use the divine name Yahweh before it is revealed to Moses<sup>33</sup>. Usually, he just mentions God by the appellative *'elohîm* — meaning originally : a god, gods, but used by our writer in the absolute sense : God. Israel, who has received the charge of worshiping God under his most intimate name, and of keeping its sanctuary where God has chosen to reside, is thus seen by the Priestly writer as sort of priestly nation among all the other nations. This vision, of course, does not exclude or reject the other nations, but includes them in a cosmic system, in which only the priestly competences have been vested in Israel.

In fact, human kind, for the Priestly writer, seems to be divided into three circles : the widest circle, that includes all human beings, are the descendants of Noah. The covenant with the whole of humanity is related in Genesis 9, which also gives the charter for life between humans, and between humans and animals (whose blood may not be consumed). Humanity after Noah knows God just under his appellative name : God (*'elohîm*). The second circle is constituted by the descendants of Abraham (Gen 17), and that means, besides the twelve tribes of Israel, most notably the twelve tribes of Ismael and many other peoples of Arab and Edomite descent. Those are the people who know God under the name of El Shadday<sup>34</sup>, who partake of the covenant of Abraham, practise circumcision and share the promise of the land of Canaan. The third and inner most circle are the sons of Israel, i. e. the Jews and, perhaps, the Samaritans. They worship God under his name Yahweh, they are the keepers of the Temple and of its ritual purity. According to that view, the Temple is the centre of the world, and only the Temple and its immediate surroundings are really “holy ground” for Israel. But, remarkably, the Priestly writer doesn't state that this Temple must be in Jerusalem<sup>35</sup>. In his narrative, he shows it can take the form of a movable sanctuary in the desert.

What lies behind the differentiation, in the eyes of the Priestly writer, between humanity at large and the children of Abraham is not quite evident. But one can sense some of its implications. In Gen 26,34-35 he tells us that Esau has married two women of Hittite extraction, and in Gen 27,46, we hear that Rebecca fears Jacob will marry Hittite or Canaanite women as well. That is the reason why Jacob is sent to his uncle Laban in the Euphrates region (Gen 28,1). When Esau sees that Jacob is sent away to prevent him from marrying Canaanite women, he wishes to make up for his own error and he weds one of the daughters of Ismael (Gen 28,6-9). We hear more about these “sons of Heth” or “Hittites” in Gen 23, in the story of the sale of the cave of Makpela in Mamre to Abraham. There the Hittites are presented as the former

<sup>33</sup> One obvious exception is Gen 17,1, where the Priestly writer says : “ ... *Yhwh* appeared to him [i.e. to Abraham] and said : “I am El Shadday. ...””.

<sup>34</sup> El Shadday, whose etymology is controverted, may designate originally the “God of the wilderness” or “God from the steppes” (rather than “God of the mountain”, cf. E. A. Knauf, “El Saddai”, *Biblische Notizen* 16, 1981, p. 20-26; id., “El Saddai - der Gott Abrahams ?”, *Biblische Notizen* 29, 1985, p. 97-105; id., art. “Shadday”, in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Old Testament*, Leiden, 1995, col. 1416-1423.

<sup>35</sup> The fact that Jerusalem is not explicitly designed as the place chosen by Yahweh for his temple has been traditionally linked to the (fictional) idea that, the Pentateuch being written by Moses, i.e. before the entry into the land of Canaan, the place of Jerusalem could not be known by him. But since many other place names of Palestine are to be found in the Tora, this argument is not valid. It may be that the Priestly writer — followed in this case by the final redactors of the Pentateuch — did not want to exclude the Samaritans (who claimed that the place chosen by Yahweh was on Mount Garizim to the south of Shechem) from rallying to the same text of the Pentateuch. Thus, the delicate question of where the legitimate sanctuary was to be was deliberately left open.

inhabitants of Mamre/Hebron. Nothing disparaging is said about them (although Abraham will finally have to pay a stiff price for his acquisition) — the Hittites themselves recognize that God ('Elohîm) has made Abraham into a “prince” among them — and Abraham, too, treats them with the utmost respect. But apparently, in the view of the Priestly writer, they do not belong to a group of people with whom you can marry, whereas all the kinfolk of Abraham — whether Arab or Edomite — obviously do. The only explanation for that distinction is that the Priestly writer knew that some of the peoples around Israel, especially on the southern fringes of Palestine, but certainly elsewhere as well, were more closely related, in their religious traditions, to the Jews than others, and he tried to express this by his complex genealogical system.

