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Reading the patriarchal narratives (Gen 12 – 50) in the context of the exile

ABSTRACT

The question addressed in this contribution is how the stories about the patriarchs told in Gen 12-50 would resonate in the time of the exile? It was Gunkel who maintained that the patriarchal narrative should rather not be seen as belonging to the genre of historiography but to that of legend. It seems that this (deliberate?) vagueness on historical detail is yet another indicator that the patriarchal narratives were not meant to be historiography in the strict sense of the word, but was compiled for another reason in exilic times. A basic presupposition in this paper following the recent trend in scholarship will be that the Torah was formed during the exile. Texts where the patriarchs resurface in exilic texts from the prophetic literature (Isaiah 41:8, 51:1-3; Jer 33:25-26; Ezek 33:24) are briefly examined before some conclusions are made regarding the promise made to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3), the motif of entering and re-entering the land, living outside the land on foreign soil, the presence of Yahweh outside of the land, covenant, the genealogies in Gen 12-50, and God who acts in hidden ways.

1. INTRODUCTION

Pentateuch criticism has a long and distinguished tradition of dedicated research with impressive results. The never-ending flow of publications probing the questions of the origin and composition of the Pentateuch is ample proof of vibrant research still going on. Within the historical-critical paradigm the exact dating of various sources that eventually made up the Pentateuch was and is important. Earlier scholarship dated the material from the Pentateuch according to the main sources detected by historical-critical investigation. So, for instance, to quote von Rad as an important exponent of historical-critical scholarship, dated the Yahwist (J) ca 950, the Elohist (E) “perhaps one or two centuries later”, with the latest source, the Priestly document (P) is dated in the postexilic period (538-540) (von Rad 1975:25). Later on Gottwald (1985:173) locates the ancestor traditions within the tribal period of Israel in Canaan before the rise of the kingdom.

Gradually a new conviction was formed, dating the Torah or Pentateuch in the exilic period. The Yahwist’s date especially should not be dated to the period of Solomon and the idea that such an author/source or redaction ever existed before the exile was seriously doubted (Ie Roux 2001:449). Albertz (2003:252) remarks in this regard “Thus the existence of an exilic Patriarchal History has been gaining scholarly support and seems increasingly likely”. Brueggemann (2003:21) maintains in this regard “It is a widespread assumption that the Torah reached roughly its final form by the time of the exile or soon thereafter (587-537 BCE)”. Lemche (2008:127) recently put it even more straightforward: “The patriarchal narrative should be dated to the exilic period”. Mostly recently Blenkinsopp (2009:212) maintains: “A critical consensus now exists that the P History was composed after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 and subsequent deportations”. It has become almost a common conviction that it is very difficult if not impossible to date the patriarchs in a reliable way. It was Gunkel who maintained that the patriarchal narrative should

rather not be seen as belonging to the genre of historiography but to that of legend. It seems to me that exactly this (deliberate?) vagueness on historical detail is yet another indicator that the patriarchal narratives were not meant to be historiography in the strict sense of the word, but was compiled for another reason in exilic times. A basic presupposition in this paper following the recent trend in scholarship will be that at least (some form of) the patriarchal history and probably a large part of the Pentateuch as a whole were formed during the exile.

It is interesting to note how the patriarchs resurface in exilic texts from the prophetic literature (Isa 41:8, 51:1-3; Jer 33:25-26; Ezek 33:24; 28:25; 37:25; Blenkinsopp 2009:231). There were reasons for this to happen. According to Albertz (2003:246) the patriarchs recall Israel's history as a family history and now in the time of the exile stateless Jews would have no difficulty in rediscovering themselves in the events the patriarchs had to go through. Kiefer (2005) in his study on the concepts, words and historical background of the exile and Diaspora in Israel/Judah made similar important remarks on the role the patriarchs played. According to him (Kiefer 2005:107) the narratives on the patriarchs were written down for a reason, the reason that there must have been some kind of identification between the patriarchs and later generations. Kiefer (2005:107) maintains that it is the terminology and themes of migration, landlessness and the promise of the land that would resonate well with the time of exile and deportation from the land. The main theological traditions of Israel became more than a historical narrative about the past. It gained theological meaning and serve as blueprint for the current or future acts of God that can be expected (Kiefer 2005:108). That the purpose of the patriarchal narratives was that of identification is not a new insight as can be seen from the commentary of Westermann (1981:8) What is new in recent research is to locate the origin of the patriarchal narratives in exilic times.

