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Patriarchal Religion as Portrayed in Genesis 12-50

PhD, Augustine Pagolo

1996

The Oxford Centre for Mission Studies

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Comparison with Ancient Near Eastern and Later Israelite Religions

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Abstract

Although Wellhausen had already rejected the historicity of the patriarchs, and with it their religion, and argued that the patriarchal traditions were retrojections of the Monarchical period reflecting the time that the stories arose in Israel, Albrecht Alt made a definitive beginning to the study of patriarchal religion with his essay, 'Der Gott der Vater, in which he argued both for a patriarchal religion distinct from Mosaic religion and for the possibility of its originating during or just before the settlement of Israelite clans in Canaan. While many since Wellhausen have continued to reject the historicity of the patriarchs, a number of scholars, in the light of Ugaritic and other archaeological discoveries, have followed Alt in arguing for a distinct patriarchal religion before exodus and before Moses. However, the study of patriarchal religion has chiefly been confined either to the different divine names or to the social and legal practices attested in Genesis. The result of this is that the patriarchal religious and cultic practices frequently attested in Genesis have hardly been focused upon, except by a few scholars who have touched upon them only in passing.

The present thesis takes its departure both from the scholarly consensus and from the Hebrew Bible's own testimony that patriarchal religion was distinct from Mosaic religion. In the present thesis, this distinction is chiefly sought in patriarchal worship and cultic practices, such as altars, prayer, pillars, tithes, vows and ritual purity. These aspects are studied in the light of both second millennium ancient Near Eastern and Israelite parallels. This is legitimate since patriarchal religion is portrayed as pre-Mosaic, and since the narrators are Israelites with a Yahwistic ethos. Our findings have been that the patriarchs shared elements in common with both the ANE and Israel only in regard to the concept of their worship and cultic practices. However, the manner of their cultic activity bore no comparison to that of the ANE or Israel, in that the patriarchs themselves built altars and made sacrifices, conducted prayer, raised pillars and offered worship, all without the aid of an established cult or priests. Further, they did these things in an informal and family setting wherever they moved or happened to camp. Neither were the patriarchal religious activities of tithing, vowing or purifying performed at a cult place. While Jacob himself was the sole officiant of the ritual purification of his family at Bethel, Abraham's tithe was voluntary and secular, and Jacob's religious tithes and vows were unpaid probably due to the absence of any cult or the priests who would be expected to appropriate them. Thus, patriarchal religion was distinct from both the ancient Near Eastern and Israelite religions, and compatible only with the lifestyle portrayed in Genesis.