

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 6 (Part 1)

Abraham, Archaeology, and History

I am a Lanier. My Dad was a Lanier, and so was his father, my “Paw Paw.” My Paw Paw was raised by his uncle, and I am fairly confident he was also a Lanier. From that point, the details get a bit fuzzy.

I have been told we go back to the 19th century Southern poet and musician Sidney Lanier (as in “The Song of the Chattahoochee” fame). While he was, for a time, a practicing lawyer in Georgia, I am not quite sure how (or if) our family trees merge.

Genealogy is a tricky thing. There are some great resources for finding out one’s heritage, but it is not an easy thing to do. A major help are the United States census reports. The Internet is becoming more of a resource as well.

In 1850, there were almost 25 million people in the United States, and finding Paw Paw’s grandfather is much like finding a needle in a haystack. Now, I know he had a grandfather; he must have. Thanks to the extant records of earlier censuses, of cemetery, and of county/state records, I suspect I could ferret out his name. But somewhere going backwards, the ancestry trail will grow cold.

If I were able to find my Paw Paw’s grandfather, whom we will call Grandpa,³ but I could not find Grandpa’s³ father, does that mean there never was a Grandpa⁴? Was Grandpa³ a mysterious appearance on earth, with no father? Of course not. It just means the records have run dry and Grandpa’s⁴ identity is lost to history.

Can you imagine the difficulty of locating Grandpa¹⁶⁵? If we assign about 25 years to each generation (assuming fatherhood at age 25), then my Grandpa¹⁶⁵ ought to be a contemporary of the Biblical Abraham (somewhere around 2000 BC).

What evidence do we have of Abraham’s life outside of the biblical accounts? Not surprisingly, the answer is “None,” if we are seeking direct evidence. We have no birth certificate, marriage certificate or newspaper obituary. Such did not exist in his day. Interestingly, some scholars regard this lack of direct evidence as substantiation to their theory that Abraham was a fiction, not a real person. Yet, the absence of such information is not odd. Should such information ever be found, that would be the oddity.

First, although Abraham grew to be greatly important in the succeeding thousand plus years, he was of no real international import at the time. He would not be listed in the lists of Mesopotamian kings. Second, most scholastic estimates put the world population at 2000 BC somewhere around 25 million people. In light of

the slight number of artifacts found from that era, what are the chances that one would provide any direct evidence of Abraham? Really zero.

So what archaeology offers on Abraham is not direct evidence of his existence, but photographs of his world. We can get a glimpse into matters like customs, life style, dress, and even haircuts! These glimpses help us understand aspects of Abraham’s life, and also speak to the truth of his existence to the extent they are consistent with the Biblical accounts.

Our goal in this lesson is to work through Abraham’s life, adding information and insight we get from various archaeological finds. We begin our story in Genesis 11:27 and follow through until Genesis 25:11.

ABRAHAM’S BACKGROUND

We begin the story of Abraham in Genesis 11:27. In one of the “*toledot*” passages that precede an unfolding account of generations,¹ we are told,

Now these are the generations [toledot] of Terah. Terah fathered Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran fathered Lot. Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his kindred, in Ur of the Chaldeans (Gen. 11:27-28).

We have noted earlier that Ur was a city in the southern part of Mesopotamia, between modern Bagdad (Iraq) and the Persian Gulf. The additional identifier “of the Chaldeans” was an additional insert by a later editor to specify the “Ur” referenced.²

After the death of Haran, Terah moved the family to a city named “Haran.” This is not some early typo. There was a significant town in the northern part of Mesopotamia named “Haran.” The family goes with Terah; Abram, his barren wife Sarai, Nahor, his wife and children, and Lot, the son of the now dead Haran.

The family settles in Haran and after living there some time, Terah dies. This left Abram and Sarai, his brother Nahor and family, and Abram’s nephew Lot.

What do we know about this time and these areas where Abram and his family lived? The time is itself an issue that is a bit unclear. Conservative scholars tend

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¹ For information on *toledot* see Old Testament Survey Lesson 1 at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

² There were a number of cities named “Ur.” The Chaldeans did not come to power in Abraham’s Ur until over a thousand years after Abraham. By giving the reference here, the Bible clarifies to the reader which Ur was Abraham’s.

to date Abram as born somewhere between 2000 BC and 2100 BC. This was a time where we have a good bit of knowledge of Ur and of Haran.

