Negotiating (with) the Natives: Ancestors and Identity in Genesis

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Introduction

No sooner does the Abraham of Genesis arrive in Canaan than the narrator informs us that “the Canaanite was then in the land” (Gen 12:6). Yet immediately God announces his intention to give this land to Abraham’s descendants (v. 7). From the outset of the Abraham narrative, the divine promise of nationhood and territory is haunted by the presence of the indigenous inhabitants of Canaan. Though mostly a silent feature of the landscape, they emerge from time to time to encounter and threaten the first family.

In the Genesis account of their wanderings, the ancestors are pictured negotiating around and with the natives of Canaan proper, as well as with those of the border areas of Egypt and Philistia. These encounters identify the flash points between the fathers and the locals, and their resolutions define a boundary between them. What is immediately striking about this boundary is that it is never defined in religious terms. In Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic literature, Moses and the Deuteronomistic editors repeatedly distinguish Israel’s God and Israel’s mode of worship from the idolatry and ritual practices of the Canaanites, forbidding the latter to the Israelites and demanding the destruction of the local sancta. Genesis, by contrast, is remarkably silent about religious differences. If Israelite identity

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in Deuteronomy hinges on the people’s exclusive devotion to YHWH and absolute rejection of the deities, images, and practices of the natives, what constitutes the identity of the ancestors when religious difference is not an issue? In this essay I examine the ancestors’ encounters with the locals in order to explore the nature of the boundary between the two groups and what that boundary reveals about Israelite identity as constructed by the writers of Genesis. If, as Jan Assmann puts it in his fascinating study of the history of the memory of Moses as an Egyptian, “a culture shapes an identity by reconstructing its past,” I ask here how Genesis remembers the natives and how that memory functions to shape Israelite identity.

Largely prescinding from questions about the authorship of Genesis, renewed in recent years by the so-called minimalists, I intend to focus on Genesis as a repository of collective memory rather than to view either the book as a whole or its putative sources as the expression of the ideology of a particular group or period in the history of Israel. Writers wove into Genesis their imaginative constructions of the origins of their people, basing their constructions on received traditions, but modeling and reinventing them according to the needs of the present. So without specifying the date of the “editorial present” of Genesis, I want to see how the encounters with the natives represented in that book set the stage for the rest of the biblical drama. If we are what we choose to remember, then the memory conveyed by these tales of tension between the ancestors and the natives are key to understanding the literary fount of Israelite identity.

This tension reflects in a specific way the reaction of any group to the Other, those whom the group defines as “not-us.” Otherness, a number of scholars suggest, is less an objective reality, an absolute set of clearly demarcated differences, than it is a


4For a rigorous historical approach to biblical expressions of ethnicity, see Kenton L. Sparks, Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1998). In his account of the development of ethnic sentiments, however, Sparks does not deal with the Pentateuch, since he considers it to be a late, Persian-period document.

5I borrow the phrase “editorial present” from Seth Kunin (The Logic of Incest [JSOTSupp 185; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995] 50) to refer to the final form of the text. Kunin, however, uses the term in a more strictly structural sense, suggesting that this form reflects the structures of the editorial process though not the structures of the antecedent texts that comprise it. In The Fate of Shechem or The Politics of Sex: Essays in the Anthropology of the Mediterranean (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 139, Julian Pitt-Rivers attributes the term to Edmund Leach.
way of relating, a consequence of interactions. While there are clearly phenotypal, ethnic, social, cultural, and religious differences among various human groups, the perception of difference is not essential, but functional; the same qualities that bind us together today may distinguish us from each other tomorrow. Images of the Other are continually in flux, shifting as our situations change. Yet, perceptions of difference often crystallize as group stereotypes, establishing discourses of difference through which outsiders are defined. Whether or not these stereotypes represent projections of our own anxieties, as some theorists argue, they reify powerfully, taking on a life of their own. Ultimately, though, as Jonathan Z. Smith puts it, “Otherness is not a descriptive category, an artifact of the perception of difference or commonality. Nor is it the result of the determination of biological descent or affinity. It is a political and linguistic project, a matter of rhetoric and judgment.”

Labeling and defining the Other, then, is a means of control, a way to demarcate the dangerous. Moreover, to raise a point of importance to this study, if a group defines itself in part over against others, it is the near Other, not the geographically distant Other, that is most problematic. The very group that is nearest us in space, and consequently in culture, is the one that presents the greatest challenge to our separate identity. Although objectively speaking, the differences may be smaller between contiguous groups, the “political and linguistic project,” as Smith says, of constructing a cultural boundary is more intense. So the Canaanites, perceived as prior and concurrent residents of Canaan, offer a greater threat to Israelite identity than do the more distant, more real, and more lethal Assyrians and Babylonians.

While the Canaanites first appear on the biblical scene when Abraham arrives in Canaan, an episode featuring their eponymous ancestor prepares the reader for that appearance. Ham’s apparently sexual offense against his father Noah draws down Noah’s curse upon Ham’s descendants, most particularly Canaanites, who, unexpectedly, take Ham’s place as the object of the curse (Gen 9:25–27). Clearly, the need to single out Canaanites as especially punished (“the lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers,” v. 25) has dictated this substitution. Still, the logic of the tale sets apart all the descendants of Ham, including, for instance, the Egyptians.

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8 Smith, “What a Difference,” 46.

9 A prime illustration of this principle is the case of the biblical Gibeonites (Joshua 9), inhabitants of Canaan, who, rightly fearing slaughter at the hand of Joshua, pretend to “come from a distant land” (v. 6) and convince Joshua to make a pact with them, thus avoiding the fate of their Canaanite neighbors.
and Philistines, for the sin of their ancestor. The otherness of the Hamites is not biological, not racial, not written into the nature of things, but rather moral, the result of human choices.