The aim of this paper is to put the theory to the test and to the text. How would the stories about the patriarchs told in Genesis 12-50 resonate in the time of the exile? Le Roux (2001:449) noted that once the narratives about the patriarchs were 'moved' to the exile, the view of Abraham also changed. In particular, four theological themes will be highlighted, the issue of the land, covenant, the genealogies in Genesis 12-50, and God who acts in hidden ways.

2. TEXTUAL EVIDENCE

As was noted earlier, is it notable how the patriarchs resurfaced in exilic times. Although texts referring to the patriarchs are not many, they are nevertheless significant in especially prophetic texts.

The first reference to the patriarchs is encountered in Isaiah 41:8 *"But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham, my friend ..."*. It is difficult to decide whether this reference to Abraham is at home in an exilic or Judahite scenario (Tiemeyer 2008:52-53). A cluster of terms is used to describe Israel: servant, chosen and a friend or beloved of God. It is important to note that it is Abraham who is regarded as a friend of God. It is a statement about Abraham's relationship to God rather than the other way around. It seems that being chosen by God, the response to it is to be a friend or beloved of God. According to Beuken (1979:73) the parallelism between "being chosen" and to be regarded as a "friend" of God indicates Abraham's loyalty to God as a proper response to being chosen. An appeal to the patriarchs going back to events prior to the Exodus events is an appeal to the trustworthiness and fidelity of God. He can still be trusted and what is more the relationship between God and his people is still intact. In this way the patriarchs may now serve as models of hope for the exiles (van Seters 1999:81).

The second reference is found in Isaiah 51:1-2 *"Look to the rock from which you were cut*

and to the quarry from which you were hewn; look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth. When I called him he was but one, and I blessed him and made him many". The metaphor employed here is strange and not easy to interpret. The metaphor of 'rock' is usually employed to refer to God and not humans but in this case it seems better to interpret it as a metaphor of Abraham and Sarah (Tiemeyer 2008:55-56). Furthermore, 'quarry' indicating a cistern is never used as a metaphor indicating women. The purpose of the metaphors of rock for Abraham and quarry for Sara is not at once clear. Does it indicate the strength of Abraham being likened to a rock? Or does it indicate the hardness of Abraham and Sara and that God irrespective of their hardness and the impossibility of bearing children blessed them nevertheless? Does the reference to the blessing of a great number of descendants refer to the small numbers of the exiles? Irrespective of how difficult these questions are, the point is that a reference is made to the patriarchs in the time of the exile.

The third text that makes reference to the patriarchs is Jeremiah 33:25-26 "*This is what the Lord says: 'If I have not established my covenant with day and night and the fixed laws of heaven and earth, then I will reject the descendants of Jacob and David my servant and will not choose one of his sons to rule over the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For I will restore their fortunes and have compassion on them'*". This text is a difficult and controversial text mainly because verses 14-26 do not occur in the LXX. Furthermore, the reference to the Levites mentioned with David and in both cases in covenantal forms (Jer 33:20-21) makes one think that this text is rather post-exilic than exilic (Holladay 1989:229).

