



## GENESIS 12 -- ABRAHAM'S JOURNEY TO CANAAN

It is interesting to note that God's Word covers the history of all the world up to Abraham in just the first eleven chapters! Then He focuses the rest of the Bible on Abraham and his physical and spiritual descendants.

In chapter 10, after naming the seventy nations that would spread throughout the earth, God traces in chapter 11 the lineage of Abraham, a descendant of Shem (a people later known as the Semites). Because of his exemplary and enduring faith, the Bible calls Abraham as "the father of us all" (Romans 4:16).

We begin to read about the life of Abraham in chapter 11:27-31, "Now Terah lived seventy years, and begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran...And Haran died before his father Terah in his native land, in Ur of the Chaldeans...And Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot, the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram's wife, and they went out with them from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to the land of Canaan, and they came to Haran and dwelt there" (Genesis 11:27-31).

There has been some controversy about exactly where Ur of the Chaldeans was located. There are several places with that name in ancient history, and this leads to certain confusion. The key to understanding which Ur is referred to in the Bible is by focusing on the added description, "of the Chaldeans."

*The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* explains about the term Chaldeans: "The land bordering the Persian Gulf that gave its name to the ruling dynasty and thus became **a synonym for Babylonia** itself ...such a description of it [referring to Ur of the Chaldeans] may well have been needed to distinguish the city from other places with a similar name, Ur."

In several places in the Bible, Ur is mentioned with the addition, "of the Chaldeans" to explain which Ur is meant here (see Gen. 15:7; Nehemiah 9:7; Acts 7:4). Chaldean refers to the later Babylonian Empire, from around 600 B.C. onwards. Abraham's initial calling was from this Ur of the Chaldeans as can be seen in Acts 7:2-4, "And he said, "Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran, and said

to him, '*Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you.*' Then he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Haran."

This calling was renewed in the middle of the journey, in Haran, the city of Abraham's ancestors. He had lived in these two great cities, Ur and Haran, of a flourishing culture and economy, that had a sophisticated lifestyle. The remains of the once mighty Ur have been excavated in the past 150 years, and it is remarkable what they have found that confirms the biblical account.

*The Bible as History* mentions, "Up until then [the 1850's] the Bible had been the only historical source for our knowledge of that part of Asia before about 550 B.C. Only the Bible had anything to say about a period of history which stretched back into the dim twilight of the past. Peoples and names cropped up in the Bible about which even the Greeks and the Romans no longer knew anything. Scholars swarmed impetuously into these lands of the Ancient East about the middle of last century. Nobody then knew names that were soon to be in everyone's mouth. With astonishment the age of progress and enlightenment heard of their finds and discoveries...Almost hidden from view by forests of shady palms the Euphrates flowed in those days past this spot [Ur]. This great life-giving river carried heavy traffic between Ur and the sea. At that time the Persian Gulf cut much deeper into the estuary of the Euphrates and the Tigris. Even before the first pyramid was built on the Nile, Tell Al-muqayyar was towering into the blue skies. Four mighty cubes, built one upon the other in diminishing size, rose up into a 75 feet tower of gaily colored brick" (pp. 8-9).

Sir Leonard Wooley did extensive excavation during the 1920's at Ur. What did they find? Keller mentions about the Ur during Abraham's time, approximately 2000 B.C. "The citizens of Ur were living in large two-stories villas with thirteen or fourteen rooms. The lower floor was solidly built of burnt brick, the upper floor of mud brick. The walls were neatly coated with plaster and whitewashed. A visitor would pass through the door into a small entrance hall where there was a basin to wash the dust off hands and feet. He then continued into the

inner court, which was laid out in attractive paving. Round it were grouped the reception room, the kitchen, living room and private rooms and the domestic chapel. Up a stone staircase, which concealed a lavatory, he would reach a gallery from which branched off the rooms belonging to members of the family and the guest rooms” (Ibid., p. 18).

It would not have been easy for Abraham to have left this lifestyle, but it was necessary for him to leave this world for God to work with him and cleanse him of all the idolatrous influence. His father, Terah, had been an idolater, and was used to this type of life.

The Bible explains, “And Joshua said to all the people, ‘Thus says the Lord God of Israel. ‘Your fathers, including Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, dwelt on the other side of the River in old times; and they served other gods’” (Joshua 24:2). The god of the city of Ur and of Haran to the north was the moon god Sin. Abraham not only had to live this cosmopolitan life-style, but also the popular gods that his father worshipped.

That is why it took so much faith and courage to do what Abraham did—leave his family, religion, culture and society behind to follow the true God. We read in Hebrews 11:8, “**By faith** Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, **not knowing where he was going.**”

God told Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3, “Get out of your country, from you family and from your father’s house to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation, I will bless you and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Abraham left Haran with his nephew Lot, and a great number of servants and cattle, and traveled 600 miles south until they arrived in Canaan.