Contrast this notion of otherness with that displayed by ancient Greeks or Egyptians, for whom humanity is divided between us and them: Greeks versus barbarians or Egyptians versus Asiatics. In the Egyptian Tale of Sinuhe, for instance, non-Egyptians, whether mountain dwellers or Bedouins, become “Asiatics,” and “No Asiatic makes friends with a Delta-man (i.e., Egyptian).” In both Greek and Egyptian cultures, foreigners come to stand for not just the other, but what Meir Sternberg calls the “anti-self,” the polar opposite of the values that define humanity. In the Bible, by contrast, the foreigner (הַמָּרוֹם or יִשְׂרָאֵל) is not the opposite of the Israelite, not a quintessential Other, but a person with a full range of human possibilities. Foreigners may be excluded from privileges or bans applicable to Israelites or they may be “joined to the LORD” (Isaiah 56:3–7). They may be portrayed negatively, as are Obadiah’s Edomites who “cast lots for Jerusalem” (1:11), or positively, as is saintly Ruth.

Despite Ham’s sin, the genealogies immediately following the curse in the Table of Nations proceed to derive all humans from a single ancestor, Noah. These genealogies and those preserved elsewhere in Genesis constitute a unified system affirming the common humanity of all nations. The nations issuing from the sons of Noah are named without qualification or judgment. Similarly, the nations and tribes bordering Israel are spawned from the descendants of Abraham—family in essence, however much circumstances may lead to enmity.

It is in the context of this familial relationship among the nations and this nuanced image of the foreigner that the special position of the natives in Genesis must be viewed. In his monumental Hebrews Between Cultures, Meir Sternberg sees Ham’s “unspeakable violence” against his father Noah as determinative for the subsequent biblical portrayal of the unique otherness of the Hamite nations, including Canaanites, Egyptians, and Philistines. Unlike foreigners in general, Sternberg contends, Hamites stand against Israel as a unique antigroup manifesting their antipathy through the disposition toward violence and sexual predation that they have inherited from their progenitor. Cursed by Noah to be a slave to his broth-

10Sternberg, Hebrews Between Cultures, 189–91.
11Sinuhe essentially becomes an Asiatic by marrying one and fathering her children. His transformation, though, is set against the regnant and absolute contrast between Egyptians and Others. See the discussion in Sparks, Ethnicity and Identity, 77–80.
12These and other examples are noted by Sternberg, Hebrews Between Cultures, 192.
14Sternberg, Hebrews Between Cultures, 194.
ers, Canaan and his Hamite siblings struggle against their genetic victimhood by victimizing Abraham’s line: Canaanite deceit, Egyptian enslavement, and Philistine domination plot Israel’s early history. The term “Hebrew,” Sternberg vigorously argues, is neither the biblical version of the term “Habiru” nor a synonym for “Israelite,” but rather a pejorative ethnicon voiced only by Hamites or by Israelites in a self-deprecating fashion in real or imagined encounters with Hamites. This usage encapsulates the Bible’s representation of Hamites as the first antisemites. Despite the persuasiveness of much of Sternberg’s argumentation, I, as will become clear below, find the image of the natives in Genesis rather more nuanced.

The Hamite connection, however, does warrant my treatment of the Egyptians and Philistines of Genesis, along with the Canaanites, as native peoples. Although some biblical writers, such as Amos, knew that the historical Philistines were not indigenous to Canaan (9:7), Genesis displays no such awareness. Nor do its writers differentiate between those peoples who had ongoing influence in their world—Egyptians and Philistines—and those who, if they ever existed as ethnic entities in Canaan, did so no longer. Some of these groups—Perizzites, Jebusites, and Hivites—are not attested outside of the Bible, while the terms “Hittite” and “Amorite” have been severed from their geographic origins and appear in Genesis as ethnicons. Most problematic is the term “Canaanite” itself, which in extrabiblical sources nearly always designates a geographic area yet in the Bible denotes a particular people. Whatever differentiated knowledge of these groups may have existed, the narrator treats them all as ancient native peoples of the ancestors’ world. The Pharaoh of Egypt, Ephron the Hittite, and Hamor the Hivite all appear as leaders of their respective groups, but they bear no marks that distinguish them as members of the peoples they represent. Genesis remembers the natives by different names but in a single guise.

In the two sections that follow I argue that the boundary between ancestors and natives is defined on sexual and economic grounds. In the conclusion, I return to the

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17Whether or not “Canaanite” and the related ethnicons may have had contemporary references for the writers of Genesis is another question. If, for instance, these tales developed in an eighth-century Hezekian or seventh-century Josianic setting, “Canaanite” might allude to rural clans that Hezekiah or Josiah aimed to disenfranchise. “Canaanite” would then be a pejorative term with a contemporary bite. See Baruch Halpern, “Jerusalem and the Lineages in the Seventh Century B.C.E.: Kinship and the Rise of Individual Moral Liability,” in Law and Ideology in Monarchic Israel (ed. B. Halpern and D. W. Hobson; JSOTSupp 124; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991) 77–79; Cohn, “The Second Coming of Moses,” 69–74.
silence about religious difference adumbrated earlier and suggest why Genesis takes a different approach to Israelite identity from the Deuteronomistic literature.

Wives and Sisters, Sisters and Wives
The tales of the ancestors’ meetings with the local population, though seeming to retard the movement toward the fulfillment of the divine promises, are critical to understanding how Genesis constructs Israelite identity. In every one of these tales, the natives are shown to be a threat to the very existence of the ancestral line. If the keynote of the ancestor tales is the repeated promise of nationhood and land, the encounters between the ancestors and the natives threaten to torpedo both elements of that promise. In these encounters, the locals are shown wielding sexual and economic power over the ancestors and aiming to use this power to dominate and assimilate them, thus aborting the divine intention. Yet the combined forces of divine intervention and the ancestors’ own sense of destiny keep the locals at bay and draw a boundary around Israel-to-be. This boundary is ethnic and territorial rather than religious or political. It is based on kinship and physical separation, not on distinctions of belief or cult.18