The fourth text referring to the patriarchs is Ezekiel 33:24 "*Son of man, the people living in those ruins in the land of Israel are saying, 'Abraham was only one man, yet he possessed the land. But we are many, surely the land has been given to us as our possession'*". The oracle addressed the issue of those who were still in the land after the exile took place. A popular saying is quoted by the prophet probably used by those who were not deported. The argument they followed is that since Abraham being only one individual, owned the land, they are entitled to possess the land because of their numbers. God has shown his great power in dealing with one man (Abraham), how much more He would do so now by replanting those who survived Babylonians (Eichrodt 1970:462; Albertz 2003:247; van Seters 1999:80). Tiemeyer (2008:51) argues that the unconditional promise of land to Abraham gained importance in time of the exile bringing hope and encouragement to those who amid all the dangers of a disordered land had decided to start life afresh.

What is striking here is the lack of theological considerations (Block 1998:259-260). There is no mention of God who promised and granted Abraham the land and no mention is made of the covenant between God and Abraham. The reference to Abraham as one individual reminds one of Isa 51:2, but the argument goes in a different direction. In Isaiah 51:2 the blessing of one man is accentuated culminating in a nation of many descendants. In Ezekiel 33:24 the reference to Abraham is made to claim the land on account of numbers without any mentioning of the blessing of the Lord. Time and space does not allow elaborating on two other texts in Ezekiel that also mention the patriarchs (Ezek 28:25; 37:25).

These texts is ample proof that the patriarchs do surface in the time of the exile and that in one way or the other hope and encouragement were drawn from them and the traditions surrounding them in a time when other traditions seemed to fail (David, Zion).

3. THE ISSUE OF THE LAND

There is little doubt that the experience of the exile impacted on the life, thought and religious convictions of Judah in a major way. Not only did they lose the kingdom of David with all the

promises attached to it, the exile had a grave impact on the way Judah thought of Yahweh, their God since times immemorial. The nagging question they had to answer was whether Yahweh was defeated by Marduk, the chief god in the Babylonian pantheon of gods now that the temple – the dwelling place of Yahweh – was devastated (Brueggemann 1997:149-150; Becking 1999:4-5). The exile also impacted on the psyche of the Judeans. To be exiled is an experience of displacement and a sense of severe loss. They were homesick for Jerusalem, there was a depressing sense of helplessness, on inability to have an influence on the course of political events, there was bitterness toward those who stayed behind and they suffered from a severe sense of guilt (Albertz 2003:104-105). Then they also lost the land – the land they once entered as a living proof of a fulfilment of a promise Yahweh made to them as far back as the ancestors together with promises of abundant fruitfulness, a land flowing with milk and honey.

In Ezekiel 33:25-26 Abraham and the land are linked to the situation of the exile. Mentioning Abraham will bring back memories more than only the figure of Abraham. The narratives connected with Abraham will also be recalled. Tiemeyer's (2008:65) conclusion is that the character of Abraham is an important and a recurring theme in exilic Judahite texts. It is especially the land that is emphasized and hence the relevance of the land promise made to Abraham is apparent. Abraham was a foreigner to whom the promise of land was made to him and his descendants by God himself. The exiles, deprived of their land could now hold on to the promise of the land once made to Abraham.

3.1 The promise made to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3)

It is in this regard that the promise made to Abraham in the programmatic text of Genesis 12:1-3 becomes relevant. A threefold promise was made to Abraham: an unidentified land, he will be the ancestor of a great nation and the nations of the earth will be blessed through him (Gen 12:1-3).

Two matters are significant for the purpose of this investigation. First, the promise of land and secondly, the location of where the promise of land was made to Abraham. Significantly, the promise of the land comes first. Without a land to make a living in, a great many offspring will have no meaning. The promise of land was made when Abraham was still outside of the land. Later history of Abraham will show that Abraham occupied only a small part of the land and that small part he had to buy from the owners of the land. Although the conditional promise of the land within Deuteronomistic circles may have been in jeopardy in the time of the exile, there is another promise of land the people can now adhere to – the unconditional promise of the land made to Abraham. As Abraham lived by the promise of the land, the exiled people will also live by the promise of the land. The land may be lost to Judah in the harsh reality of the exile, but the promise made by Yahweh to Abraham will be kept. However, one must not think that the mentioning of the land in the first place renders the second part as unimportant. The exiles would have recognized themselves as the descendants of Abraham as a fruit of the promise of a great offspring.

