

in the Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian periods. Not only can many of the ethnic terms and place-names be dated to this time, but their characterizations mesh perfectly with what we know of the relationships of neighboring peoples and kingdoms with Judah and Israel.

Let us start with the Arameans, who dominate the stories of Jacob's marriage with Leah and Rachel and his relationship with his uncle Laban. The Arameans are not mentioned as a distinct ethnic group in ancient Near Eastern texts before c. 1100 BCE. They became a dominant factor on the northern borders of the Israelites in the early ninth century BCE, when a number of Aramean kingdoms arose throughout the area of modern Syria. Among them, the kingdom of Aram-Damascus was a sometime ally, sometime rival of the kingdom of Israel for control of the rich agricultural territories that lay between their main centers—in the upper Jordan valley and Galilee. And, in fact, the cycle of stories about Jacob and Laban metaphorically expresses the complex and often stormy relations between Aram and Israel over many centuries.

On the one hand, Israel and Aram were frequent military rivals. On the other, much of the population of the northern territories of the kingdom of Israel seems to have been Aramean in origin. Thus, the book of Deuteronomy goes so far as to describe Jacob as "a wandering Aramean" (26:5), and the stories of the relations between the individual patriarchs and their Aramean cousins clearly express the consciousness of shared origins. The biblical description of the tensions between Jacob and Laban and their eventual establishment of a boundary stone east of the Jordan to mark the border between their peoples (Genesis 31:51–54, significantly an E, or "northern," story) reflects the territorial partition between Aram and Israel in the ninth–eighth centuries BCE.

The relationships of Israel and Judah with their eastern neighbors are also clearly reflected in the patriarchal narratives. Through the eighth and seventh centuries BCE their contacts with the kingdoms of Ammon and Moab had often been hostile; Israel, in fact, dominated Moab in the early ninth century BCE. It is therefore highly significant—and amusing—how the neighbors to the east are disparaged in the patriarchal genealogies. Genesis 19:30–38 (significantly, a J text) informs us that those nations were born from an incestuous union. After God overthrew the cities of Sodom

and Gomorrah, Lot and his two daughters sought shelter in a cave in the hills. The daughters, unable to find proper husbands in their isolated situation—and desperate to have children—served wine to their father until he became drunk. They then lay with him and eventually gave birth to two sons: Moab and Ammon. No seventh century Judahite looking across the Dead Sea toward the rival kingdoms would have been able to suppress a smile of contempt at a story of such a disreputable ancestry.

The biblical stories of the two brothers Jacob and Esau provide an even clearer case of seventh century perceptions presented in ancient costume. Genesis 25 and 27 (southern, J texts) tell us about the twins—Esau and Jacob—who are about to be born to Isaac and Rebecca. God says to the pregnant Rebecca: “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples, born of you, shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger” (25:23). As events unfold, we learn that Esau is the elder and Jacob the younger. Hence the description of the two brothers, the fathers of Edom and Israel, serves as a divine legitimation for the political relationship between the two nations in late monarchic times. Jacob-Israel is sensitive and cultured, while Esau-Edom is a more primitive hunter and man of the outdoors. But Edom did not exist as a distinct political entity until a relatively late period. From the Assyrian sources we know that there were no real kings and no state in Edom before the late eighth century BCE. Edom appears in ancient records as a distinct entity only after the conquest of the region by Assyria. And it became a serious rival to Judah only with the beginning of the lucrative Arabian trade. The archaeological evidence is also clear: the first large-scale wave of settlement in Edom accompanied by the establishment of large settlements and fortresses may have started in the late eighth century BCE but reached a peak only in the seventh and early sixth century BCE. Before then, the area was sparsely populated. And excavations at Bozrah—the capital of Late Iron II Edom—revealed that it grew to become a large city only in the Assyrian period.

Thus here too, the stories of Jacob and Esau—of the delicate son and the mighty hunter—are skillfully fashioned as archaizing legends to reflect the rivalries of late monarchic times.