

Abraham Journeys from Chaldea

(GENESIS 12)



Abraham, a descendant of Noah through his son Shem, lived with his family in the city of Ur in Chaldea. God promised to bless Abraham and make his descendants into a great nation. Having left Ur with his father, Terah, his wife, Sarah, and his nephew Lot, Abraham stayed for a time in Haran and then continued his travels into the land of Canaan. Once there, however, he discovered that there was famine in the land, and he and his wife, Sarah, continued on to Egypt. After an eventful stay there, they returned to Canaan.

ALTHOUGH Abraham's name¹ is mentioned in passing in Gen. 11:27–31, his story really begins with the opening words of chapter 12:

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your country and from your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; and I will make your name great, so that it will be a blessing. And I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you will I curse, and all the families of the land will be blessed because of you." —Gen. 12:1–3

So begins this biblical figure's great adventure—his journey to Canaan, his stay in Egypt, and everything that ensues.

Yet readers of these opening words were doubtless disturbed by them. For the Bible has just now begun Abraham's story, and suddenly God is promising him that he will be blessed, he will found a great nation, and so forth—what had Abraham done to deserve these things? Moreover, if God was so pleased with Abraham, why did He begin by telling him to leave his homeland? To leave one's homeland meant leaving the security of family and friends and becoming a defenseless wanderer. If God had truly wished to bless Abraham and grant him all manner of good things, would He not have at least allowed him to stay where he was?

1. At the beginning of the story his name is Abram and his wife's Sarai; only later (Gen. 17:16) are they changed to Abraham and Sarah. Except when citing the biblical text, however, I refer to them consistently by their later names, as ancient interpreters generally did.

In searching for an answer to such questions, early interpreters of course took into account Abraham's overall "image" in the Bible. For throughout the rest of his story in Genesis, Abraham is presented as God's devoted servant, someone who obeyed every divine commandment (note, in this regard, Gen. 26:5). In particular, God singles out Abraham elsewhere as one "who loved Me" (Isa. 41:8; in some translations, "my friend")—as if, of all the people mentioned in the Bible, Abraham was the one who loved God the most. In keeping with this, 2 Chr. 20:7 also speaks of "Abraham *who loved You.*" Thus, it seemed to interpreters that the promises made by God at the beginning of Genesis 12 must have had something to do with Abraham's great love of, and devotion to, God.

But there was one part of the Bible that seemed to shed special light on these opening words of Genesis 12. It was a passing reference to Abraham's departure from his homeland found later in the Bible, at the end of the book of Joshua. Though the reference there is brief, to ancient interpreters it seemed to supply precisely the information that was missing in Genesis itself:

And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: 'Your ancestors lived of old beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan.'" —Josh. 24:2-3

It struck ancient interpreters that God says here, "I took your father Abraham," setting him apart, as it were, from Terah and Nahor, who are mentioned along with him in the previous verse. Why single out Abraham?

Ancient interpreters concluded that Abraham must somehow have been different from Terah and Nahor—that is why he is singled out. And surely it was significant that the previous verse, after mentioning Terah, Abraham, and Nahor, adds: "and they served other gods." Who "they" refers to here is not clear; but if Abraham is singled out in virtually the next breath, "Then I took your father Abraham," it seemed that the reason must be that "they" refers to Terah and Nahor and the others, *but not to Abraham!* They served other gods, but Abraham did not, and for that reason "Then I took your father Abraham."

Such a conclusion could only be bolstered by another biblical verse that mentions Abraham:

Consider Abraham your father, and Sarah who bore you: **him alone did I call**, and bless him and and make him many. —Isa. 51:2

If God called Abraham *alone*, is this not another way of saying that Abraham was quite unique among his family members? He—and not his father, Terah, or his brother, Nahor—was summoned personally to God's service.

Abraham: the Mo...