Brueggemann (2008:270) asks the question to whom the promise of land is addressed? Brueggemann answers the question by pointing out that a promise of land is made to those without land. He then goes on to identify four possible candidates, all of them considered to be landless. He mentions nomads, slaves and peasants as likely candidates but then interesting enough also includes exiles. In this regard Brueggemann (2008:271) argues that since the final form of the Old Testament text is accomplished in the sixth century exile, "we may imagine that the land promises in the final form of the text are addressed to displaced and deported Jews who have been scattered into other lands and who yearn for a return home to the land". According to Brueggemann, even though the land promises are much older than the sixth century, they

could be re-heard in a second listening. What happened was that the land promise made once and fulfilled with Israel's initial occupation of the land when it was said that Yahweh gave them rest (Jos 21:43), became the ground for hope for the exiled people. Yahweh's promise of the land once received a new meaning in the context of the people outside of the land during the Babylonian exile.

3.2 The motif of entering and re-entering the land

There is an interesting motif of entering and re-entering the land by the ancestors. The story of Abraham is a story of constant migration: from Ur to Haran to Canaan to the Negev to Egypt and then back to the Negev to Beth-El and eventually to Hebron. In Genesis 11:28-12:9 Abraham received a calling from God to leave Ur in Chaldean to an unknown land promised to him. It is not unlikely that this calling from Ur is an allusion to the people in exile calling from Babylon (Tiemeyer 2008:54). Just as Abraham was once called from Ur the exiles are called from Babylonia back to Judah. It is also interesting to note that Abraham moved into the land without any military actions or aggressive invasion of the land (Blenkinsopp 2009:234-235) just as the Judeans re-occupied the land when they returned from exile. What is also of particular interest is the journey from Canaan to Egypt recorded in Genesis 12:10-20. It is clear that Abraham did this in contradiction to Yahweh. Yahweh however intervened in Egypt and Abraham returned to the land once again. According to Albertz (2003:259) this incident served as a critique on those Judeans who in exilic times emigrated to Egypt. Clearly the intent of Abraham's stay in Egypt is to show that Egypt is not the place to stay – the land promised to them is the place where they belong. The mention of Egypt will certainly bring back memories of Israel's stay in and subsequent deliverance from Egypt. Reading this narrative against the background of the exile, Abraham's move to Egypt may also serve as a metaphor for the stay in exile. So, just as Abraham, the founding father of the people of Judah once moved to Egypt but re-enter the land under the guidance of Yahweh, so the exiled people will also once again re-enter the land from exile.

The same motif is found with Jacob. Jacob has to flee from his brother to Paddan Aram (Gen 27:43-28:2) and within this context the promise of the land is reiterated to Jacob. After a lengthy stay in a foreign land, he re-enters the land (Gen 31:18; 33:18). Later in his life Jacob and his family once again move from the land to Egypt (Gen 46:1-7). His migration to Egypt is accompanied by a promise that he will return to the land even beyond his death (Gen 46:4). When Jacob died he was indeed buried in Canaan at the same site where Abraham, his wife Sarah as well as Isaac and Rebecca were buried.

Joseph was sold by his brothers and eventually stayed in Egypt. Shortly before he died he made his sons swear an oath not to leave his body in Egypt but to take it with them "from this place" (Gen 50:25). In this way the book of Genesis comes to a close with the prospect of returning from Egypt to the Promised Land. God will come to or visit his people in Egypt "and take you out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (Gen 50:24). In Jeremiah 29:10 the same verb is used to describe God's action towards his people in exile. He will visit them and bring them back. This visit of God is according to Brueggemann (1982:379) an exile-ending intrusion something that served as the hope for the sixth century exiles in Babylon.