In line with the myth of the genealogical origins of nations, the narrative of the ancestors that begins in Genesis 12 traces the genealogy of Israel but problematizes what in Genesis 1–11 was a purely natural process of “begetting” by working through the dangers to endogamy at every turn. Abraham arrives in Canaan with wife in tow; his problem will be keeping her. Himself born in Canaan, Isaac faces a different challenge. Endogamy demands that he take a wife from non-Canaanite kin, yet Isaac must not leave Canaan if he is to maintain title to it. Happily, Abraham’s servant successfully journeys to the old country and retrieves Rebekah, Isaac’s first cousin once removed on his father’s side. Conversely, Ishmael, Isaac’s unchosen half-brother, confirms what R. Christopher Heard calls his “diselection” by wed- ding an Egyptian like his mother, a match proper only for an improper heir.19 Esau favors local women. The narrator’s report that these Hittite women were a source of bitterness to Esau’s parents (Gen 26:34–35) is confirmed by Rebekah’s memorable lament over Esau’s wives: “If Jacob takes a woman from among the daughters of the Hittites like these, from among the daughters of the land, what would life be

18Ethnicity and the causes of ethnic sentiments have been investigated in a number of recent stud- ies. With respect to the Bible, see Sparks, Ethnicity and Identity, 1–6. I use the term here to specify distinctions based on kinship rather than those based on religion. On the other hand, Manning Nash, in The Cauldron of Ethnicity in the Modern World (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) 10–11 sees kinship, commensality, and a common cult as together the three main markers of ethnicity in the modern world.

to me?" (27:46). So Jacob is sent back to his kin, identified by Isaac as maternal and, though distantly, paternal relations as well, and returns to the same well, as it were, where he encounters his first cousins. Meanwhile, Esau, seeking to heed his father’s warning to Jacob against marrying Canaanite women, marries his paternal cousin, Ishmael’s daughter. As child and grandchild of an Egyptian, however, she hardly qualifies as a suitably endogamous spouse.20

Though arranged marriages with kin in Paddan-Aram keep the natives at bay, the course of events brings on other challenges. The three well-studied wife-sister episodes form one clear trajectory of danger. In their travels, first Abraham and then Isaac stand to lose their lives and their wives to local kings, the unnamed Pharaoh of Egypt and the Philistine Abimelech of Gerar. What lies behind this literary topos, says anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers, is the ancient Mediterranean custom of “sexual hospitality,” the use of women to establish patron-client bonds between host and guest. On this reading, the patriarch gives over his woman in order to dwell in the land unmolested (though molestation is precisely the fate of the woman herself!), protected by the “king” and permitted to graze his flocks and herds.21 Abraham and Isaac, however, seem unfamiliar with the Mediterranean custom, for they both assume that in order to have the wife, the foreign ruler would have to kill the husband, avoiding adultery at the cost of murder. Thus, Abraham and Isaac pass off their wives as their sisters to secure their own safety. Behind the tales, however, is the assumption that the fathers would have found it acceptable to use their sisters to establish alliances.

The writers, however, reject this practice: the sequence of the three wife-sister episodes charts an increasing resistance to sexual hospitality as well as the increasing recognition that God, not sexual exchange, brings about the enrichment of the chosen family. In the first episode (12:10–20), Pharaoh’s talent scouts spot the attractive (vv. 11, 14) Sarah and take her into Pharaoh’s harem, and Pharaoh duly rewards Abraham with flocks, herds, and slaves. But a divinely sent plague and Pharaoh’s expulsion of the couple, foreshadowing the exodus, rescue the foremother. In the second episode (20:1–17), Sarah, now pregnant, remains untouched by King Abimelech, to whom God reveals Sarah’s status as wife in a dream. Now Abraham’s reward from Abimelech comes after Sarah’s release as compensation for the indignity caused her. Here, Abraham’s after-the-fact explanation that Sarah really is his sister can be read either as vindication or as a lame excuse. In the third

20Ramban remarks that Esau’s impropriety was not marrying Mahalat, Ishmael’s daughter, by which Esau meant to heed his father’s warning to avoid Canaanite women, but rather his failure to divorce his Hittite wives. “He took her [Mahalat] besides his former wives [28:9], and he did not divorce the evil wives since he followed his heart’s desire more than he followed the will of his father.” Ramban: Commentary on the Torah, Genesis (trans. and ed. Charles B. Chavel; New York: Shilo, 1971) 348.

version (26:6–11), the matriarch, now Rebekah, never even enters the king’s palace. Abimelech, apparently not about to be fooled again (if we read diachronically) by the wife-sister caper, spies on the supposed siblings and finds them engaged in unfamilial familiarity. The reader knows that Isaac and Rebekah are unambiguously not brother and sister, but cousins, and so Isaac cannot make any such excuse to the king, admitting rather to a lie based on fear. This time the patriarch’s reward comes directly from God, quite independently of the aggrieved Abimelech.

The wife-sister stories demonstrate the dangers that threaten the integrity of this outsider family as it wanders in lands occupied by others. In fact, the Abraham of the second story reveals his perception of ubiquitous danger by admitting that he told Sarah to say he was her brother in “whatever place we come to” (20:13). For Sternberg these episodes demonstrate the Hamite predilection for sexual violence. Before we even see the Egyptians, Abraham fears their designs on Sarah (12:11–13); his deception anticipates that of the midwives who rescue the Hebrew newborn boys in a culture that lets girls live so that they may, as in Sarah’s case, become prey for Egyptian men. The Philistines, Hamites as well, operate under the same harem mentality, nabbing even geriatric Sarah, no longer described as lovely, and leaving Abraham alone.

While Sternberg wants to see these incidents as early representations of the vicious Egyptian and Philistine antigroup designs on Israelites that will manifest themselves most dramatically after the events recorded in Genesis, taken in themselves they seem less nefarious. If the custom of sexual hospitality had any currency for the authors of Genesis, then both Pharaoh and Abimelech are simply playing according to the rules, taking in an eligible “sister” in return for the protection of a brother in alien territory. Moreover, the ruse reflects less favorably on the patriarch himself than it does on either Pharaoh or Abimelech, for it is the patriarch who relies on schemes rather than God, while the foreign king responds immediately to divine prompting. Abraham’s after-the-fact explanation to Abimelech—“I thought that surely there is no fear of God in this place” (20:11)—turns out to be quite wrong. When God appears to Abimelech in a dream and explains the situation, the king reacts as only one who fears God would, following the divine instruction to return Sarah and then challenging Abraham’s immoral action. Later, the Abimelech of the third episode shows himself to be God-fearing in another way by taking preventative action to avoid “guilt” by promising death to any of his people who would molest either Isaac or Rebekah (26:10–11). And while Pharaoh receives no personal divine visitation, he apparently interprets what readers know with certainty to be divinely-sent plagues (12:17) as the result of some supernatural intervention on Abraham’s behalf: “What is this you have done to me?” (v. 18). Although these episodes, taken together, surely show the dangers to the ancestors

22Sternberg, Hebrews Between Cultures, 111.
in lands not their own, they do not contain a collective memory of the foreign kings as evil personified. In fact, in two of the tales it is the beauty of the matriarchs that draws the attention of the kings: how indeed could they resist? It is the threatening situation into which the landless ancestors are repeatedly pressed by history, rather than the sexual designs of the Hamites, that seems to me the focus of these stories. That situation risks impregnation of the mothers of Israel by foreign kings; each episode explains how that result is prevented.

