

# The Politics of the Ancestors

Edited by  
MARK G. BRETT  
and JAKOB WÖHRLE

*Forschungen  
zum Alten Testament  
124*

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**Mohr Siebeck**

# Forschungen zum Alten Testament

Edited by

Konrad Schmid (Zürich) · Mark S. Smith (Princeton)  
Hermann Spieckermann (Göttingen) · Andrew Teeter (Harvard)

124





# The Politics of the Ancestors

Exegetical and Historical Perspectives  
on Genesis 12–36

Edited by

Mark G. Brett and Jakob Wöhrle

in collaboration with Friederike Neumann

Mohr Siebeck

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ISBN 978-3-16-154509-2 / eISBN 978-3-16-156552-6  
DOI 10.1628/978-3-16-156552-6

ISSN 0940-4155 / eISSN 2568-8359 (Forschungen zum Alten Testament)

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data are available at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

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The book was printed on non-aging paper by Gulde Druck in Tübingen, and bound by Großbuchbinderei Spinner in Ottersweier.

Printed in Germany.

## Preface

In Old Testament research, it has long been recognized that the ancestral narratives present not simply a prehistory for the later Israelite people; these narratives rather describe through the ancestors and their kin groups fundamental relationships between the later Israelite people and their neighboring nations. The ancestral narratives treat social convergences and divergences, present conjunctive and disjunctive features, show possibilities and limitations of peaceful coexistence, and even at points display the integration of outsiders. The ancestral narratives thus have a pronounced political character.

In recent scholarship, new insights into the formation of the Pentateuch, as well as new insights into the history of ancient Israel and its neighboring countries, affect also the political interpretation of the ancestral narratives. Several texts, which in previous research were held to be very old, are now read against a late historical background. The political relationships between Israel/Judah and the neighboring nations are, to some extent, seen in a rather different light. Thus, several issues, not least regarding the political interpretation of the ancestral narratives, are controversial at the moment and subject to a comprehensive re-examination.

This volume gives a broad overview of these trends in current research on the ancestral narratives. It evolved out of the papers presented at an international conference that took place on January 15–17, 2016, at the Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg, Germany.

We want to thank all those who enabled the conference to take place and the conference volume to appear. The Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft generously sponsored the conference. We thank the editors of the *Forschungen zum Alten Testament*, Prof. Dr. Konrad Schmid, Prof. Dr. Mark S. Smith, Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Hermann Spieckermann and Prof. Dr. Andrew Teeter, for accepting this volume in the series, as well as Katharina Gutekunst and Jana Trispel at Mohr Siebeck for the engaging editorial care. Dr. Friederike Neumann provided magnificent help in all stages of the organization of the conference and the editing of this volume. We also thank Leslie Ann Kalka and Kirsten Mittmann for their assistance during the conference and Dorothea von Böhlen for the formal editing of the articles and compiling the indexes.



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## Introduction

*Mark G. Brett / Jakob Wöhrle*

The ancestral narratives of the book of Genesis have a decidedly political character. According to Gen 32:29 Jacob is named Israel and thus, together with his forefathers Abraham und Isaac, he is introduced as the ancestor of the later people of Israel. But in addition, Abraham's nephew Lot is presented as the ancestor of the Ammonites and Moabites, Abraham's firstborn son Ishmael as the ancestor of the Ishmaelites, and Jacob's twin brother Esau as the ancestor of the Edomites. Accordingly, the ancestral narratives reflect self-conceptions of a later Israelite people who are located among neighboring peoples. These narratives treat social convergences and divergences, and illustrate the possibilities and limitations of peaceful coexistence or of the integration of outsiders.