In the case of Abraham, Jacob and Joseph there is a motif of exit and eventual re-entering into the land can be detected. This means that the time of stay outside of the land will only be a temporary one, ultimately they will return to the land (Albertz 2003:269). It is interesting that this motive is lacking in the stories about Isaac. In fact, when Isaac considers moving due to a famine like the one his father experienced, he was advised by Yahweh not to move to Egypt but to stay in the land of Gerar together with a reiterated promise that he will be prosperous in the

land (Gen 26:1-6). In the case of Jacob and Joseph the re-entering into the land was transposed even to beyond death. To live in a foreign land is not home. The people living in exile could take courage from their forefathers who also had to live outside of the land but with the promise and even actually returning to the land. The fact that two of the ancestors died outside of the land may be a reminder that not all of the exiled people will return to the land.

3.3 Living outside the land on foreign soil

In Jeremiah 29:4-23 a letter of Jeremiah to the exiles is recorded encouraging the exiles to make the best of their stay outside of the Promised Land. Joseph (Gen 37-50) did exactly that. He is an example of an Israelite who on the one hand remained a true Israelite but on the other hand raise to one of the top positions to be occupied in Egypt. Joseph's position at the Egyptian court resembles the Judeans who make a good living in a foreign country and serve at the courts of foreign kings in the period in and after the Babylonian exile. There is life outside of the borders of the Promised Land. The Joseph narrative is ample proof of this. A people in exile can pursue its own interests and do so with success. The fate of Joseph is thus used to illustrate the opportunities and dangers that faced the Israelites in a foreign country. The life and times of Joseph is a way of showing how Yahweh's promise to Abraham concerning his blessings to other nations, became effective (Gen 12:1-3). At the same time the Joseph story also served as a warning to the dangers of living in a foreign land. He became a slave and landed up in prison because of a false accusation by a woman (Albertz 2003:263-264).

The Joseph story is also a story of divine providence. This is a theological theme that would also resonate well with exiles. Despite so many things that went wrong in the history of Joseph and his brothers, the Lord did not forsake him or his brothers. At crucial moments during his stay in a foreign country, he was reassured of the Lord's presence (Gen 39:2; 20-21, 23). The Lord's presence may also be experienced outside of the land.

Wisdom influences are also widely recognized in the Joseph narrative. The success Joseph achieves at a royal court, serving as loyal subordinate, planning ahead, rejecting sexual temptations by women, acquiring the virtues of humbleness etc are all very typical of wisdom traditions. It is in this regard that the Joseph narrative may be thought of as a Diaspora novella, "a short story orientated to life in exile" (Birch 1999:92-93).

The initial promise to Abraham that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" finds a special application in the story of Joseph. Joseph was indeed a blessing not only to his own people but also to the people of Egypt by Joseph's foresight to be prepared for the years of drought. The scope of the blessing reached other nations when Joseph act to the benefit of Egypt and by doing so was nothing more than a blessing to Egypt. Earlier on in Genesis 14 Abraham also acted to the benefit of foreign kings and in this way became a blessing to them.

3.4 The presence of Yahweh outside of the land

The narratives about Jacob are marked by two incidents where Jacob had a special encounter with God (Gen 28:10-22; 32:22-32). To a certain extent these encounters serve as a framing mechanism in the narratives about Jacob. In both cases at Bethel as well as Peniel, a very real encounter with God is experienced resulting in the names of the places as a testimony to the presence of the Lord. At Bethel not only the promise of the land was reiterated to Jacob, he was also assured of the presence of the Lord (Gen 28:15). At Peniel Jacob was blessed and had a name change from Jacob to Israel. What is noteworthy is that both encounters took place outside of the land promised to the patriarchs. The presence of God can thus be experienced even outside of the borders of the land. What happened once to the exiled Jacob rings still true to the exiled people in Babylonian times? What is more, these encounters took place at