Some might think these cultures were so old that they were extremely primitive. Archeology has shown the opposite to be true. These were cultures that irrigated and farmed, built from bricks, used bronze (this was the “Middle Bronze Age”) made advanced forms of pottery, jewelry, and multiple level houses. Archaeologists have discovered complicated written legal codes. Excavated tombs of the royal families of Ur from the time period have uncovered games, musical instruments and an array of furniture, including beds, chairs, tables, and chests. The tombs also indicate both animal and human sacrifices.

Although inland now, Ur was a port city in the time with several thousand years of history already. It was about 170 acres in size and was a ruling city of the area on and off for over a thousand years.

While the people of Mesopotamia worship thousands of gods, each town and city typically had one main patron god or goddess. In Ur, it was the moon god Nanna (also called “Sin”). Nanna was the god in charge of the calendar.

About the time of Abram, Ur, and other areas of southern Mesopotamia were infused by a large number of Amorites. The immigrants brought certain problems on the local city, including food shortages and resultant inflation (Immigration issues have long plagued civilizations!) The Amorites were Semitic people, while the native Ur-ites were Sumerian. The Semitic peoples from the North spoke a different language that was the parent language of what would become Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, among others. The settling Amorites were typically animal herders, as was Abram’s family, rather than the agriculturalists native to Ur.³

This becomes important because the name Abram, and his family’s names (including his father Terah) are Semitic names.⁴ Some wonder if upon Haran’s death the decision was made to move “home” to the town Haran, a Semitic town. If the move occurred in the 20th century BC, then another possible reason for the move was the recent government change in Ur. Ur was overthrown in 2004 and was no longer the ruling capital. Neighboring cities of Isin and Larsa were

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³ Saggs, H. W. F., *Babylonians*, (U.C. Berkley Press 2000) at 93. Saggs’s book in general gives a good thorough history of Ur both before and after the time of Abram. Saggs is not writing a book about the Bible and mentions Abraham only once and then in passing. The thrust of his book is simply a dissertation on the people who occupied Babylon over the centuries.

⁴ Scholars differ over the terms used in classifying these names, some calling them Semitic; others calling them West Semitic. See the fuller description of naming labels in Huffman, Herbert, *Amorite personal names in the Mari Texts*, (Johns Hopkins 1965) at 2ff.

controlling the region. Scripture does not tell us the reason for the move, but simply states it occurred.

Haran was not the same sized city as Ur; it was smaller. Still, it was an important town as a stopping point on the major trading route through that area of Mesopotamia. One thing the towns had in common was that out of the pantheon of gods, they both worshipped the moon god Nanna. While in that pagan town, Abram received a call from the LORD to pack up and move to Canaan. Genesis 12 takes us to that part of the story.



GOD CALLS ABRAM

Genesis 12 begins in sharp contrast to the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Since creation, God had repeatedly pronounced the curses of sin:

1. “Cursed are you [the serpent] above all livestock” (Gen. 3:14).
2. “Cursed is the ground because of you” (Gen. 3:17).
3. “And now you [Cain] are cursed from the ground (Gen. 4:11).
4. “Out of the ground the LORD has cursed...” (Gen. 5:29).

5. “Cursed be Canaan” (Gen. 9:25).

Now in contrast, we start chapter 12 and the LORD says to Abram to:

Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land I will show you (Gen. 12:1).

As part of this instruction God, announces multiple blessings on Abram:

1. “I will make of you a great nation” (Gen. 12:2).
2. “I will bless you and make your name great” (Gen. 12:2).
3. “You will be a blessing” (Gen. 12:2).
4. “I will bless those who bless you” (Gen. 12:3).
5. “In you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3).

The shift is not simply from curses to blessings. With Abram, there is a sharp distinction from the events in the preceding verses on the tower of Babel. In the tower story, the people arrogantly proclaimed, “let us make a name for ourselves” (Gen. 11:4). In contrast the LORD tells Abram, “I will make your name great.”