In Old Testament scholarship, this political character of the ancestral narratives has always been acknowledged. However, up to recent times, scholars often claimed that the political outline of the ancestral narratives is just the result of a secondary redactional reworking of these narratives, which, originally, aimed at a different object and intention. For example, according to Hermann Gunkel, the ancestral narratives, or rather the older *Vorstufen* of these texts, should be understood as legends or fairy tales, as stories told in order to touch the hearts of the audience.<sup>1</sup> William Albright, in contrast, thought that the ancestral narratives should be read, in large measure, as historically reliable reports about the (pre-)history of the later people of Israel.<sup>2</sup> And according to Claus Westermann, the ancestral narratives, in their kernel, should be taken as old family stories, which inform the reader about certain family affairs like concerns for offspring, death and inheritance.<sup>3</sup> According to all of these scholars, the older narratives, be they legends, historical reports or family stories, acquired their current political shape – with the protagonists presented as the ancestors of the later people of Israel and their neighboring peoples – not before a late stage of their literary development.

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<sup>1</sup> GUNKEL, Genesis, esp. XIII–XXVI.

<sup>2</sup> ALBRIGHT, Stone Age, esp. 179–189.

<sup>3</sup> WESTERMANN, Genesis II, esp. 1–90.

However, in more recent research, scholars like Erhard Blum could show that the ancestral narratives are from the outset political stories.<sup>4</sup> Already the oldest literary kernels of the ancestral narratives present Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as well as their relatives as ancestors of the later people of Israel and their neighboring peoples. For example, the birth story of Jacob and Esau describes Esau in Gen 25:25 as being “red” (*'admoni*) and “hairy” (*šē'ār*), and with this wordplay the text clearly alludes to the land of Edom and the mountains of Seir as the dwelling place of the later Edomite people. The ancestral narratives need not be traced back to older legends, historical reports or family stories, which were just secondarily transformed into political narratives. The ancestral narratives are rather from the oldest literary kernels politically shaped. They can be read as etiologies of Israel, through which the ancestors present fundamental issues regarding the formation of the later Israelite community and neighboring people groups.

In current research on the ancestral narratives, some other key assumptions can no longer be held without detailed argument. In older research, scholars explained the formation of the ancestral narratives on the basis of the traditional documentary hypothesis, to which Julius Wellhausen gave its classic form.<sup>5</sup> According to the documentary hypothesis, a first version of the Pentateuch and hence also of the ancestral narratives emerged with the Yahwist, commonly dated not later than the 10th century BCE, i.e., already at the beginning of the monarchic period. Thus, the basic outline of the ancestral narratives and their political concepts had to be explained against the background of this very early time.

In the last few decades, scholarly views about the formation of the Pentateuch have radically diversified.<sup>6</sup> Although there are still important proponents of the documentary hypothesis, for instance in the manner of the so called neo-documentary hypothesis,<sup>7</sup> newer paradigms of Old Testament research (in the German speaking countries, but also beyond) challenge several basic assumptions of this classic theory. Some scholars adhere to the idea of sources but question the early dating of the Yahwist.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, a growing number of scholars have abandoned the documentary hypothesis as a whole.<sup>9</sup> According to their view, the Pentateuch and thus also the ancestral narratives arose out of small individual traditions, which over centuries were enlarged and connected, at first to smaller and then to larger collections. In such mod-

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<sup>4</sup> BLUM, *Komposition*, esp. 478–506.

<sup>5</sup> WELLHAUSEN, *Composition*.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview over the recent debate about the formation of the Pentateuch cf. the comprehensive volume GERTZ et al. (ed.), *Formation*.

<sup>7</sup> BADEN, *Composition*.

<sup>8</sup> VAN SETERS, *Abraham*; LEVIN, *Jahwist*.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the collected volumes GERTZ et al. (ed.), *Abschied*; DOZEMAN / SCHMID (ed.), *Farewell*; GERTZ et al. (ed.), *Formation*.

els, the Pentateuchal framing of the primeval history, ancestral narratives and the exodus story emerged not before a very late stage. The connections between these elements stand at the end and not at the beginning of the formation of the Pentateuch.

These radical changes in recent Pentateuchal scholarship are also of major importance for the political interpretation of the ancestral narratives. While older research had to explain large parts of the ancestral narratives, and the political concepts implied by these texts, as stemming from the early monarchic times, recent approaches are able to explain these narratives in a more differentiated way. It is now possible to trace multi-levelled literary developments of the ancestral narratives, occurring over centuries – from the early monarchic period down to the later Persian times. This allows us to appreciate a multi-faceted history of the ever-new reflections upon the relationship between Israel and the neighboring peoples.