One determinant element, most certainly, was the practice of circumcision. Circumcision is an act which, like Christian baptism, is performed once and cannot be undone. It is therefore a once-and-for-all sign of belonging, and does not require a life-long effort to keep up with the requirements of law. In that sense, it belongs to the realm of “theology of grace”. The priestly writer obviously thinks that all the tribes that practise circumcision are the children of Abraham and belong to the covenant established by Abraham's God.

Who, then, are these “children of Abraham” ? In Genesis 25,12-15, the Priestly writer gives the list of Ismael's twelve sons. All the names listed here are those of Arab tribes. E. A. Knauf has shown that Shumu'il (> biblical Isma'el) was, between the end of the 8th century and the first half of the 6th century B.C., a federation of Arab tribes in Northern Arabia well attested to us by Assyrian annals and Babylonian inscriptions. At least six of the names mentioned in Gen 25,12-15, are tribes belonging to that federation<sup>36</sup>. But in the time of the Priestly writer, at the beginning of the Persian period (539-332 B.C.), the federation of Shumu'il no longer exists. At that time, the south of Palestine has been heavily settled by Edomite and Arab elements. Within the Persian satrapy of Transeuphratene, Southern Palestine (including Hebron) has become the province of Idumaea. It is there, in all likelihood, rather than in far-away Arabia that the Priestly writer envisions these sons of Ismael and Esau.

##### 5. *The Priestly writer and Jewish “ecumenism”*

We must now try to visualize the Priestly writer in his historical context. This very incisive writer can be seen both as a witness of the nascent Persian empire and as an active participant in the theological debate within nascent Judaism. It is known that the Achaemenid rulers favored the preservation or even the eclosion of local particularisms, as long as the Persian suzerainty was not contested<sup>37</sup>. Permission was granted by Cyrus to the Jews to return to Judaea and to rebuild the Temple of Jerusalem (which was done between 520 and 515 B.C.). Later, in the 5th century, they asked the local communities themselves — examples are known from Lydia in Anatolia and from Egypt — to produce the codes of laws under which they wanted to be ruled. And it has been suggested by several Old Testament scholars that the Jewish Torah could have been written down at the direct request of the Persian authorities<sup>38</sup>. The very complex and

<sup>36</sup> Nebaioth, Qedar, Adbeel, Massa' Duma and Tema. Cf. E.A. Knauf, *Ismael*, p. 6f., 56-81.

<sup>37</sup> On the history of the Achaemenid empire, see the unsurpassed work of P. Briant, *Histoire de l'empire perse. De Cyrus à Alexandre*, Paris 1996.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. P. Frei and K. Koch (ed.), *Reichsidee und Reichsorganisation im Perserreich. Zweite, bearbeitete und stark erweiterte Auflage* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 55), Fribourg / Göttingen 1996; F. Crüsemann, “Le

composite structure of this canon, and especially the juxtaposition of very different points of view within the Torah, could then be explained as the product of a negotiated compromise between the main Jewish parties — notably the Deuteronomistic/prophetic and the priestly/sacerdotal parties — rather than as the result of a haphazard or clumsy history of redaction.