With those promises pronounced, Abram leaves many of his kindred taking his wife and servants along with his nephew Lot and heading to Canaan at God’s direction. Abram moves through parts of Canaan receiving the LORD’s promise to give the land to Abram’s descendants (of which he has none at that time!)

Canaan is a land of city-states with a number of nomads circulating with their flocks as the weather and landscape dictated. Archeology has shown that in the cities the people lived in row houses. There was pagan religion with numerous gods who received regular sacrifices, there was incense burned for the gods, and idols were made to represent the gods.

Abram does not embrace any gods but only the LORD, Jehovah God. He goes as the LORD directs and builds altars to the LORD only. Abram calls on the name of LORD for his direction and life (Gen. 12:7, 8).

ABRAM GOES TO EGYPT

A famine comes upon the land of Canaan and Abram goes south to Egypt to live out the drought. In preparation for the occupation, Abram instructs his wife Sarai to tell the Egyptians that she is Abram’s sister rather than wife (Gen. 12:13). There is something reassuring in reading that a man called by God who receives

innumerable blessings and outspoken attention by the Creator, panics and fears for his own safety, wrongly asking his wife to deceive others.

Why Abram was worried, and why Pharaoh would want Sarai are questions that readers of the story have asked for centuries. Among the Dead Sea Scrolls was the *Genesis Apocryphon*, an apocryphal account that supplements the stories of Genesis. The writing indicates that Pharaoh took Sarai as his wife because of her beauty that included her “long and delicate fingers.”⁵

Another perspective considers that the size of Abraham’s retinue and the interesting possessions that he would have had from his time on the major trading routes made him an attractive trading partner for Pharaoh. Hoerth and McRay contend that adding,

It is more likely that the Egyptians saw Abraham as potentially useful to their commercial dealings with Palestine. An exchange of women was one way to seal agreements between two parties.⁶

Pharaoh took Sarai into his house and “dealt well with Abram” for her sake, giving him sheep, oxen, donkeys, servants, and camels. But before too long, the LORD afflicts Pharaoh and his house with plagues because of Sarai. Pharaoh ferrets out the reason and expels Abram and Sarai.

Egyptologists have discovered and translated the story of an Egyptian named Sinuhe which gives some interesting insight into the Abram story. Set in the time of Abram (around 2000 BC), Sinuhe was an Egyptian court official (some believe fictional) who fled Egypt fearing indictment in the death of a Pharaoh. Sinuhe goes to Canaan, the land Abram left during the famine for his excursion into Egypt. Sinuhe marries into a Semitic family, lives in a tent, and eats figs, grapes, honey, fruits, barley, desert game, beef, olive oil, and fowl. He drinks wine and milk.

On the walls of Khnumhotep II’s tomb (he was an Egyptian governor) are paintings of West Semitic traders from the era close to Abram. The painting is traceable to the year 1862 BC.⁷ The painting shows the dress of the Canaanites in that era. The men wore sandals, and the women wore an ankle-high moccasin-like shoe. The men and women are all wearing colorful clothing. The men have no moustaches, but do wear beards. They almost have a 1980’s mullet, but not quite!

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⁵ *Genesis Apocryphon*, Col. 20.

⁶ Hoerth and McRay, *Bible Archaeology: An Exploration of the History and Culture of Early Civilizations*, (Baker 1977) at 76.

⁷ Hoffmeier, James, *The Archaeology of the Bible*, (Lion Hudson 2008) at 41.

The women wear their hair down over their shoulders with a white headband. They have weapons (bows, spears, axes), a musical lyre, and a leather water canteen.



ABRAM AND LOT'S PROBLEMS

Abram, Lot, their possessions and families head back into Canaan, going into the “Negeb,” which is the southern part of what would become Israel. From there, they continued into the area where Abram had previously built an altar to the LORD. While there, “strife” arose between the herdsmen of Abram’s livestock and the herdsmen of Lot’s livestock.

Abram steps in to bring peace, a righteous move on his part, giving Lot his choice of where to go.

Then Abram said to Lot, “Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen, for we are kinsmen. Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right, or if you go to the right, then I will go to the left” (Gen. 13:8-9).

