Biographies of Abraham and Other Men[1]

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Abstract: The biography of Abraham can be compared with other biographies from the second millennium BC which are often treated as fictional. The motifs in the lives of the Egyptian Sinuhe and the Syrian Idrimi are typical. Does the recurrence of such motifs indicate they are imaginary or may they be based on the lives of real characters? Reasons for believing Sinuhe and Idrimi were historical, not legendary, figures are advanced as analogies for accepting that the biblical narratives of Abraham also tell of events in the life of an historical person.

Keywords: Sinuhe, Idrimi, Abraham, fictional autobiography

Introduction

The greater part of the Book of Genesis relates the biography of the patriarch Abraham, one of the most significant figures in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Did Abraham actually exist? Today, intensive literary and historical criticism has led to his biography being widely treated as fiction, invented late in, or after, the history of Israel, perhaps interwoven with a few early traditions.

While literary studies may reveal how the narratives reached their present form, I believe it is equally important to examine their form and contents to see if they may reflect the earlier era the texts claim.

Sinuhe

To do so, Abraham's life-story can be set beside biographies of other men of the second millennium BC. Most famous of all those ancient biographies is the Story of Sinuhe.[2] This Egyptian official had to leave the country for political reasons about 1930 BC, following the death of Amenemmes I, and settled in a fertile region somewhere in north Canaan. There he won the favour of a local semi-nomadic prince who gave him some land and his daughter's hand in marriage. Sinuhe adopted the local way of life and became rich and powerful. When a fearsome rival challenged him, he overcame him in a duel, gaining even greater stature. Yet he did not forget or lose contact with his homeland. A route taken by messengers from Egypt to Byblos and other places passed his new home, and other Egyptians had settled there. Maybe thirty or forty years later, in the time of Sesostris I (ca. 1971–1926 BC) circumstances in Egypt changed, so Sinuhe left Canaan and his family and was welcomed back to court in Egypt. There, it is assumed, he had his career recorded, perhaps on the walls of his tomb.

[1] This paper was edited after the passing away of Alan Millard. It has been left untouched apart from formatting and eliminating the most obvious typos.
[2] It presents itself as an autobiography; Sinuhe's own account of his life.

Sinuhe's story is known from two copies made on papyrus about a century after the time in which it is set, and from many copies made later when it became a standard work for training Egyptian scribes. Its poetic, literary character leads several scholars to think that the whole narrative, including its hero, is a fiction, perhaps with some factual basis, a major element being praise for the current king who permitted his return to Egypt.[3]

Even if it is an imaginary tale, we may see the value of the Story of Sinuhe in showing that a lengthy biography concerning an Egyptian's life in Canaan could be composed as a work of literature in the nineteenth century BC. Additionally, it makes a major contribution to modern knowledge of society and culture in the Levant in the Middle Bronze Age, for it repeatedly interlocks with the results of other linguistic and archaeological research.

Another Egyptian Biography

A more recent discovery may show that some of the features often thought to show the Story of Sinuhe is fictional rather than factual carry less weight than supposed. A fragmentary account of the career of another official, Khnumhotep III, who lived about 1850 BC in the reigns of Amenemmes II and Sesostris II, was carved on his tomb at Dahshur (Allen 2008). It is written in a literary style in the third person, like the Story of Sinuhe. The pieces recovered tell of an expedition to the coast of Syria, to the ports of Byblos and Ullaza. Its editor remarked, "The fact that it was inscribed on Khnumhotep's mastaba as a work of literature, in place of a standard tomb biography, provides an interesting counterpoint to the Middle Kingdom Story of Sinuhe, a literary composition cast as a tomb biography." Each case ends with a hymn to the pharaoh. Furthermore, as is the case with the Tale of Sinuhe, the editor observed, "unlike a standard tomb biography, it does not seem to have mentioned the tomb owner, except perhaps in the anonymous character of the 'overseer of an expedition of sailors'" (Allen 2008: 37, 38). As its discoverer has said, the Khnumhotep III inscription can be treated as a literary biography. The similarities with the Tale of Sinuhe may indicate that both began life as tomb inscriptions. The literary form need not mean that its contents are fictional. Arguments can be mounted either way, but the possibility that the Story of Sinuhe is based upon the career and adventures of a real person becomes stronger in the light of this new text.