The religion of the Achaemenids was monotheistic (although with a dualistic trait) : Ahuramazda was the supreme god, but the Persians did not demand that he be worshiped everywhere, and they probably readily acknowledged that their supreme god could be venerated by others under other names. Judaism was born in this atmosphere of a monotheistic cultural climate, and it greatly benefited from the Persian benevolence towards foreign religious traditions. Before the Exile, the religion of Yahweh was — or could be — exclusivistic, but it was not yet monotheistic. Now Yahweh was elevated from being the national god of Israel to be the Creator of the universe and confessed as the one and only God. The most explicit testimonies to this development can be found in Deutero-Isaiah (Is 40-55)<sup>39</sup> and in the texts of the Priestly writer<sup>40</sup>. But of course, that entailed, at least for the Priestly writer, the recognition that this one God was also known and could also be venerated by other human groups, as is reflected in his thinking about the divine names. Another consequence was that Judaism was born as a diaspora religion, and that means as a universal religion. No longer linked to the existence of a state called Israel or Juda, the religion of Yahweh became a religion that could be maintained in the family years and centuries after the kingdoms whose religion it had been had vanished and thousands of miles from the territory of those former kingdoms. From that decisive period on, the very existence of Judaism was linked to the diaspora, and the reemergence of a small province of Juda in the Persian satrapy of Transeuphratene and the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem did not basically alter that fact. Demographically, soon after the beginning of the Persian era, there were more Jews living in the diaspora (first, mainly Mesopotamia and Egypt, later, in the whole of the Mediterranean world) than in Juda. In that context, the city of Jerusalem and its surroundings — the province stretched to approximately 20 km around the focal point of Jerusalem — came to play (with its partner and rival in Samaria) much the same role that the city of Rome or the Vatican came to play for Catholics.

If the Priestly writer lives in the end of the 5th century, around the period when the Temple of Jerusalem is being rebuilt under Persian administration, we can imagine him residing in Jerusalem, and rethinking “God and the world” in the light of the new situation:

The Persian world order is accepted (tacitly) as a beneficial framework, providentially instaurated by God<sup>41</sup>. The war-like God of the Deuteronomistic tradition is replaced by a God of

Pentateuque, une Tora. Prolégomènes à l'interprétation de sa forme finale”, in A. de Pury (ed.), *Le Pentateuque en question. Le origines et la composition des cinq premiers livres de la Bible à la lumière des recherches récentes* (Le Monde de la Bible 19), Genève 1989 (2nd ed. 1991), p. 339-360; id., *Die Tora. Theologie und Sozialgeschichte des alttestamentlichen Gesetzes*, München 1992; E. Blum, *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch* (BZAW 189), Berlin and New York 1990.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. e.g. Is 44,6 : “I am the first, I am the last, and besides me, there is no God.”

<sup>40</sup> See especially, Gen 1, which can be considered as the model of a monotheistic creation account.

<sup>41</sup> The Second Isaiah, already, had presented Cyrus, the Persian conqueror, as God's Messiah (Is 45,1). See R. G. Kratz, *Kyros im Deuteronomium-Buch. Redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu Entstehung und Theologie von Jes. 40-55* (Forschungen zum Alten Testament 1), Tübingen 1991; id., “Cyrus Messie de Dieu”, *Cahiers Bibliques de Foi et Vie* 33, 1994, p. 51-65.

peace. The best example of this pacific program within the work of the Priestly writer's work is Genesis 9 : after having instated an order that will curb willful bloodshed, God says :

“That is the sign of the covenant that I am placing between me, you and all living being with you, for all future generations. I have placed my bow in the clouds that it may become the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I will let clouds appear above the earth and when the bow will be seen in the clouds, I shall remember my covenant between me, you and all living creature of whatever flesh. Never again shall the waters become a Flood to destroy all flesh! The bow will be in the clouds, and I will look at it in order to remember the eternal covenant between God and all living creature, all flesh that is on earth.” (Gen 9,12-16)

The bow, of course, is the murderous weapon par excellence: it can hit its victim without that the attacker has to come out into the open. Therefore, if God vows to suspend his bow into the clouds — there to be seen by everybody, God, man and even animals — he declares his intent to renounce violence as a means of retaliation for earthly violence. He himself will be reminded by the sight of the suspended bow that he must not let himself be a prey to his anger. And that good resolve, of course, is also destined to be adopted by man<sup>42</sup>.