This volume offers comprehensive insights into such new approaches to the political contours of the ancestral narratives. The articles focus upon a range of important topics regarding the political intention of the ancestral narratives, considering each of their component elements and at various literary levels.

The first part of the volume treats significant political threads of the ancestral narratives. *Ronald Hendel* in his introductory article “Politics and Poetics in the Ancestral Narratives” reads this material as a “biography of a nation” which unfolds with a poetic imagination. Making use of anthropological models, he finds different views of the relationship between the central people group and their neighbors. He shows, for example, how the ancestral narratives time and again contrast the ancestors and their relatives as civilized / human on the one hand and barbarian / wild on the other, but how, especially in later phases of the narratives’ literary development, this construct is softened in order to show a more peaceful coexistence of the ancestors and their relatives.

*Reinhard G. Kratz*’ article “Die Verheißungen an die Erzväter: Die Konstruktion ethnischer Identität Israels” gives a comprehensive overview of the different promises to the ancestors, their significance for the formation of the ancestral narratives as well as the political concepts behind the various literary levels. According to Kratz, the older promises like Gen 12:1–3 present a certain self-perception of the later Israelite people, which is independent from kingship and state and thus, according to his view, emerged after the downfall of the northern kingdom. The later promises within the priestly texts (Gen 17) or the post-priestly texts (Gen 15) then further develop this concept with regard to questions of lineage or the inheritance of the land.

In her article “What if They’re Foreign? Inner-Legal Exegesis in the Ancestral Narratives,” *Megan Warner* shows how late texts of the ancestral narratives deal with and further develop issues of the legal tradition, especial-

ly concerning the question of ethnicity. For example, the story about the expulsion of Ishmael in Gen 21:8–21 interacts with the law about the rights of the firstborn in Deut 21:15–17. The Genesis text highlights the significance of the ethnicity of the mother, which the Deuteronomic law leaves unconsidered. However, other narratives like the subsequent story about the sacrifice of Isaac Gen 22:1–19 undermine a more exclusivist view of Gen 21:8–21 so that the ancestral narratives as a whole give a differentiated, well-balanced interpretation of the Deuteronomic law.

*Konrad Schmid's* article “Die Priesterschrift als antike Historiographie: Quellen und Darstellungsweise der politischen und religiösen Geschichte der Levante in den priesterschriftlichen Erzelternerzählungen” explains the political concept of the priestly passages within the ancestral narratives against the background of the early Persian period. He deals, for example, with the inclusivist theological concept of P, according to which it is one and the same God, the creator of the earth, who stands behind the different religions of the peoples. Additionally, P pursues the (Persian) concept of a world divided in different people with their respective countries and presents this as the God-given and final state of the world.

A universalizing tendency in the ancestral narratives' theology is also the central topic of *Mark G. Brett's* article “YHWH among the Nations: The Politics of Divine Names in Genesis 15 and 24.” These two chapters clearly differ from P texts on some key points, and Brett shows that the late Hexateuchal texts Gen 15 and 24 share not only the divine name YHWH, but they present YHWH's territory as stretched across the whole Persian empire. Additionally, these post-Priestly texts stress that the adherence to YHWH is more important than endogamy or even obedience to the law. Developing quite different theologies of divine naming, both P and the Hexateuchal redactions provide critical alternatives to the exclusivist Judean politics of the circles behind the books of Ezra–Nehemiah.

Beginning with a thematic literary approach, the article by *Yairah Amit*, “The Place of Exile in the Ancestors' Narratives and in their Framework,” emphasizes the significance of exile for understanding the ancestral narratives. Time and again these narratives describe how the ancestors have to leave the land, but they also return. The ancestors can thus be understood as models for exemplary exiles. Through the ancestral protagonists, these narratives show that exile is part of human life, which may even have its advantages, especially when it is restricted to a temporary phase in the people's story.