What these tales demonstrate is that wives cannot be exchanged for security, however much their patriarchal husbands may try to arrange it. In each case God intervenes—with a plague (12:17), dream (20:3–7), or blessing (26:12)—to redeem the wife and thus keep the first family intact. But what happens if a woman really is an unmarried sister and not a wife? Can an unattached female be exchanged to open a political alliance? This is one way of putting the question of the episode of Dinah, sister to Jacob’s sons. The rape of Dinah by Shechem, son of the local Hivite chief Hamor, sets off a series of reactions that breaks the fragile peace between the ancestors and the natives and finally sets a clear ethnic boundary between them.

Even before the rape, the episode opens on an ominous note. The introductory exposition describes one “daughter,” Dinah, setting off to see the local “daughters” (גַּלְגֹּלֵל לִבָּה, 34:1), the daughter of Jacob out there among the “daughters of the land.” Perhaps we are to imagine that, with twelve brothers at home, Dinah was simply looking for some female companionship. Yet, by employing the same phrase that Rebekah used when she contemplated the “native women” unacceptable for her son Jacob (27:46), the narrator puts us on guard. Here, though, not the local girls, but a local boy poses the threat. Indeed, before Dinah has a chance to “see” him, Shechem “sees” her and, in rapid sequence, takes her, lies with her, and abuses her (34:2). That his violence upon her begets his love for and romancing of Dinah may be hard to swallow, but the narrator’s attestation (“his soul clung to Dinah, daughter of Jacob, and he loved the girl and spoke to the girl’s heart,” v. 3) leaves no room for doubt. While Dinah’s feelings are not disclosed, Shechem, despite his terrible overture, seems a changed man. If it is permissible to give sisters to local men, Shechem just might do.


24Fewell and Gunn assert that the phrase “to speak to the heart of” is perlocutionary (a speech act that affects the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the hearer), thus indicating “both Shechem’s action and Dinah’s positive response” (“Tipping the Balance,” 196). Citing other biblical uses of the phrase and analyzing them together with this one according to J. L. Austin’s criteria, Sternberg
Yet, as the story continues, the depiction of the untrustworthiness of the natives comes to show that even a single marriage with them would result in total assimilation. Thus, when Shechem demands that his father secure Dinah for him as a wife, Hamor uses the occasion to make a broader proposal which invites intermarriage as a prerequisite for economic integration of the fathers with the natives: “Intermarry with us: give your daughters to us, and take our daughters for yourselves. You will dwell among us, and the land will be open before you; settle, move about, and acquire holdings in it” (34:9–10). While this offer to Jacob and sons appears generous, it is undercut by Hamor’s later speech to his own people. There he attempts to convince them to comply with Dinah’s brothers’ demand for universal Hivite circumcision as a prerequisite for the marriage of Dinah to Shechem by relying on an economic argument quite different from the one he proposed to the Jacobites. While at first he echoes the brothers’ proposal (“these men are at peace with us [אנה עשת נפשי נפשו],” vv. 21–22), he then discloses his own ulterior motive. To his own people he does not speak of Jacob’s sons “acquir[ing] holdings” in the land, but rather argues that “their cattle and substance and all their beasts will be ours” (v. 23). Not economic integration but domination is the reward Hamor offers for the pain of circumcision.

The Hivites, to be sure, are not the only deceivers, for the narrator had earlier revealed that Jacob’s sons’ offer to permit the marriage and to settle among the Hivites as “one people” (גירת וגו, v. 16) was made “with guile,” as the subsequent slaughter of the convalescing circumcisees demonstrates. Yet, as we learn only in retrospect, the brothers’ deception had a more pressing justification. Not until after Simeon and Levi kill Shechem and Hamor is it revealed that Dinah had all along been “detained,” as Sternberg puts it, for “they took Dinah from Shechem’s house and left” (v. 26). Whether Dinah’s detention at Shechem’s place has been forcible (Sternberg) or voluntary, Dinah having been won over by Shechem’s affection (Fewell and Gunn), the brothers would have no way of knowing. They only know that she has been raped and detained, and that the Hivite negotiators are silently holding her over their heads when they propose ethnic and economic integration. From the brothers’ perspective deceit is justified if the end result is Dinah’s liberation. So the proposal of mass circumcision turns out to be, for the Hivites, a plausible if painful requirement and, for the brothers, a cunning way to defeat superior numbers and rescue Dinah.

disputes its perlocutionary function. On the contrary, here and everywhere else Dinah’s heart is “opaque” (“Biblical Poetics and Sexual Politics,” 476–79).

25The Hebrew קיוב לש, translated in the NJPS as “move about,” may also mean “trade” as in the NRSV, a rendering that probably better suits the economic aims of Hamor.

26See 33:18.

27Sternberg, The Poetics of Biblical Narrative, 467.