Idrimi of Alalakh

While neither Sinuhe nor Abraham are known from independent sources, contemporary documents attest the existence of Idrimi, king of the town of Alalakh on the Orontes River, in the 15th century BC. His career is recounted on the statue of him created by his son and unearthed from the ruins of Alalakh. The king speaks, autobiographically, explaining how his family, his brothers and he, were

[3] Favouring a factual tale are, among others, Albright (1961: 130–31, 142); "more or less factual account" (Simpson 1973: 57); Kitchen (1996); "more likely a real tomb inscription" (Rainey 2004: 53). Opposed to its historicity, "einer fiktiven Biographie" (Helck 1971: 40); Bárta (2003); "literary romance" (Kemp 1983: 79, 143); "a pseudo-autobiographical work" (Wente 1990: 17); Parkinson (2009). Noncommittal, "Sinuhe, whether fictional or not … corroborates the archaeological picture to perfection" (Redford 1992: 83–87); "tale" (Grimal 1992: 161–163); "propaganda" (Hallo and Simpson 1971: 246); "It may be a true story" (Lichtheim 1973: 211).

chased out of Aleppo, where they had been ruling, and found refuge with his mother's family in Emar. Dissatisfied with life there, Idrimi left with horse, chariot, and groom, to cross the desert and settle in Canaan, in the town of Ammiya, where he found people from the Aleppo region who recognised him. He spent some years with Habiru warriors in the area until, assured by good omens, he embarked with his followers and sailed to the Orontes River. He was well received, eventually gaining acceptance by the local great power, the king of Mitanni, to whom his ancestors had been vassals. He defeated neighbouring kings and places within the Hittite kingdom, returning to Alalakh with captives and booty to build his palace, bringing peace and prosperity to the realm (Lauinger 2020).

Fiction or Fact?

Several of the episodes in Idrimi's story echo events in other biographies, notably the motif of the younger son who leaves home, endures hardship then reaches high status. The story of Joseph is an obvious parallel, the story of Sinuhe has similar elements, and many others may be cited. In 1972 the eminent Italian historian, Mario Liverani characterized such features as typical of fairy tales and concluded that texts containing them should be treated more as fictional than historical narratives, concluding that Idrimi's story was created along lines people understood in order to demonstrate his right to be king (Liverani 1972). The Idrimi inscription was then classed as a "Fictional Akkadian Autobiography" by Tremper Longman, noting its tripartite structure of autobiographical introduction, narrative, blessings, and curses (Longman 1991; 1997). However, that structure does not indicate a fictional composition; the three parts are integral to many Akkadian royal inscriptions which certainly contain historical narratives.

Now it is true that elements in Idrimi's story, as in Sinuhe's, recur in numerous narratives of kings gaining their thrones, or of insignificant people rising to great heights and that they are present world-wide in folktales and legends. Other examples of the pattern have been collected from the ancient Near East and Egypt in which someone leaves home to find refuge abroad, gaining status in exile, then returns to take a high position, all under the aegis of a divinity (Greenstein 2015). Yet the common occurrence of the pattern does not mean the events are always fictional, as Longman and others admit (Longman 1991: 71–73). The best fiction is credible because it mirrors life within its literary form. History provides similar accounts from later times. In 750 CE the Abbasids brought the rule of the Umayyads in Damascus to an end and slaughtered the Umayyad family. One son escaped with a small number of his family and soon fled from Syria with a single servant. He travelled south, into Egypt, was sheltered and then rejected by a ruler in Tunisia and made his way to Spain. Taking advantage of local rivalries, he made himself Emir of Cordoba in 756 and there his successors ruled until 1031.[4] In modern times the life of Winston Churchill could be analysed in a comparable way. He left home to join the army, became a reporter, was taken prisoner, escaped, returned home, entered politics to have an inconsistent career with failures and successes until he became a great war leader. In addition, he was the author of highly esteemed books and recognized

[4] His career is well covered by the Wikipedia entry and articles in the *Encyclopedia of Islam* and *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

artist. Could one hero achieve so much? Doubt may be justified, but a multitude of independent sources would prove it to be unfounded. The frequent themes of these biographies like those of Sinuhe and Idrimi, can be seen less as 'fairy tale' motifs than reflections of life. The presence of episodes in them which echo some in stories of other heroes does not mean they are imaginary; comparable circumstances may lead to comparable actions. They are experiences following familiar tracks because people know such things happen: younger sons do sometimes leave home, overcome obstacles and become leaders, outshining their siblings. Lacking the sort of evidence for the careers of Sinuhe or Idrimi that is available for Churchill, should they be doubted or dubbed 'fictional'? Significantly, they contain none of the monstrous creatures or magic that appear in clearly fictional Egyptian and Babylonian tales (Meltzer 1977).