The world order of the Priestly writer is a peaceful order, where men of whatever origins have to live together in peace and justice. And this awareness, surely, guides the way our writer is thinking about Abraham and his multiple descendance. Let us come back, one last time, to Ismael, to this non-Jewish descendant of Abraham. In Gen 25,9, the Priestly writer, after having told the death of Abraham, writes :

“His sons Isaac *and Ismael* buried him in the cave of Makpela, in the field of Ephron, son of Sohar, the Hittite, vis-à-vis of Mamre, in the field that Abraham had acquired from the sons of Heth”

The reader of the current Genesis story (where Hagar and Ismael have been expelled to the desert for good in Gen 21, a story that does *not* belong to the Priestly writer) is quite surprised to see that Ismael is still around, and present at his father's funeral. That trait, probably, is not just a gesture of goodwill towards Ismael on the part of the author of our verse. What is consigned here is the fundamental right of the Ismaelites to continue to consider themselves as the sons of Abraham and to be present in Hebron. In fact, if our Priestly writer, who resides in Jerusalem, wishes to make a pilgrimage to the tomb of Abraham in Hebron, he must cross a border. Hebron, indeed, does not belong to the persian province of Juda, but to the province of Idumaea, which already at that time was populated mainly by Edomites and Arabs (even though, some Jews resettled there,too<sup>43</sup>). This, probably, means that the much revered shrine of Abraham's tomb<sup>44</sup> was already at that time a holy place shared by Jews and Idumaeans<sup>45</sup> and Arabs, who may have claimed Ismaelite ancestry. Being situated in Idumaea, the shrine was certainly controlled by Idumaeans. If the Priestly writer tells us about the presence of Isaac and Ismael, and obviously considers the presence of both as perfectly legitimate, it means that he has

<sup>42</sup> This interpretation was first proposed by E. Zenger, *Gottes Bogen in den Wolken. Untersuchungen zu Komposition und Theologie der priesterschriftlichen Urgeschichte* (Stuttgarter Bibel-Studien 112), Stuttgart 1983.

<sup>43</sup> See Nehemiah 11,25.

<sup>44</sup> The most comprehensive recent presentation of the history and archaeology of Hebron and the *Haram el-Khalil* as well as of Mamre (*Ramet al-Khalil*) is to be found in O. Keel, and M. Küchler, *Orte und Landschaften der Bibel. Ein Handbuch und Studienreiseführer zum Heiligen Land, Vol. 2. Der Süden*, Einsiedeln Köln / Göttingen, 1982, p. 670-713.

<sup>45</sup> It is to be noted that the same right is recognized to the descendants of Esau. In Gen 35,29, the Priestly writer says after reporting Isaac's death : “His sons Esau and Jacob buried him (in Mamre)”

no objection to the notion of a shared holy place, a shared tradition and a shared territory. That all, in his eyes, is in the most explicit accordance with God's will<sup>46</sup>.

What strikes me as remarkable, therefore, is not so much the story in itself, but the fact that this story was conceived and written down by a very pious and profound Jewish writer, and that that story originally was not destined to be broadcast to the world, but to be read and meditated by the Jewish community in Jerusalem or wherever it lived in the diaspora. The Priestly writer's interpretation of history is precious as a testimony of Jewish self-understanding in the beginning of the Persian period. At the same time, it can be read as the thinking of a unique (de-militarized) humanity with a differentiated world of (de-nationalized) nations. It is a story of love and sharing, of spirituality and joy.

## 6. Conclusion

Abraham, what kind of ancestor is he ? That was the question asked at the outset, and the suggested answer was : an "ecumenical patriarch" ! Our somewhat detailed enquiry has largely confirmed this intuition. It is true : we have investigated only the level of tradition which we can ascribe to the "Priestly writer". If we had included all the other levels of the Abraham narrative, most of which are probably more recent, it would have tarnished the picture here and there<sup>47</sup>, but it would not have modified it entirely, since the Priestly writer's narrative operates like a read thread holding the whole saga together. Besides that, the Priestly writer bears one of the strongest and clearest voices within the concert of Biblical traditions. His situation, of course, is