The focus on circumcision here, as a secondary marker of ethnicity, identifies this surgery as the prerequisite to “become like us” (v. 15). The problem with Shechem, so the brothers’ demand communicates, is not that he is a rapist, and the problem with the Hivites is not that they are natives. The brothers pretend that ethnic unity is possible, that once Shechem and company are properly branded, the two peoples can be one. But circumcision in Genesis sets apart the descendants of Abraham and their slaves (17:12–13); it does not function as a means to join them to others. That the Hivites expect circumcision to make them and Jacob’s clan into one people shows, perhaps, a native naïveté; the author represents the locals as misunderstanding the significance of circumcision in the patriarchal context and thus, as appropriately duped for their own treachery. Yet here, as in the wife-sister stories, the Hamites are not depicted wholly negatively. As rapist turned lover, Shechem wants to do the right thing. Offering to pay any bride-price for Dinah (and thus, implicitly following the Deuteronomical law [Deut 22:28–29] for a man who takes and lies with a virgin), he wields the knife on his member immediately and, together with his father (vv. 22–23), urges the same on the members of his clan. But his ethics cannot trump his ethnicity; however sincere Shechem may have become, as a Hivite he is ineligible to marry Dinah (Deut 7:1–3).

Though it may seem that the brothers’ subsequent slaughter of all the men and seizure of all their wives, children, and property more than balances Shechem’s seizure and rape of Dinah—so Jacob, silent until now, finally opines—their action draws an absolute line in the sand. First, by their vengeance, the brothers reject not only intermarriage but any sort of economic parity on native terms. Sisters cannot be exchanged any more than wives can, and real estate is not worth the price. While Abraham was willing to accept a client status with respect to Pharaoh by handing over his wife, Jacob’s sons turn down the economic advantage that would become theirs by handing over their sister and daughters to the people of Shechem. Second, by insisting that not even circumcision can domesticate the natives, the story underscores the necessity of remaining distinct from them. Shechemite men cannot

30Sternberg contrasts the brothers’ speech “in its insistence on matters of principle” (The Poetics of Biblical Narrative, 457), with the Hivites’ preceding speech, which focuses on economic inducements. Yet from a Hivite perspective the highminded demand of circumcision to remove a “disgrace” would likely be perceived as a ritualistic hurdle.
31Even though a circumcised (“foreigner”) may, like a citizen, eat the passover lamb (Exod 12:43–49) he remains a “p and does not, by virtue of his circumcision, become an Israelite.
32Fewell and Gunn note this compliance with Deuteronomical law: an offer of marriage and monetary compensation of the father (“Tipping the Balance,” 210). But Sternberg rightly points out that this law applies only to Israelite men; marriage with the seven nations of Canaan, including the Hivites, is outlawed altogether (Deut 7:1–3). See Sternberg, “Biblical Poetics and Sexual Politics,” 482–84.
join the tribe even if they bear the tribal mark. On the other hand, the Hivite women captives can apparently be absorbed en masse without threatening the integrity of the first family (v. 29). Shechem’s willingness to meet the brothers’ demands cannot erase the “disgrace” of rape (an act to which Shechem never actually confesses) in the brothers’ minds, and when dealing with natives presumed to be holding their sister, duplicity is justified, just as it was in the wife-sister tales. Though Jacob laments his sons’ seeming overkill in his first spoken words (v. 30), his is not the last word in the story. To his practical and egocentric concerns (“You have brought trouble on me, making me odious among the inhabitants of the land”), Simeon and Levi offer an idealistic answer: “Like a harlot shall he treat our sister?” (v. 31). The brothers’ aggression forecloses the possibility of exogamy and establishes a boundary that cannot be crossed.

Or can it? Is what’s sauce for the goose also sauce for the gander? Simeon, the leader of the vendetta against Shechem and company, is himself credited with a son by a Canaanite woman (46:10), though Jacob’s deathbed blessing upon him, apparently referring to the vendetta, curses his (and Levi’s) anger and promises that his house will be divided and scattered. And though Judah’s marriage to another Canaanite woman, the daughter of Shua, produces three sons (38:2–5), the first two, Er and seed-spilling Onan, are both childless and killed off by God, while the third, Shelah, is at the end of Genesis still unmarried and lacking issue. This union between Judah and a Canaanite leads to negative outcomes. Judah’s primary line is traced rather through Perez, twin son of his (apparently non-Canaanite) daughter-in-law Tamar. So although both Simeon and Judah enter into exogamous marriages with Canaanites, the issue of those marriages is doomed.

Territorial Plots

If the natives are represented as seeking to possess the immigrants’ women and so abort their separate nationhood, they are also shown resisting any immigrant possession of the promised land. As we have seen, Hamor’s offer to Jacob’s sons of “holdings” (נירם) in the land was only a ploy to establish an alliance with the immigrants before the Hivites absorbed them. Hamor’s invitation appears magnanimous—“with us (נשנש) you will dwell and the land will be before you” (34:10)—but the word “with us” carries a darker connotation in his speech to his townsmen. “Their cattle and their possessions and all their animals, will they not be ours? Just

33Sternberg discusses two different readings of this verse, suggesting that not only Shechem but also Jacob may be the subject of the brothers’ indictment (The Poetics of Biblical Narrative, 473–75).
34See Gen 46:12, where sons of Perez, but not Shelah, are named. Num 26:20 does identify a clan of Shelanites as descendants of Judah, and 1 Chr 3:21 names Er and Laadah as Shelah’s sons.
let us consent (נָשָׁנְנוּ) to them so that they will dwell with us (לְזָמַתְנוּ)” (v. 23). The wide open land is presented as a temptation to draw the family into the economic world of the locals. But once settled, the Jacobites are envisioned by Hamor as easy prey; then separate “holdings” will mean little. To be sure, Jacob already has a foothold in the land, for he is reported as having bought “a portion of the field where he pitched his tent from the hand of the son of Hamor, father of Shechem” (33:19) directly upon his return to Canaan from Paddan-Aram. The text handles this purchase with no fanfare even though it is the first and only account of the acquisition of residential property by the fathers. But it sets a backdrop for Hamor’s subsequent use of land as a negotiating ploy and the eventual abandonment of this site outside Shechem when God commands migration to Bethel (35:1).

If Jacob’s purchase of a lot for his tent is passed over quickly, Abraham’s earlier effort to secure a plot for the burial of his wife receives lengthy and subtle treatment. Abraham’s need for a place to bury Sarah underscores the futurity of the promise of the land and the present status of Abraham as נָשָׁנְנוּ (‘resident alien,” 23:4) without any land to call his own. Though recognized as a “prince of God,” Abraham must still haggle with Hittites just for a gravesite. Like Hamor, Ephron the Hittite, Abraham’s negotiating partner, emerges from the “people of the land” (23:7) as another native chieftain lacking ethnic specificity. While the Hivites are pictured inhabiting Shechem, the Hittites control Hebron. The writer’s note that Hebron was called Kiryat-arba in Abraham’s day further sets the tale in the legendary past.

