



## UR AND HARAN: ABRAHAM'S BACKGROUND

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The migration of the patriarchs from their place of origin into the land of Canaan is emphasized several times in the Old Testament as an integral ingredient of biblical history. In fact, the early life of Abraham is characterized by his migrations from Mesopotamia to Canaan, to Egypt, and back to Canaan. This emphasis is consistent with the biblical view that the patriarchs came from outside of Canaan. Joshua, in retelling the mighty acts of the God of Israel to the new generation of Israelites, reminded them of this important fact in the history of the young nation: "Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River" (Josh. 24:2 NIV). The river mentioned by Joshua was the Euphrates.

The migration of Abraham and his family from Mesopotamia to Canaan probably is related to the vast migration of nomadic and semi-nomadic people that occurred in the Fertile Crescent in the first half of the second millennium B. C.<sup>i</sup> To the writers of the Old Testament, who understood the events of history from the perspective of divine sovereignty, the migration of Abraham and his family was portrayed as a response of faith to God's call. This call involved God's promise that Abraham would become a great nation, that he would receive the land of Canaan as his own inheritance, and that he would become a blessing to the nations.

The biblical record is unanimous in affirming that Terah, the father of Abraham, and his family left Ur to move to the land of Canaan: "Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there (Gen. 11:31 NIV). The name "Ur of the Chaldeans," the city of Abraham's ancestors, appears four times in the Old Testament (Gen. 11:28; 11:31; 15:7; Neh. 9:7). The Chaldeans were Aramean seminomadic tribes who lived in the southern part of Mesopotamia (present day Iraq), along the Persian Gulf.

Scholars disagree whether the Ur of the Chaldeans mentioned in Genesis is identical with the Sumerian city of Ur that flourished in southern Mesopotamia in the third millennium B.C. Some scholars have attempted to locate Ur in northern Mesopotamia, near the city of Haran. Two reasons are given for this shift in location. First, the patriarchal narratives seem to corroborate the view that the patriarchs considered upper Mesopotamia, especially the region of Haran, as their place of origin.<sup>ii</sup> According to this view, Haran would be out of the way as a route for a group of people moving from Ur to Canaan. The second reason is that when Abraham sent his servant to his place of origin to procure a wife for his son Isaac (Gen. 24:1-10) and when Isaac sent Jacob to the place of origin of his ancestors (Gen. 28:1-5; 29:1-8), both Abraham's servant and Jacob

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came to the region of Haran in upper Mesopotamia. Cyrus Gordon has proposed the northern Mesopotamia city of Ura, a city that is mentioned in cuneiform texts, as the city from which Abraham came.<sup>iii</sup> According to Gordon, Abraham was a merchant prince who was involved in caravan trade. The majority of scholars today, however, still accept the ancient Sumerian city of Ur, located on the southern bank of the Euphrates, as the place referred to in the patriarchal narratives. They also accept the biblical tradition affirms that the ancestors of Abraham came from southern Mesopotamia.<sup>iv</sup> The view taken in this article also affirms the historicity of the biblical narratives and affirms the Sumerian city of Ur as the birthplace of Abraham.

When the family of Terah left Ur to move to Haran, they left the sophistication of city life, the splendor of Ur, and the rich Sumerian culture of their ancestors. Ur was a renowned city in antiquity, a city with a history that dates back to the fourth millennium B.C. The city was located on the banks of the Euphrates River in the area known in the Bible as Aram Naharaim (translated Syria of the Two Rivers, Gen. 24:10 NIV) or Mesopotamia (Deut. 23:4 NRSV). The ruins of Ur are located about 220 miles from Baghdad in southern Iraq.

The ruins of the ancient city of Ur were first excavated in 1850 by the British archaeologist W. K. Loftus. Other efforts followed, with the discovery of several religious structures. Then, after World War I another major effort at exploring the site was attempted in 1922 by the University of Pennsylvania and the British Museum under the direction of Sir Leonard Wooley. His excavations uncovered the royal mausoleums that provided hoards of artifacts manufactured in gold, silver, and lapis lazuli.