The second part of the volume treats the political significance of the matriarchs. *Sarah Shectman* in her article “Israel's Matriarchs: Political Pawns or Powerbrokers?” shows that unlike the patriarchs, whose families embrace several sub-lineages, the matriarchs establish exactly these sub-lineages. It is precisely the different wives of the patriarchs who, in these narratives, effect

the separation of the ancestors and their relatives into several, though related, kinship groups.

Besides this more exclusivist tendency, *Irmtraud Fischer* in her article “Rahel und Lea bauten ganz Israel auf – Rebekka ermöglichte eine gemeinsame Identität” shows that the matriarchs fulfill also a more inclusivist function when they mediate, in some of the ancestral narratives, between the ancestors of the later Northern kingdom and the later Southern kingdom. For example, Isaac, the son of Abraham, the ancestor of the South, marries Rebekah, the mother of Jacob, the ancestor of the North. Similarly, the wives of Jacob – Leah (the mother of Judah) and Rachel (the mother of Joseph) – also correlate with the later people from the South and from the North.

The third part of the volume deals with political issues regarding the Abraham and the Jacob narrative. *Oded Lipschits* in his article “Abraham zwischen Mamre und Jerusalem” traces the history of the Abraham tradition from its earliest stages up to its present shape. Based upon literary and archaeological considerations, he claims that Abraham originally was a local figure memorialized around the cultic site of Mamre near Hebron. In the early monarchic period, when Hebron was integrated into the kingdom of Judah, Abraham became an ancestor of the whole south. In later, post-exilic times, due to the combination of the Abraham and the Jacob traditions, the significance of Abraham was then enhanced to become an ancestor for all Israel.

*Thomas Römer* in his article “Die politische Funktion der vorpriesterlichen Abrahamtexte” treats the formation and the political intention of the older pre-priestly Abraham narratives. The oldest kernel of these narratives, the story about Abraham and Lot in Gen 13\*; 18–19\*, deals with the relationship between an in-group and the Ammonites and Moabites. Through Abraham and Lot, the narrative highlights the peaceful coexistence between the core community and these neighbors. An even more integrative tendency can be seen in the later narratives about Hagar and Ishmael, which show that the God of Abraham is also their God and thus the God of the later Ishmaelites.

In his article “Hagar und Ismael: Politische Aspekte im Wandel der Überlieferungen,” *Matthias Köckert* challenges the common assumption that Ishmael stands for the Arabian tribe *šumu’il* known from extra-biblical sources. According to his view, Ishmael has rather to be seen as the ancestor of nomadic Arab groups more generally. By referring to Ishmael, the ancestral narratives reflect upon the relationship between Israel and these nomadic groups, especially with regard to the inheritance of the land. The texts suggest that these nomadic groups have no share in the land of Canaan and thus need to restrict themselves to their own territories.

The article “Abraham Traditions and Cult Politics in the Persian Period: *Moriyyāh* and *Šalēm* in Genesis” by *Christoph Nihan* provides a new explanation of the references to the place names *Moriyyāh* in Gen 22 and *Šalēm* in



Gen 14. According to Nihan, *Moriyyāh* stands for the cultic center of Samaria in Shechem, while *Šalēm* stands for the Judean cultic center in Jerusalem. On this basis, the ancestral narratives present the integrative view that both of these cult places can be traced back to Abraham and are thus equally legitimate.

*Omer Sergi's* article "Jacob and the Aramaean Identity of Ancient Israel between the Judges and the Prophets" focuses on the historical background of the early Jacob story. He argues that through Jacob and Laban an early narrative reflects the relationship between the northern Jacob clan and the Aramean Laban clan, both of whom lived around the transitional zone of the Gilead. It describes close affinities between Jacob and Laban and thus it points to an Aramean identity of the people of Israel. Additionally, however, it also describes the separation of Jacob and Laban, which marks a political separation (possibly beginning in the 8th century BCE) between the groups descendant from these ancestors.