In an exquisitely sensitive reading, Sternberg argues that behind Ephron the Hittite’s ostensible generosity in offering Abraham a burial place lies a more sinister motive, much as we have detected in Hamor’s offer. First, Abraham addresses the

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36This verb, meaning “to agree or consent” and attested only in the Niphal, occurs only in this story (vv. 15, 22, 23) and in 2 Kgs 12:9.

37Literally “alien sojourner and resident” but here translated as a hendiadys. The expression occurs in only two other biblical chapters (Lev 25:23, 35, 47; Num 35:18) both, like Genesis 23, considered P texts by source critics. In Lev 25:23, God describes the Israelites as resident aliens (לְזָמַתְנוּ) just as Abraham calls himself a resident alien נָשָׁנְנוּ (‘with you”). In Leviticus this status is used to justify the redemption of land; the land belongs to God and Israelites only occupy it by his sufferance. The pronouncement in Leviticus precedes a series of cases providing for the repurchase of land, so that it not be sold in perpetuity (25:26–34). The parallel phrasing in Gen 23:4 has Abraham underscore, for legal, and perhaps rhetorical, purposes his subservient status and dependence upon the local landowners. The other occurrences in Leviticus 25 of נָשָׁנְנוּ indicate that resident aliens may be bought as slaves, but also that they may prosper and hold Israelites as servants. Moreover, a kinsman may be indentured by an Israelite as if he were a resident alien (25:35), since the term has more to do with legal status than ethnicity.

Hittites as a whole, asking to buy a burial site for a holding, אָנָא הַקְּצֶּר. The Hittites reply magnanimously with a general offer to Abraham to bury his wife אֲבָנָא אֶלְלֶד, “in our midst,” in the choicest of our graves. Sternberg sees this offer of “anywhere” to be in effect an offer of nowhere in particular and thus no real offer at all.\textsuperscript{39} Moreover, Abraham’s response indicates that “in our midst” is precisely what he does not want. Instead he requests their intercession with Ephron for a specific property, “the cave of Machpelah at the edge of his field” (v. 9). At the edge, and not in the midst: here we see a territorial border used to mark an ethnic boundary. Even in death Sarah is not to be lost in the midst of alien fields. Ephron responds to Abraham’s request, which included the naming of a price, with a willingness to surrender not only the cave but the whole field in which it is found free of charge. This overly generous bequest, however, again sidesteps Abraham’s requests for both an אָנָא הַקְּצֶּר, a simple burial place, and a definite price. By now Abraham is on his knees begging for a figure (v. 13). But still feigning refusal to sell and wanting only to donate, Ephron happens to let slip a price, and an exorbitant one at that: “A piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver—what is that between you and me?” (23:15). Beneath the veneer of generosity and politesse, Sternberg insists, Ephron’s “naked greed” reveals itself.\textsuperscript{40} When Abraham pays, Ephron accepts. The writer insists on including all the Hittites as witnesses to the payout, and concludes with the clear statement that “the field with its cave passed from the Hittites to Abraham, as a burial site” (v. 20).

In death as in life, the “prince of God,” as the Hittites call Abraham with perhaps a tinge of sarcasm, is shown wanting to remain separate. His refusal of the initial Hittite offer for a grave site אָנָא הַקְּצֶּר (“in our midst”) represents a refusal to be swallowed up among the natives. In retrospect, Hamor’s clearly stated aim of absorbing the sons of Jacob illuminates the unstated Hittite intention here. Abraham paid a high price for separateness but preserved the peace; Jacob’s sons turn to war for the same reason, earning their father’s ire. Land for the dead is apparently negotiable; land for the living poses a different threat to the natives.

One other pair of encounters between the fathers and the locals involves real estate: the controversies with the Philistines over wells. In the first episode (21:22–34), Abraham concludes a loyalty oath to Abimelech securing his peaceful residence in Philistine territory with the challenge that Abimelech’s men have seized a well that Abraham claims to have dug. Abimelech’s excuse of ignorance parallels his outraged surprise at his discovery that he almost bedded Abraham’s wife. But here instead of Abimelech paying off Abraham, Abraham presents Abimelech with sheep and oxen and seven special ewes to establish that

\textsuperscript{39}Sternberg, “Double Cave, Double Talk,” 31–32.

\textsuperscript{40}Ibid., 51.
the well is Abraham’s. As he will with the Hittites, Abraham here insists on payment and witness to guarantee his holding in the land.

In the second encounter, disputes over wells erupt between Isaac and Abimelech. First, the Philistines stop up the wells dug by Abraham, and Abimelech sends Isaac away (26:15–16). Next, Isaac redigs wells in the wadi of Gerar, but the locals claim them for their own (vv. 17–20). Finally, Isaac goes to Beersheba where Abimelech arrives to make a mutual nonaggression pact based on his recognition of Isaac’s divine favor (vv. 26–30). And, as a nice sequel, just after Abimelech leaves, Isaac’s diggers in Beersheba strike water (v. 32). The movement in these incidents is from Abimelech’s expulsion of a water-guzzling alien (“you have become far too big for us” [26:16]) to his recognition of Isaac’s chosenness (“We now see plainly that the LORD is with you” [v. 28]). And in the midst of these developments, a divine appearance confirms the continuity of the blessing of offspring to Abraham (v. 24). Isaac’s success at digging wells and finding water illustrates how the land supports the chosen even though they do not yet own it. And the recognition by and departure of the Philistine king symbolically secures the ultimate border between Israelite Canaan and Philistia.