locations not particular known as holy places where God can be met. God is thus not confined to be worshiped only at an official place of worship such as a temple and at the time of the exile no longer in existence. A nameless place somewhere between Beersheba and Haran became Bethel, a house, and a dwelling place like a temple, of God. The same motive is found in Genesis 46 where Jacob/Israel is assured of Yahweh's presence when he moved to Egypt. Yahweh will not abandon Israel in Egypt, to the contrary the relationship between God and Israel is not tied to the land; it could be as intense in the Diaspora as in Judah. Yahweh was with the patriarch Jacob once when he had to move to Egypt and so it will be for those living in exile outside of the borders of the land (Albertz 2003:267-268). The presence of God outside of the land is also one of the theological motives in the Joseph-novella. The story begins with the statement that God was with Joseph (Gen 39:1-6) and toward the end of the story it was stated again (Gen 45:8). Westermann (1982:286) indicated how the presence of God could be seen in Joseph's explanation of the Pharaoh's dreams. The ability to explain dreams is a gift from God and the outcome of this event was to the benefit of both Egypt and the people of God.

4. COVENANT

With the exile the conditional covenant made at Mt Sinai and further explicated in Deuteronomy apparently came to an end. Deuteronomy 28 clearly warned the people of what would happen should they trespass the conditions of the covenant. The curses predicted and foreseen in Deuteronomy came into effect. In the mind of many a Judean the Sinai covenant was nullified by the behaviour and sins of the people. The exiled people were in need of another covenant. The covenant Yahweh made with Abraham provided in precisely that need. There was thus another and unconditional covenant that Yahweh made with Abraham. In Genesis 15 (Gen 15:18; 15:6) the ritual of a covenant making is described. God from his side promised to give the land to Abraham and his descendents. Although the ritual implies a threat should one of the parties not adhere to the stipulations of the covenant, there is no explicit threat posed in the Genesis 15 account. The same promise of the land is found in Genesis 17:7 also as part of Yahweh's covenant with Abraham. The descendants of Abraham are included as the co-recipients of a promise that they will have everlasting possession of the land and thereby Yahweh will be their God (Klein 1979:137).

Genesis 17 is another text emphasizing the importance of a covenant but an important detail is added: circumcision. Considering that Genesis 17 is often regarded as so-called P material and that P is regarded as the most recent of the so-called sources of the Pentateuch, the link with exilic times is possible. Even if the source hypothesis is not accepted, Genesis 17 is dated within the time of the exile and by doing that the circumcision performed in Genesis 17 is linked with the exiles of the Babylonian exile (Wyatt 2009:407). What is of particular importance in terms of Gen 17 is that the covenant is termed as an everlasting covenant in verse 6 and that means that Israel's disobedience can in no way nullify the permanent validity of the covenant (Tiemeyer 2008:51; Blenkinsopp 2009:236-237, 241). It is often said that circumcision became important in exilic times especially as marker of Jewish identity (Collins 2004:103-104). That explains why stories about the covenant and circumcision as a visible sign of the covenant became important in exilic times. There was another covenant over and above the Sinai-covenant made by the same God the people could rely on. Circumcision is not a recent custom but one that can be traced back even to Abraham. Furthermore, the fact that the covenant with Abraham will include also the seed of Abraham (Gen 17:7) underlines the ongoing validity of the covenant with Abraham and the seed will of course also include those living in exile now (Klein 1979:136). There are also

covenantal overtones in the mentioning of Abraham in Isaiah 41:8-9. God will not - because of his covenant of grace with Abraham – abandon his people for ever (Tiemeyer 2008:53).