Out of this basic in
Genesis in the high
Abraham's great v
explicitly in the Jos
Then served other
thought of in mor
belief in the existen
of a nation that wo
there is only one G

How far back t
present very early
some scholars date
significant that the
one God is present
himself is not even
author of Judith th
knowledge that the
belief in the existen

A foreign gene
the Chaldeans.
would not follo
they had left th
of heaven, the
beans' drove th
to Mesopotami
commanded th
the land of Can

It is interesting that
well, namely, why
had told him to lea
that related to Abra
had to leave Chalde
who were in Chalde
presence of their g
This same idea
their sons and bel
makes as well.

Abraham the Monotheist

Out of this basic insight—arrived at by reading the beginning of chapter 12 of Genesis in the light of Josh. 24:2–3—arose an interpretive tradition that held Abraham's great virtue (never mentioned in Genesis itself, nor even stated explicitly in the Joshua passage) to have been his refusal to worship other gods. *They served other gods, but not Abraham.* And so Abraham came to be thought of in more general terms as the great opponent of polytheism (the belief in the existence of many gods), in fact, as the person who, in the midst of a nation that worshipped many gods, had become convinced that in truth there is only one God.

How far back this line of thinking goes we do not know, but it is certainly present very early. For example, it is found in a part of the book of Judith that some scholars date to the second century B.C.E. (if not earlier). And it may be significant that the theme of Abraham's recognition of the existence of only one God is presented in Judith in a somewhat offhand manner—Abraham himself is not even mentioned there by name. One might conclude that the author of Judith thought (or wished to claim) that it was simply common knowledge that the ancestor of the Jews had left his homeland because of his belief in the existence of only one God:

[A foreign general explains:] This people [the Jews] is descended from the Chaldeans. At one time they lived in Mesopotamia, because they would not follow the gods of their fathers who were in Chaldea. **For they had left the ways of their ancestors, and they worshiped the God of heaven, the God they had come to know;** hence they [the Chaldeans] drove them out from the presence of their gods and they fled to Mesopotamia, and lived there for a long time. Then their God commanded them to leave the place where they were living and go to the land of Canaan.

—Jth. 5:6–9

It is interesting that this passage presents an answer to our second question as well, namely, why along with promising Abraham all sorts of blessings God had told him to leave his homeland. The text in Judith suggests that this is in fact related to Abraham's belief in the one true God: Abraham and his family had to leave Chaldea "because they would not follow the gods of their fathers who were in Chaldea . . . hence they [the Chaldeans] drove them out from the presence of their gods."

This same idea—that Abraham rejected the worship of many gods and their idols and believed only in the one true God—is found in other ancient sources as well:

E A

interpreters of course
or throughout the
s devoted servant.
n this regard, Gen.
is one "who loved
, of all the people
God the most. In
o loved You." Thus,
at the beginning of
s great love of, and

shed special light on
ference to Abraham's
the end of the book
ient interpreters it
ng in Genesis itself:

ord, the God of
rates, Terah, the
er gods. Then I
led him through

— Josh. 24:2–3

k your father Abra-
who are mentioned
aham?

somehow have been
d out. And surely it
erah, Abraham, and
refers to here is not
breath, "Then I took
that "they" refers to
y served other gods,
ur father Abraham."
er biblical verse that

vow: him alone

— Isa. 51:2

ing that Abraham
ut his father, Terah,
s service.

And the child [Abraham] began to realize the errors of the land—that everyone was going astray after graven images and after impurity.