Two important religious structures were excavated by archaeologists. The first was the temple dedicated to Sin, the moon-god. Sin was the patron god of the city of Ur. The second was the temple tower or the ziggurat. The ziggurat of Ur was a temple tower in the form of a pyramid with steps. Probably the story of the tower of Babel mentioned in Genesis 11 reflects the temple towers of Mesopotamia.<sup>v</sup> The tower was made of mud bricks. The bricks of the exterior part of the ziggurat were fired and sealed with pitch and mortar for preservation. This process gave rise to the modern name of the site, Tel el-Muqayyar, "The Mound of Pitch." The ziggurat had three ramps with steps that led the worshiper to the sanctuary on the top of the tower where sacrifices were offered to the gods. The temple tower was built by Ur-Nammu and his successors about 2000 B.C. during the Third Dynasty of Ur. The ziggurat was restored by the Chaldean king Nabonidus in the sixth century B. C.

In the excavations of Ur archaeologists have discovered several temples, palaces, mausoleums, and a number of dwellings with chapels. While nothing has been found at Ur to prove that Abraham or his family lived in the city, nothing has been found to disprove the claim that they lived there.<sup>vi</sup>

From Ur, Terah and his family moved to Haran, traveling northwest along the Euphrates river, seeking to avoid the western desert. Haran was a city in northern (upper) Mesopotamia, located between the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers. After Terah reached Haran, he and his family settled there. In the Old Testament Haran is known as the city where the descendants of Abraham's brother Nahor lived. Haran is called "the city of Nahor" (Gen. 24:10, NRSV).

Haran was an important city of commerce and trade in the ancient Near East during the second millennium B.C. The prophet Ezekiel mentioned Haran as one of the famous commercial cities of antiquity (Ezek. 27:23). The city achieved economic prosperity because it was the hub of the ancient caravan trade that came from Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Charchemish, Assyria, and Babylon. The name "Haran" means "highway," "road," or "path." Thus, because Haran was located at the "junction of trade routes,"<sup>vii</sup> the city's name affirms the importance of the commercial caravan that transversed the region.

Haran became an important city in the narrative of the patriarchs. When Abraham decided to find a wife for his son Isaac, he sent his trusted servant to

the place of his ancestors, to "the city of Nahor" to find a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24:4, 10). The city of Nahor has been identified with Haran (Gen. 27:43; 29:4). Later, when attempting to escape the anger of his brother Esau, Jacob fled to Haran, to the house of Laban (Gen. 28:10).<sup>viii</sup>

Terah died in Haran at the age of two hundred and five. After the death of his father, Abraham, his wife Sarah, and his nephew Lot left Haran to go to Canaan as Yahweh had commanded him (Gen. 12:1-4). When Abraham reached Canaan, he settled there and built an altar to Yahweh. Abraham's arrival in Shechem culminated a journey of more than four hundred miles.

One difficult issue in the narratives about Abraham is the question of his call. When God appeared to Abraham, He said: "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you (Gen. 12:1 NIV). Did Abraham receive the call recorded in Genesis 12:1 while he was still in Ur or when he was already living in Haran? Scholars have presented different opinions on this issue. Those who support the view that Abraham was called while he was still in Ur appeal to Genesis 15:7. When Yahweh appeared to Abraham in a dream, the Lord said: I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it" (NIV). This view is also supported by Nehemiah 9:7, where Ezra, in his prayer to God said: "You are the Lord God, who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and named him Abraham" (NIV). In the same manner, Stephen, before his death, retold the saving acts of God to people by declaring that "the God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran" (Acts 7:2 NIV)

Those who support the view that Abraham received his call while he was already in Haran appeal to Genesis 11:31, a passage that attributes the migration from Ur to Haran to Terah, not to Abraham. Other passages such as Genesis 24:7 and 27:43 are also consistent with the view that the call of Abraham came at Haran.

God's command to Abraham to leave his country and his family was shocking. Abraham was asked to leave behind the thriving culture and commerce of Ur and Haran to go to Canaan, in many ways a primitive society in comparison to those two renowned cities of antiquity. Abraham was free to choose to go or to stay, but he chose to obey. He obeyed God because he was looking not for the wealth and culture of Ur or Haran. Rather, he was looking for a better city, "the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Hebrews 11:10 NIV).

## Notes

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This article was published in the *Biblical Illustrator* 24/1 (Fall 1997), 50-53. The *Biblical Illustrator* is published by Lifeway. For subscriptions, visit [www.Lifeway.com](http://www.Lifeway.com)