5. THE GENEALOGIES IN GENESIS 12-50

The importance of genealogies in exilic times is something scholars agree upon. According to Westermann (1981:48-49) the function of genealogies is to establish one's place in the society you belong to by a common history as well as a common fate and destiny. In a time of utter confusion and disorientation such as the time of the exile, it would have made sense to re-establish one's identity by looking back to the past and discover one's roots once again. It is noteworthy that genealogies occur time and again in Genesis 12-50 (Gen 25:1-4; 12-18; 36:1-30; 46:8-26). The genealogies bring to mind the Jacob-Esau strife. Considering the role Edom played in the events surrounding the exile, the strife and conflict depicted in the patriarchal narratives between Jacob and Esau may of some significance. Edom/Esau is on the one hand in conflict with Jacob/Judah while on the other hand they are also twins. The conflict described in the patriarchal narratives shows that it is an age-old conflict yet at the same time it is inexplicable that twins can be at war with one another.

6. THE GOD WHO ACTS IN HIDDEN WAYS

The time of the exile was a time of severe doubt in the capability of Yahweh. Was and is He still the Almighty one? One of the theological themes in the patriarchal narratives is that God acts in hidden ways. If the exiled people could thus not comprehend how Yahweh was still in control of world matters irrespective of the exile, the patriarchal narratives may console them. Way back in the history and also in a place outside of the borders of the Promised Land, Yahweh also acted in hidden and mysterious ways.

Closely related to this theme is the one emphasizing the importance of human endeavours. Even though Jacob is a trickster and speaking from a moral point of view, a doubtful character, he nevertheless enjoys the promises, presence and guidance of the Lord. The same theme is seen in the Joseph narrative. Humans may make innovative plans to survive in difficult times. Yahweh's guidance is often not to be seen in a spectacular way therefore the emphasis is on humans to work out plans to bring about a positive turn in events. In the end it turns out well because in all human planning Yahweh was at work in a hidden and mysterious way. This is also the conclusion Ebach (2007:40) came to. The Joseph-novella is about the hidden but active ways in which God is at work in history. But at the same time humans are at work themselves making plans in innovative ways to survive. These two trajectories is according to Ebach summarized right at the end of the book in Genesis 50:20 where it is stated that humans sometimes plan evil things but God let it happen for good.

7. CONCLUSION

The conclusion reached can only be a preliminary one. Much research is still to be done to further substantiate and refine an exilic reading of the patriarchal narratives. But at least it may be said that reading the Patriarchal narratives in an exilic milieu makes sense. It seems that many of the stories related to the patriarchs could have had meaning to an exiled Judah.

This exercise proved once again that it is important to keep a historical dimension in mind when reading Biblical texts. Ancient texts gained meaning only by reading them within a historical background. A a-historical reading may lead to a fundamentalistic reading and interpretation

with dire results to both the texts and its application.

Not every detail of the patriarchal narratives can be linked to the time of the exile. The enigmatic Genesis 22:1-19 or Abraham's meeting with the three figures in Genesis 18:1-15 or Rachel's theft of her father's household gods (Gen 31:19) especially in an exilic context where monotheism was emphasized, is unlikely to provoke any direct contact with an exilic context or every detail of the Joseph narrative will not by necessity fit an exilic background. Gottwald (1985:175) has shown how that the ancestor traditions are primarily concerned with the struggle to secure a viable community by means of the need for offspring and the repeated defence against outside pressures. Even the prominent issue of land may have a different meaning within the socio-historical horizon of the ancestors of Israel in earlier times.

To read the patriarchal traditions against an exilic background is in essence a hermeneutical exercise. Von Rad in his commentary on Genesis (Von Rad 1972:35, 39) made us aware of that. On the one hand, von Rad maintains, Israel saw the need and the promise of its own existence before God in Abraham and Jacob. On the other hand, the interpreter should abandon any attempt "for one meaning which is the only meaning that the narrator can have intended" (von Rad 1972:39). Why? Because the narrators of these stories did not hand over an explanation to the reader but rather to let the events narrated speak for themselves to the reader or hearer (von Rad 1972:39). This is something that has been done many times since the Babylonian exile – even up to present day circumstances where believers find some parallels between the stories told in Genesis 12-50 and their present day conditions.

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