In his article "Koexistenz durch Unterwerfung: Zur Entstehung und politischen Intention der vorpriesterlichen Jakoberzählung," *Jakob Wöhrle* explains the formation and the political outline of the Jacob narrative. He reconstructs an older Jacob-Esau-story, which through the ancestors envisages a political subjugation of the Edomites. Later authors, however, connected the Jacob-Esau-story with the Jacob-Laban-story and added a new ending to this combination in Gen 32–33, which now describes Jacob's self-submission before Esau. In its current form, the Jacob narrative thus depicts nothing else than the abandonment of older imperial expectations and opts for the people's self-submission before the Edomites, suggesting that this should lead finally to a peaceful coexistence between these two people groups.

*Christian Frevel* in his article "Esau, der Vater Edoms' (Gen 36,9.43): Ein Vergleich der Edom-Überlieferungen in Genesis und Numeri vor dem Hintergrund der historischen Entwicklung" investigates the territorial concepts for Edom detectable behind the Jacob-Esau-narratives in Gen 25–36 and the book of Numbers. He shows that most parts of Genesis and Numbers locate the Edomite territory not, as often supposed, east of the Arabah, on the Edomite plateau, but rather in the southern Negev. Against this background he explains the different geographical concepts behind the references to Edom in Genesis and Numbers and relates them to specific historical and political situations from the 9th century down to Persian times.

The final part of the volume gives exemplary insights into the political reception of the ancestral narratives in early Jewish literature and in Islam. In his article "The Reception of the Abraham Narrative in the Book of Jubilees" *Jacques T.A.G.M. van Ruiten* shows how the book of Jubilees takes up and develops the ambiguous depiction of the Abraham narrative into a more exclusivist one. It uses the Abraham narrative to plead for the separation from the nations and, especially, to warn of mixed marriages. With this, the book

of Jubilees reveals the most extreme position within the early reception history of the Abraham narrative.

However, as *Beate Ego* shows in her article “‘Nimm dir eine Frau aus dem Geschlecht deiner Väter’ (Tob 4,12): Die Rezeption der Erzelternzählung im Tobitbuch,” not only the book of Jubilees, but also the book of Tobit uses and develops the ancestral narratives in a rather exclusivist way. The book of Tobit takes up certain motives from the ancestral narratives in order to substantiate and legitimize the imperative for endogamy. In presenting the protagonists of the Tobit story in line with the ancestors, the book of Tobit suggests that they are worthy descendants of the ancestors and thus part of the real Israel.

*George Brooke* in his article “The Politics of the Patriarchs in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” gives a comprehensive overview of the political reception of the ancestral narratives in the Dead Sea Scrolls. These scrolls refer again and again to the ancestral narratives and relate these narratives to the specific time and situation of the Qumran community. The political receptions of the ancestral narratives within the Dead Sea Scrolls focus, for example, upon the specific ethnos of Yehud, the inheritance, control and extent of the land, the status and role of Jerusalem and of the Hebrew language.

Finally, in his article “The ‘Other’ Ishmael in Islamic Scripture and Tradition,” *Reuven Firestone* traces the reception of Ishmael/Ismā‘īl in the Qur’an. In particular, he illuminates a rarely considered reference to a person called Ismā‘īl, who, at all likelihood, is not Ismā‘īl, the son of Abraham, but rather a martyr from the time of the separation between the Sunnī and Shi‘a communities. Not least by taking up features from the earlier Ishmael/Ismā‘īl tradition, the presentation of this “other” Ishmael receives its specific political character.

The current volume thus provides a wide range of insights into the political implications of the ancestral narratives. These narratives are the product of a centuries-long debate about the formation of a people, and about the contested relationships between this people and neighboring groups. The texts show both exclusivist and inclusivist tendencies. There is evidence of a will to political separation, at various times, but also a readiness to overcome divisive factors in search of peaceful coexistence. Several essays show how the narrative proposals for peaceful coexistence are especially clear in the social imagination of the Priestly traditions.

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Part I

Political Threads  
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