Every encounter between the fathers and the natives is caused by or results in a conflict over women or land. The narratives of these encounters create the memory of an ambiguous beginning for Israel in its land. One the one hand, the natives seem to be gracious hosts, permitting the fathers to dwell in Canaan and in Egypt and Philistia when necessary and not responding negatively when they seek to purchase land for the dead or the living or to dig wells to support their flocks and herds. They are depicted as recognizing the divine blessing that rests upon these sojourners. On the other hand, the price of peace is the mothers of Israel, handed off and returned like booty, and Hamite graciousness is shown in every case to have an ulterior motive, namely the termination of the first family’s separate identity both ethnically and geographically. The land and its people are shown to be seductive, and there is no safety walking among the “daughters of the land.”

Conclusion

What is especially striking about the identity of the fathers in relationship to the natives is the total lack of religious distinction between them. The post-Genesis contrast between the Israelite worship of YHWH and Canaanite idolatry is completely missing. Deuteronomy’s injunctions to liquidate the shrines, sancta, and personnel of the idolatrous Canaanite cult upon entry into the land have no echo in the depiction of the ancestors’ relationship to the local population. The locals in Genesis present no religious threat; indeed, some are shown recognizing the power of YHWH in the lives of the ancestors. When King Melchizedek of Salem blesses Abraham in the name of El Elyon, Abraham does not flinch in horror, nor does Jacob when
God introduces himself as El Beth-el (31:13). As has long been noted, the names of Canaanite deities are, in Genesis, assimilated to YHWH, so that the many names appear to refer to the one true God. Still, Genesis preserves or archaizes those names for the sake of calling attention to the translatability of divinity in the patriarchal period.41 Genesis assumes an original monotheism dating from Eden; whatever the sins of the Canaanites are in Genesis, they do not include idolatry. In fact, Abimelech, despite his designs on Sarah, manifests precisely that fear of God that Abraham assumed was lacking among the peoples in whose lands he sojourns.

This lack of religious differentiation is notable not only in contrast to post-Genesis representations but also in light of the literature on ethnicity brought to bear on biblical studies in a number of recent works.42 Anthropologist Manning Nash, in his study of modern ethnic groups, identifies religion—along with the body, a language, a shared history and origins, and nationality (including the right to a territory)—as one of the basic building blocks of ethnicity.43 These building blocks interact and shift as historical circumstances change. Similarly, Nash finds that a common cult, along with kinship and commensality (the propriety of eating together), most typically mark out ethnic boundaries. These cultural markers, he says, are a “single recursive metaphor. This metaphor of blood, substance, and deity symbolize the existence of the group while at the same time they constitute the group.”44 In the ancestor tales kinship, the constructed biological unity hedged by endogamy, serves as the primary boundary, while comestible concerns arise not with the fathers in Canaan but only with Joseph in Egypt.45

Why the religion of the ancestors does not function to differentiate them from the natives has not been addressed clearly as a literary question, though biblical historians have given a variety of answers. For Wellhausen, who dismissed the historical value of the patriarchal narratives, the picture of patriarchal religion in Genesis was purely a retrojection of late monotheism. Albrecht Alt, using oral tradition as a window to the age of the patriarchs, identified the “god of the fathers” as a god of a nomadic type of religion, closely tied to a particular group and concerned for its fortunes.46 In this regard, the “god of the fathers” did differ from the

41Assmann contrasts the way in which ancient polytheisms “translated” the deities of other cultures into functionally equivalent deities in their own systems with the way in which biblical “counter-religion” rejects everything preceding it and outside of it as “pagan.” Assmann calls this difference the “Mosaic distinction” (Moses the Egyptian, 2–4). For Genesis, this “Mosaic distinction” does not apply.
42Brett, ed., Ethnicity and the Bible; Sparks, Ethnicity and Identity.
44Ibid., 11.
Canaanite gods who were attached to particular geographic locations. Yehezkel Kaufmann argued that the silence about Canaanite religious difference stems from the actual, historical lack of difference. As the tribes that were to become Israel coalesced, they absorbed much from the native culture. It was only with Moses that monotheism began, only then that the battle with idolatry was joined. So it was not that the Canaanites were not pagans; it was that the patriarchs were not yet monotheists. Consequently, no traditions of religious conflict in this early Canaanite environment were preserved. Like Wellhausen, Kaufmann saw patriarchal monotheism as a later projection.

Much more recently, Rainer Albertz has examined the question, proceeding, like Kaufmann (but without referring to him), from the observation that the practical worship of one god (monolatry) in Genesis completely lacks the exclusivism which was later to be so characteristic of Yahweh religion. This difference demands an explanation especially because the traditions of Genesis were written when the religion of YHWH was a going concern. Albertz offers a sociological explanation, arguing that YHWH religion is functionally related to the wider group of the tribe, while Genesis portrays a family engaged in personal piety. In the ancestor narratives, writers described what they knew of the family piety of their own time, a piety that existed concurrently with the tribal and national Yahwistic religion. He also suggests, rather unconvincingly to my mind, “that they also had relevant knowledge of what was typical of families in the period before the state.” The unwarlike, personal god of the fathers fits the close personal relations of the family in contrast to the warlike exclusiveness of the god of the tribes. So the religion of the fathers as represented in Genesis was not a preliminary stage of monotheism but a form of religion that was its “substratum.” The god of the fathers was simply not the type to engage in conflict with the native system.

Finally, Moshe Weinfeld, while not addressing directly the question of the absence of religious differentiation between fathers and natives, calls attention to the contrast between the two stages of encounter with the promised land, first in the narratives of the ancestors and later in the account of the conquest. He outlines telling parallels between the representation of these stages in the Bible and the Aeneid, the only other ancient foundation story divided into two corresponding parts: a tale about the migration to a new land of an ancestor under a divine charge and, separated from it chronologically, the settlement of that land by his successors. Roughly speaking, Abraham is to Joshua as Aeneas is to Romulus. And as divine
promises link David to Abraham, so too prophecy links Augustus to Aeneas. In both traditions a period of wandering contrasts with a period of settlement and the establishment of law and order. These literary works, Weinfeld surmises, may reflect a more common eastern Mediterranean belief that colonization proceeded in two stages. Carthage, for example, was founded in 814 B.C.E., but tradition assigned its founding to a thirteenth-century ancestor.