This land was known by the Greeks as “the land of purple” or Phoenicia, since its inhabitants were experts in removing the purple dye from a conch shell that was found in their shores, and they were able to dye clothing in this color that was craved by the rich.

Once in Canaan, Abraham first settled around Bethel and then went further south. “And he moved from there to the mountain east of Bethel, and he pitched his tent with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east, there he built an altar to the Lord and

called on the name of God. So Abraham journeyed, going on still toward the South” (Gen. 12:8-9).

At this time, the land of Canaan consisted of walled cities, and great expanses between them. The place must have appeared to Abraham to have a far inferior life-style to that which he left in Ur and Haran. Hebrews 11 alludes to this: “By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God...And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them” (vs. 9-16).

After settling down in this Promised Land, but as a stranger, Abraham’s trials were just beginning. “Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to dwell there, for the famine was severe in the land” (Gen. 12:10).

This famine probably was new and strange to Abraham, who previously had always lived near the mighty Euphrates and Tigris rivers. Now he comes to the Promised Land, and all his family and people are threatened with a deadly famine—not a good start. But Abraham does not sit idly by for God to solve everything, but instead acts, and does his part to alleviate the trial. He goes down to Egypt, where another mighty river, the Nile, could normally assure the people water and food. Abraham has faith—but he also has works. He does his part, and expects God to do the other.

Famines were not infrequent in Canaan, since it did not have a steady supply of water, and had to rely on the early and latter rains. If they did not come, a famine was assured. Then many would flee to Egypt for help. Some Egyptian murals depict famine-ridden foreigners arriving to Egypt. They waited too long for help. Later, Jacob’s sons had to also go down to Egypt after a famine his the country.

It is interesting that around this time, there is preserved in Egypt a wall mural depicting the arrival of a rich Semitic household. This does not necessarily mean that it was of Abraham and his family, but at least it gives us an inkling of how Semites such as Abraham dressed and what type of

implements and animals they had around that time. The Bible describes the same type of tools, equipment and clothing as seen in the mural, even to the multi-colored clothing that was so desirable, as the one Jacob gave his son Joseph.

“Newberry [the Egyptologist] discovered foreign looking figures. They were wearing a different type of clothing from the ordinary Egyptians, they were fairer-skinned and had sharper features...Their leader was called Abishai. With thirty-six men, women and children of his tribe Abishai had come to Egypt. He had brought gifts for the nobleman, among which special mention was made of some costly stibium [used for coloring eyelashes] for the nobleman’s wife. Abishai is a genuine Semitic name (1 Sam. 26:6). The shepherd’s crook was so characteristic of the nomads that the Egyptians in their picture-writing used it for the name of these foreigners” (Ibid. p. 70).

Another parallel between the biblical and archaeological records has to do with the Pharaoh’s habit of increasing his harem with beautiful women. Egyptian murals are full of pictures of the Pharaoh’s harem and there is an Egyptian story in a papyrus called “The Two Brothers” where the ruling Pharaoh makes a great effort to incorporate into his harem a beautiful woman, although she has a husband. This is why Abraham took some precautions, but violated God’s law while doing it.

“And it came to pass, when he was close to entering Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, ‘Indeed I know that you are a woman of beautiful countenance. Therefore it will happen, when the Egyptians see you, that they will say, ‘This is his wife, and they will kill me, but they will let you live. Please say you are my sister, that it may be well with me for your sake, and that I may live because of you. So it was, when Abram came into Egypt, that the Egyptians saw the woman, that she was very beautiful. The princes of Pharaoh also saw her and commended her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken to Pharaoh’s house. He treated Abram well for her sake. He had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female servants, female donkeys, and camels” (Genesis 12:11-16).

Here is an example of how *not* to have faith and *improper* works. Abraham knew he would be under a trial, but broke God’s law by *lying* that Sarah was not his wife. It is true that Sarah was a half-sister of

Abraham, but she also was his wife. This lie got Abraham into trouble, and God had to bail him out. Again we see the Bible be quite candid about its heroes, and shows their mistakes and sins as well as their virtues. Only Christ is described in the Bible without sin.

“But the Lord plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram’s wife. And Pharaoh called Abram and said, “What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, ‘She is my sister’? I might have taken her as my wife. Now therefore, here is your wife; take her and go your way” So Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him; and they sent him away, with his wife and all that he had” (Gen. 12:17-20).

In the next study, we will find Abraham back in the land of Canaan, and the adventures he and his nephew Lot have to go through.