And he began to pray to the Creator of all so that He might save him from the errors of mankind . . . And he said [to his father], “What help or advantage do we have from these idols . . . ? Worship the God of heaven.” . . . And his father said to him: “. . . Be silent my son, lest they kill you.”
— *Jubilees* 11:16–17, 12:2, 6–7

He [Abraham] grew up with this idea and was a true Chaldean for some time, until, opening the soul’s eye from the depth of sleep, he came to behold the pure ray in place of the deep darkness, and he followed that light and perceived what he had not seen before, One who guides and steers the world, presiding over it and managing its affairs.
— Philo, *On Abraham* 71

You are the One who delivered Abraham from ancestral godlessness.
— Hellenistic Synagogal Prayer, *Apostolic Constitutions* 8.12.22

And when all those inhabiting the land were being led astray after their [idols], Abraham believed in Me and was not led astray with them.
— Pseudo-Philo, *Biblical Antiquities* 23:5

He thus became the first person to argue that there is a single God who is the creator of all things . . . Because of these ideas the Chaldeans and the other people of Mesopotamia rose up against him, and having resolved, in keeping with God’s will and with His help, to leave his home, he settled in the land of Canaan.
— Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 1.154–157

And so both questions now seemed to have the same answer: God promised Abraham all those things in Genesis 12 because Abraham, unique among the people in Chaldea, had come to know the one true God and so had refused to worship the Chaldean gods, “the gods of their fathers”; and for precisely this reason, the Chaldeans would no longer allow Abraham to dwell in their midst, which is why God begins by saying, “Go forth from your homeland.”

Terah, Priest of Idolatry

“They served other gods,” it says in Josh. 24:2, presumably referring to Abraham’s father, Terah, and his brother, Nahor. Since Scripture says so (and so matter-of-factly), interpreters seeking to understand the full meaning of Abraham’s story must have returned again and again to this striking statement to consider all its possible implications. Indeed, perhaps this reference to his

father and brother
up being the on
how it was that
place and that a
the worship of
sav—as bowing
creations. And
enjoyed depictu
Terah became m
facturer or seller
gotten a close-u
that might ultin
an illusion:

And he [Ab
worship the

And it came
he said. “Yes
have from th
there is no s
of the mind
but what sha
them [that is
because the
might worsh

When I was
brother Nah
the stronges
was to finis
wood and s
having ente
Marumati
iron god. N
was trouble
unable to re
out of a gre
the. And as
off of it in s

There are
again, same

father and brother serving other gods explained not only *why* Abraham ended up being the one to whom God promised great things in Genesis 12, but also *how it was* that Abraham came to know that there is only one God in the first place and that all the “other gods” are simply false. Now, elsewhere in the Bible the worship of “other gods” is frequently described—caricatured, one might say—as bowing down to “gods of wood and stone,” that is, idols, mere human creations. And so, ancient interpreters and retellers of the story of Abraham enjoyed depicting at length Terah’s ministering and tending to such idols. Terah became not just an idol worshiper, but a priest of idolatry, or a manufacturer or seller of idols. With such a father, Abraham must in his youth have gotten a close-up view of the folly of worshiping idols, and it was this exposure that might ultimately have led him to realize that these “other gods” are simply an illusion:

And he [Abraham] separated from his father so that he might not worship the idols with him.

And it came to pass . . . that Abram said to his father, “O father,” and he said, “Yes, my son?” And he said: “What help or advantage do we have from these idols before which you worship and bow down? For there is no spirit in them, because they are mute, and they are an error of the mind . . .” And his father said to him, “I also know that, my son, but what shall I do to the people who have ordered me to serve before them [that is, the idols]. If I speak to them truthfully, they will kill me because they themselves are attached to them [the idols] so that they might worship them and praise them.” — *Jubilees* 11:16, 12:1–3, 6–7

When I was watching over the gods of my father Farah [Terah] and my brother Nahor, I was experimenting [to find out] which god was truly the strongest. Then, at the time when my [priestly] lot came up and I was to finish the service of my father Farah’s sacrifice to his gods of wood and stone, of gold and silver and copper and iron, I, Abraham, having entered their sanctuary for the service, found a god named Marumat,² which had been carved out of stone, fallen at the feet of an iron god, Nakhin. And it came to pass that, when I saw this, my heart was troubled, and I thought to myself that I, Abraham, would be unable to return it to its place all by myself, since it was heavy, [carved] out of a great stone; so I went to inform my father, and he went in with me. And as we both were moving it to return it to its place, its head fell off of it in such a way that I was left holding on to its head. And it came

2. There have been many suggestions for the underlying sense of this apparently Hebrew or Aramaic name. One possibility is *mar ’umot*, “lord of nations.”