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<sup>46</sup> If one is considering that to-day, the *same* holy place (the present enclosure of the *Haram al-Khalil* has been built by the Iduemaeon Herodes the Great) is vehemently claimed by Jewish settlers as their own and as having to belong to their national territory — and that for this claim, they necessarily have to rely on the texts we have just analyzed — there are no other Biblical texts on that site — one cannot but wish that religious Jews would accord their own traditions a somewhat closer and more enlightened scrutiny. I am writing this although I do not think that Biblical texts should play *any* role in the settlement of the conflict between modern Israel and modern Palestine. Against the misuse of Biblical traditions in the Israeli-Palestinian litigation, see my forthcoming article "Histoires, mémoires, identités, héritages. Les bénéfices de la confrontation. Ou : que répondre à l'argumentaire biblique ?" to appear in A. Benani (ed.), *La Palestine ...*, Genève, Labor et Fides, 1998 or 1999.

<sup>47</sup> We would have had to scrutinize especially the two stories of the flight/expulsion of Hagar in Gen 16 and 21. It seems to me that both of these stories try to come to terms with the *uncomfortable* evidence that Ismael is Abraham's elder son and that the Ismaelite neighbours can claim Abrahamic ancestry. Those two stories, apparently, cannot alter the fact that Ismael is blessed with an innumerable and glorious posterity (Gen 16,10-12; 21,13.18), because this fact surely was anchored in tradition and in reality (if the nearby Ismaelites claimed their link to Abraham), but they wish to make it clear that this Ismaelite prosperity must take place somewhere far out in the desert (Gen 16,12.14; 21,20-21). Both Gen 16 and Gen 21 try to make a distinction between the will of Abraham (Abraham is "weak", and he would like to favor Ismael, Gen 16,6; 21,11) and the will of God (God is "strong" and upholds Sara in her determination to impose her will on Hagar and her son, Gen 16,9; 21,12). Those two stories, in my opinion, are of a later date than the Priestly narrative : they try to correct and to diminish the impact of the Priestly writer's "ecumenism", especially concerning the sharing of the land of Canaan. One should also note the ambiguity of the blessings given to Ismael in these stories. In Gen 16,12 God says of Ismael: "He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and to the face of all his brothers he will set his dwellings!". In Gen 21,20-21, the narrator says : "God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became a bowman (i.e. a sharpshooter); he lived in the desert of Parân, and his mother got a wife for him from Egypt". All of this smacks of reaction against the Priestly writer : Ismael is *not* a peaceful or stable neighbour ! *He* has taken the *bow* into his hands ! And finally, there is *no intermarriage* with Ismael and his people! On the other hand, even in the final arrangement of the stories, there is something deeply moving in the portrait that is made of Abraham. As Thomas Naumann beautifully shows in his forthcoming work (see above, n. 24), in the sequence of Gen 21 and 22, it appears that Abraham has to forfeit both his sons, Ismael by letting him get lost in the desert, and Isaac by offering him on the altar. Both are miraculously saved by God.

not ours, and his issues are not today's issues, even among to-day's "children of Abraham", but his voice remains, in my opinion, one of the most important, most inspiring and most universal not only of the Old Testament, but of the whole history of theology. And for the Priestly writer, Abraham is unequivocally the "Father of reconciliation", the figure of a plural people of God, often divided but always invited to reconciliation without forsaking the particular legacy that each one of them has received.

We should also have given more attention to the *reception* of the traditions, and especially of the tradition of Ismael. Christians and Jews often believe that Islam has identified itself with Ismael's ancestry, whereas Islam does not confirm this view. Muslims consider themselves as the children of Abraham by *faith* and not by biological ancestry. The Qur'an mentions both sons, Isaac and Ismael, and does not specify which of the two sons has been offered to God<sup>48</sup>. Therefore, we do not have to make ours the view that Ismael represents Islam or embodies the Arab part of humanity.