Lot chose the most favorable land toward the east in the Jordan Valley. It was well watered like Egypt around the Nile. Lot’s immature/selfish decision would

cost him and his family dearly later on. His move took him to the wicked city of Sodom.

Abram, meanwhile, was approached again by the LORD with the promise of blessing both as to land and descendants.

Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted (Gen. 13:14-16).

Abram then settles near Hebron again building another altar to the LORD.

Soon, Abram hears of the capture of Lot, Lot's family, and Lot's possessions by marauding kings. Abram's reaction was discussed in the last lesson in the section on Melchizedek. We bring it back up at this point because of the contrast between what Abram did in the Lot scenario versus the Sarai/Pharaoh situation.

When Pharaoh took Sarai, Abram laid low, saying and doing nothing out of fear for his own life. When Lot is taken, however, Abram immediately swings into action.

When Abram heard that his kinsmen had been taken captive, he led forth his trained men...and went in pursuit (Gen. 14:14).

Scripture is never bashful about showing even godly men in their weaker moments as men of sin. Nowhere does Scripture teach that the "righteous people" lived without a need for forgiveness or a Savior. As Paul would later note,

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23).

These same "all" are the ones who can access God's justification—"as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:23).

There is such a bold contrast between the Abram in Egypt and the Abram returned to Canaan. In Egypt, Abram lives in fear producing sinful judgments. Back in Canaan, he makes peace with Lot in humility and willing submission. Abram then readily takes his men and, with reliance on the LORD, pursues another strong army and defeats them to reacquire Lot and his material possessions and family. After this victory, Abram paused to worship the God Most High with the priest Melchizedek.

CONCLUSION

We have wonderful tools in archaeology to help us further understand passages of Scripture, but one of the greatest helps is the way archaeology can bring the reality of life to stories in the Bible.

Abram was a man, living in various places, surrounded by pagan worship of idols, and learning more of the one God along the way. Abram was no simple primitive. He was an adventurer, a traveler, and a family man. He rose to heights of holiness and faithfulness. He also sank to shameful mistrust and a lack of faith in the LORD. Yet God's hand stays on Abram, and as we see next week, God will confirm and explain his plans for his life.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“Cursed...blessed”* (Gen. 3-12).

Sin brings curse. There is a vicious cycle of sin and death; Paul calls it a law and a bondage. Sin is not simply a list of “no no’s.” It is the course of action that leads to bad consequences. Contrasted with sin is the faithfulness of obedience. Just as sin brings cursed unhappiness and pain/defeat, so faithfulness brings blessing and joy/victory.

We must ask ourselves in the quiet of our hearts, “Why do we sometimes choose the path of sin?” Lord, make us followers of you in constancy as we live daily before you.

2. *“Go from your country...to the land I will show you”* (Gen. 12:1).

God called Abram away from his parents' home—away from the home of his kinsmen. This is the way of God. He calls his people, not simply to “be a Christian.” He calls with specific purposes in mind. God equips and sets out a journey for each one of his children. Paul makes this point: “We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works that he prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Do not ever be satisfied with simply being a Christian. Seek out what God has planned for you. Ask him about it in prayer. Then step out in faith and know that as you acknowledge God in all your ways, “he will make straight your paths” (Pro. 3:6).

3. *“Let there be no strife between you and me”* (Gen 13:8).

Abram could have taken control of the situation and sent Lot somewhere. The story makes clear, Abram did not need Lot; Lot needed Abram. Yet instead of asserting his rights, Abram treated Lot the way Abram would have hoped to be treated. He gave Lot the choices that belonged to Abram. In what is an interesting set of events amid certain promises of God we see Abram living the words of Jesus, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God” (Mat. 5:9). Abram was both, peacemaker and son of God.

When given a choice to be a peacemaker, do we take it? Are we ever willing to lay down our “rights” for the sake of peace? This is not about being a doormat and fostering poor behavior in others, but it is a request to prayerfully consider situations and seek what God’s desired course of action might be.

WANT MORE?

Next week we continue to work through Abraham’s life. We will read multiple times that Abraham’s faith is reckoned to him as righteousness. Can you find those passages? What is your insight on them? Email me and let me know! Email is: wantmore@biblical-literacy.com.