This journey to Egypt certainly troubled interpreters. For one thing, as the couple was preparing to cross the Egyptian border, Abraham instructed the beautiful Sarah to tell the Egyptians that she was his sister rather than his wife, lest they kill him in order to take her for themselves. "Say you are my sister," he says, "so that it may go well with me because of you, and so that my life may be spared on your account" (Gen. 12:13). These hardly sounded like heroic words! To make matters worse, the Bible records that Sarah acted on Abraham's advice and that, as a result, she was taken by Pharaoh to his palace for an unspecified period of time (until God "afflicted Pharaoh with great plagues" and he discovered the truth). If Abraham was upset by her departure, the Bible does not mention it—in fact, it implies at one point that Abraham's silence actually caused him to profit by this interlude (Gen. 12:16).

Interpreters were understandably disturbed by Abraham's apparent cowardice and subsequent silence. But the fact that the Bible narrated the whole incident so quickly—in less than a dozen verses—certainly left room to suppose that Abraham's true feelings, and even some of his actions, had simply been omitted in the Bible's telegraphic account. Many ancient writers, in retelling the story, thus felt entitled to add in what the story had somehow left out, an account of Abraham's deep distress at these events. (Some also simply skipped over what Abraham had said to Sarah, implying or stating that she had been taken to Pharaoh's palace by force.)

So Abram went to Egypt [and] lived in Egypt five years before his wife was taken from him **by force** . . .⁴ When Pharaoh took Abram's wife Sarai by force for himself, the Lord punished Pharaoh and his household very severely because of Abram's wife Sarai. — *Jubilees* 13:11–13

He [Abraham] had a wife distinguished greatly for her goodness of soul and beauty of body, in which she surpassed all the women of her time. When the Egyptian officials saw her and admired her beauty . . . they told the king. He sent for the woman and, seeing her extraordinary beauty, paid little regard to decency or the laws enacted to show respect to strangers . . . [He] intended, he said, to take her in marriage, but in reality merely to dishonor her. She who in a foreign country was at the mercy of a licentious and cruel-hearted despot and had no one to protect her—for her husband was helpless, menaced as he was by

4. Not only does this account omit Abraham's words to Sarah, but the words "taken . . . by force" are intended to make it clear that Abraham in no way cooperated with Pharaoh's deed. Moreover, the fact that Abraham had been in Egypt for five years before Sarah was taken from him may further be intended to suggest that she was not taken as a result of anyone being under the mistaken (first) impression that the two were not married.

the terror of stronger powers—joined him [Abraham] in fleeing for refuge to the last remaining championship, that of God.⁵

—Philo, *On Abraham* 93–95

I, Abram, **wept greatly**, I and my nephew Lot as well on the night that Sarah was taken away from me **by force**. On that night I prayed and begged and pleaded, and in great suffering, as the tears went forth, I said: Blessed are You, God Most High, Master of the whole universe. For You are master and ruler over all, You rule over all the kings of the earth, meting out justice to all of them. Now I lodge my complaint with You, Lord, against Pharaoh Zoan, king of Egypt, that my wife has been taken from me **by force**. Execute justice upon him for me and show forth Your great hand against him and his house, and do not allow him to defile my wife this evening, so that I may know about You, my Lord, that You are master of all the kings of the earth.” And I wept.

—(1Q20) *Genesis Apocryphon* col. 20:10–16

When Abraham saw what had happened, he **began to weep** and pray before God, saying, “Master of the universe! Is this what comes of the faith I have placed in You? But now, act in accordance with your mercy and faithfulness and do not disappoint my hope.” Sarah likewise wept and said, “Master of the universe! I had no prior inclination, but when you said ‘Leave your homeland,’ I believed your words. Yet now I am left all alone, without father or mother or husband—shall this wicked man [Pharaoh] now come and abuse me? Act in keeping with Your great name and the faith that I placed in your words.” Said God to her: “By your life, nothing ill will happen to you or your husband.”