Nevertheless it has to be reminded that Christian and Jewish tradition have not been tender to Ismael, and that for them, Ismael has unquestioningly represented the Muslim and/or the Arab world. Much "damage" has been done by the reception in the West of Galatians 4. In the chapters 3 and 4 of that epistle, Paul criticizes the Galatians for their belief that, having been converted as pagans to Christ, they must also submit to the Jewish law: Quoting Genesis 15,6, Paul reminds them that Abraham has been justified by his faith and not by the accomplishment of the Law. Therefore it is because they have received the faith, he argues, that the Galatians are the children of Abraham, not because they have or should have become Jews. Faith has liberated them from the "yoke" of the Law. In chapter 4, Paul takes a curious illustration to make his point : believers in Christ, he says, should be not like the children of the slave, Hagar, but like those of the free woman, Sara (Galatians 4,21-31). Thereby Paul identifies Hagar with orthodox Judaism and Sara with liberation from orthodox Judaism, which is of course quite the opposite of the "evaluation" of Sara and Hagar in Jewish tradition. He invites his listeners to excommunicate those who advocate submitting to Jewish law and concludes by quoting Gen 21,10 : "Expulse the slave and her son, because the son of the slave must not inherit with the son of the free woman!". This New Testament verse, which one can understand within the framework of Paul's complicated rhetoric, has unfortunately been taken at face value : it was meant to combat judaizing tendencies within the Pauline communities, but it has wound up doing great harm not only to Christian-Jewish relations, but even more so to the relationship between Christians and Muslims.

Indeed, as soon as Islam emerged and started to expand beyond the Arabic peninsula, Byzantium evoked the spectre of "Ismael" as the wild donkey (Gen 16,12) that was ravaging the cultured lands (although most Jews and many Nestorian Christians saw the arrival of the Muslims as a liberation). In the time of the Crusaders, the war was to be waged against the sons of Ismael, the Hagarites and the Saracens (name that was interpreted as "expelled by Sara"). Even Martin Luther qualified the heirs of Ismael as "a people that lives without law and that is

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<sup>48</sup> Sura 37,100-109. The hesitation is reflected by many early muslim commentators, like Al-Tabari, even if most of them in the end opt for Ismael. It is also recognized that it is only in its second phase (in Medina) that islam has adopted the Jewish tradition of considering Ismael as the (physical) ancestor of the Arabs. Cf. for a recent overview, A. Segal, *Abraham. Enquête sur un Patriarce* Paris, 1995, p. 235-247.

accustomed to devastate, chase, pillage and steal”, but it was in the days where the Turks stood at the gates of Vienna. Jewish rabbinic traditions did not lose any love for Ismael either. The two main branches of the “children of Abraham”, Edom and Ismael, became the code-names for those whom rabbinic Judaism saw as its worst enemies : Edom (Jacob's twin brother) representing Rome (both pagan and christian), and Ismael (Isaac's elder brother) representing Islam and the Arab world<sup>49</sup>. As we can see, both Christian and Jewish tradition make for a heavy heritage. The sad thing is that Biblical tradition — and I would like to include both Old and New Testament — often is much more sensitive, much wiser and much more bearing for new insights than the standardized clichés that are served around would let us suspect. One just has to take the time to get to know it, to weigh it, to let it speak, and — as H. E. Sheikh Muhammad Mahdi Shams Eddine has reminded us in his inaugural exposé — “to listen to the best of what we hear”!

Albert de Pury

Albert de Pury,  
Professor for Old Testament studies at the Faculté de théologie protestante  
of the University of Geneva (Switzerland)

*Permanent private address:*

5, Avenue de Miremont

CH - 1206 Genève

Switzerland

Tel. and fax : (4122) 347 87 48

In summer, try also (4132) 863 35 03 (tel. and fax)

*Professional adresse (not to be used for urgent matters) :*

Université de Genève, Faculté de théologie,

3, Place de l'Université, CH - 1211 Genève 4, Switzerland

Tél. (4122) 705 74 45 ou 705 74 18

e-mail : Albert.DePury@theologie.unige.ch

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<sup>49</sup> On this history of reception, see Th. Naumann, *Ismael*, p. 3-5 (with bibliographical indications).