Abraham

As for Sinuhe, as for Idrimi, so for the biography of Abraham, the label 'fictional' may be challenged. Following the publication of Thomas Thompson's and John van Seters' books in 1974 and 1975 (Thompson 1974; van Setters 1975), comparisons made between incidents in Genesis and in Babylonian texts which W. F. Albright and others had adduced to argue for a Middle Bronze Age date for the Abraham story have been dismissed because similar comparisons can be made with texts from the first millennium BC. However, later occurrences of similar events show no more than that they were common, so they could be at home in the Middle Bronze Age, unless they would be clearly anachronistic. Some of the personal names in the Patriarchal Narratives, such as Jacob (*ya'aqōb*), were current over two millennia, but names of that 'Amorite' perfective type (*y*QTL), such as Ishmael, which some of Abraham's family bore, diminish after the Late Bronze Age. That is when QTL perfective forms appear, such as Eleazar, forms absent from the Genesis accounts. The names, therefore, suit the early second millennium BC better than the first (Millard forthcoming). This is not the place to demonstrate the same for other topics, e.g., camels, Philistines (see Millard 2020; Heide and Peters 2021).

Does Genesis preserve a very ancient report?

Now the Tale of Sinuhe was recorded on papyrus rolls surviving from a century or so after the setting of the story, perhaps themselves copied from older rolls. There is debate about when the history of Idrimi was composed. It presents itself as the king's legacy, possibly as posthumous: "I reigned for thirty years" and "I entrusted my achievements to my son", so perhaps it claims to have been created shortly after the king's death, which can be placed late in the fifteenth century BC. An alternative interpretation places the carving of the statue and its inscription in the thirteenth century BC, as a piece of antiquarian patriotism, presenting past glories to encourage a new nationalistic attitude at a time of Hittite domination. The latter case seems to rest more on speculation than the former.

In contrast, the oldest copies of the Abraham biography, among the Dead Sea Scrolls, were clearly made very many centuries after the era they purport to describe. Furthermore, they do not reflect a

language used in the Bronze Age but Hebrew of the Iron Age, whether the time of the Monarchy or later. Can it be possible that the life story of a man living before 1,500 BC might be handed down for a thousand years, then composed as we have it? Most scholars would deny that, with the majority arguing that books were not written in Hebrew before about 800 BC. Yet evidence suggests scribes may have written books in Hebrew as early as the days of king David, as I have argued recently (Millard 2022). Now that is still long after the apparent time of Abraham. No example of a lengthy literary text like the chapters of Genesis has been found written in Canaan in the Bronze Age (se Millard 1998). The only written documents discovered there are cuneiform tablets which deal with government and business matters in Babylonian, a few fragments of schoolbooks and some laws, so it is assumed there were no others. Every one of those texts is subject to careful study and arguments about literacy are built upon them, but they only present part of the picture. Beside Babylonian, some scribes in Canaan would also have written in Egyptian. Pharaonic monuments and a few ostraca show their skill. Unfortunately for us, they wrote usually on papyrus or leather rolls which do not survive. They did exist! The Story of Sinuhe includes a lengthy decree sent to him from the Pharaoh and his reply and the new Khnumhotep inscription refers to various letters. Although those in Sinuhe might be imaginative, they illustrate the use of Egyptian writing reaching the Levant. That is supported by inscriptions from Byblos, the port from which cedar wood was exported to Egypt. At about the same time, princes of Byblos had memorials written in Egyptian and inscribed on stone and I suggest that other stone pillars were plastered and inscribed (Millard 2022). There is no room to doubt that much more was written on perishable materials and so lost, just as much is known to have been written in later ages but is almost entirely lost (see Krings 1995).

My plea, therefore, is for a “respectful” attitude to ancient texts, including the Hebrew Bible. If that does no more than show how a statement is compatible with its context, it establishes that the statement may accurately reflect the situation. As such, it should only be counted as imaginary or fictional if an indubitable case were brought against it. If the present form of a book dates to a time long after the events it relates, that does not necessarily deny the reality of its narrative.

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