What I find relevant in Weinfeld’s research here is literary support for the same contrast that Albertz wants to establish sociologically—namely, one between a family myth and a political myth. The ancestors stake out a claim to the land simply by wandering through it and building a family within it. They steer clear of the natives except when provoked, avoiding intermarriage and economic integration. Because religious conflict would represent a level of political engagement with the natives, it forms no part of these tales. That conflict is reserved for the political myth of the conquest as it is formulated in Deuteronomy, when the establishment of political sovereignty demands religious hegemony as well. In Deuteronomy, the cultic abominations and moral depravity of the Canaanites strike at the very basis of the political and social order established by the covenant, whereas in Genesis the locals threaten not political but familial integrity.

How then, finally, does the representation of the relationship between ancestors and natives in Genesis shape Israelite identity? Four points bear emphasizing. First, by representing the fathers as outsiders, as immigrants to a land currently occupied by others, Genesis valorizes outsiderhood over autochthony. Whereas in Mesopotamia and Egypt, outsiders—Amorites for Mesopotamia, Asiatics for Egypt—were perceived to be threatening, in Genesis, outsiderhood is a badge of distinction, a mark of divine chosenness. By traversing the land and establishing links with its major cities—Shechem, Bethel, Hebron, Beersheba—the outsiders make their claim on the land that they stand to inherit. The indigenous peoples stand by and watch but do not actively resist, even if some attempt to dominate the ancestors. Interestingly, by giving voice to native spokesmen like Abimelech

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50For a brief discussion of the prophecies in the Aeneid pointing to Augustus and historical events contemporary to Virgil, see Kenneth Quinn, Virgil’s Aeneid: A Critical Description (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1968) 47–52. Professor Howard Marblestone kindly called my attention to the texts by Quinn, Hadas, and Gordon.


and Hamor, biblical writers show how their ancestors as outsiders were themselves seen as Other by local folk. This imaginative representation of foreign discourse grants the natives greater human depth and makes the threat posed by the outsider ancestors all the more compelling.

Second, by insisting on the ancestors’ radical separation from the natives through both endogamy and economic independence, the ancestor traditions construct a memory of family purity and territorial separation that maps an unambiguous distinction between the recipients of the promise and all others. Yet, the repeated challenge of the native peoples to each succeeding generation establishes that separation as one not easy to achieve. Each generation, the message would seem to be, must overcome both the threat and the temptation of being submerged matrimonially and economically. By depicting those recipients, moreover, as four generations of a single family whose descendants spread geographically through Israel and Judah, Genesis sets forth a “pan-Israelite” ideology that would have served to express an all-Israel national consciousness. Whether that consciousness is to be assigned originally to the Josian period or to a later one, its important function in the development of Jewish collective memory is clear. As stories that flesh out the trials of the heralded triad of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (e.g., 1 Kgs 18:36; 2 Kgs 13:23; Ps 105:5–11), who became liturgically central in Judaism (e.g., the Shemoneh Esrei), these traditions forged religious identity.

Third, however, because there is no clear religious difference between ancestors and natives, who all seem to acknowledge a single God known by various names, even the locals are represented as recognizing and thereby validating the divine blessing resting on the fathers. Whereas the Pharaoh of the exodus and the Philistines of the ark narrative need to be forcibly confronted with the unique power of YHWH, their Genesis counterparts recognize that power instinctively, it seems. In the case of Melchizedek of Salem, in fact, the native king’s blessing upon Abraham is explicit (Gen 14:19–20). So the absence of religious conflict and the generally decent, if not warm, treatment at the hands of native peoples sets Israel-to-be on a positive course from the beginning.

Finally, the encounters with the Egyptians, Philistines, and Canaanites serve to foreshadow the major confrontations with these peoples later in the biblical narrative. Sexual predation, oppression, and territorial threat are all faced by the ancestors.

53Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman argue that these pan-Israelite traditions that are nevertheless centered (The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts [New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001] 43–47) around Judah fit the Josian period when Judah saw itself as the heir to the Israelite territories and people that remained after the Assyrian conquest. The traditions embrace North and South yet stress the superiority of Judah and constitute a “powerful expression of seventh-century Judahite dreams.” While this pan-Israelite ideology fits the Josian period, given a different interpretation of archaeological, linguistic, and historical data, one could equally well imagine it as the product of the Solomonic era, or the exilic or postexilic periods.
and relived by the children. Even though subsequent texts show Israel having very different experiences with and relationships to each of these peoples, in Genesis those differences are leveled in order to focus on the ethnic boundaries of kinship and land. Thus Egypt functions as both the land of slavery (Exodus 1) and escape (e.g., 1 Kgs 11:40; Jer 43:4–7), and Egyptians appear as enemies but also as allies. Philistines are depicted as a perennial military threat until David’s decisive defeat of them, yet the historical Philistines remained neighbors throughout the monarchy and beyond. And Canaanites, in the priestly and Deuteronomistic sources, are seen as the chief source of moral corruption and cultic depravity, respectively; their destruction is meant to assure the ethical and religious purity of Israel. But in Genesis, these enmities are only hinted at: Pharaoh expels Abraham and Sarah (Gen 12:18–19) in much the same language in which his successor later expels Moses and Israel (Exod 12:31–32); Isaac’s negotiations with the Philistines anticipate later border disputes; Hamor’s interest in merging the Jacobites with the natives explains the legal injunctions against intermarriage with them. But Genesis, save for God’s warning of the fate of Abraham’s descendants in Egypt (15:13), is largely innocent of these darker themes. With the exception of the rape of Dinah, violence in the narratives of the ancestors is launched not by the natives but by Jacob’s sons, first against the Shechemites and later against their own brother, Joseph.

The natives in Genesis, then, constitute an Other different from the Others in subsequent books. They are far from malevolent; they antagonize the first family not by design but by doing what comes naturally: extending sexual hospitality, offering economic integration, selling and protecting real estate. Recognizing themselves as outsiders, the fathers also come to understand the peculiar divinely imposed requirements of their identity vis-à-vis the natives: endogamy and land holdings apart from the local scene. Even voluntary circumcision, the fathers’ ethnic marking, cannot domesticate the natives as marriage partners or residential neighbors. Though the ancestors tread softly in a land not yet their own, their tales establish a firm ethnic boundary between themselves and the local populations on the basis of which future enmities easily develop.