—*Midrash Tanhuma, Lekh Lekha* 5

Abraham’s Dream

One retelling of the biblical story, found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, reckoned with the problem of Abraham’s apparent cowardice in another way, suggesting that there had been a good reason for Abraham to tell Sarah what he did (“Say you are my sister”). It all came about because of a dream that Abraham had:

5. Philo omits all mention of Abraham’s request of Sarah that she say she is his sister. Pharaoh is presented as acting in violation of the laws of the land and solely out of lust. Philo says that Pharaoh claimed he “intended” to marry Sarah in order to account for Pharaoh’s words in Gen. 12:19 (“I took her as my wife”). However, Philo says that this was merely a ruse, and that it was only as a result of God’s intervention that “the chastity of the woman was preserved” (*On Abraham* 98).

And I, Abram, d
Egypt, and I sa
palm-tree. Ther
uproot the ceda
protested, “Do
same root.” So th
not cut down.

That night I a
dreamt a dream
“Tell me your d
dream, and I ma

In the dream, the
dream says, therefor
be saved if Sarah say
dream, it would hav
tell the Egyptians th
generally messages
an instance not of c

But did he reall
found a tiny bit of s
version, when Abra
I know that you are
Egyptians see you .
Sarah’s husband of
know” in Hebrew c
and joined with “b
ham *now* knows so
knew before now th

If Abraham’s w
convey a striking di
found out”]—since
when the Egyptians
found out, is not s
beauty, the Egyptia
indeed make Abra
approach would h
Abraham *know* th
anyone *know* for c

And I, Abram, dreamt a dream on the night that I entered the land of Egypt, and I saw in my dream a cedar tree and a beautiful, tall, palm-tree. Then some people came and sought to cut down and uproot the cedar and to leave the palm-tree alone. But the palm-tree protested, "Do not cut down the cedar, for both of us are from the same root." So the cedar was spared for the palm-tree's sake, and it was not cut down.

That night I awoke from my sleep and I said to my wife Sarah, "I dreamt a dream and I am frightened by this dream." And she said, "Tell me your dream so that I may know." And I began to tell her the dream, and I made known to her the meaning of the dream.

— (1Q20) *Genesis Apocryphon* col. 19:14–19

In the dream, the cedar is Abraham and the palm tree is Sarah. What the dream says, therefore, is that Abraham's life is in great danger, and he can only be saved if Sarah says the right thing. Now if Abraham had indeed had such a dream, it would have virtually constituted a divine *commandment* for Sarah to tell the Egyptians that she was Abraham's sister, since dreams in the Bible are generally messages from God. Abraham's conduct would therefore have been an instance not of cowardice but of obedience to God.

But did he really have such a dream? It may be that the author of this text found a tiny bit of support for the dream in the Bible itself. For, in the biblical version, when Abraham starts his instructions to Sarah, he says, "Behold, *now I know* that you are a beautiful woman; and it will come to pass that, when the Egyptians see you . . ." (Gen. 12:11–12). These are strange words for Abraham, Sarah's husband of so many years, to be saying to her—especially since "I know" in Hebrew often carries the connotation of "I have [just] found out," and joined with "behold *now*" it could easily seem to be implying that Abraham *now* knows something that he did not know previously. But surely he knew before now that his wife was beautiful. What then could the text mean?

If Abraham's words are read in the Hebrew in a slightly different way, they convey a striking difference in meaning: "Behold, now I know [or "I have just found out"]—since you are a beautiful woman—that it will come to pass that, when the Egyptians see you . . ." In this way what Abraham knows, or has just found out, is not simply that Sarah is beautiful, but that, given Sarah's great beauty, the Egyptians will try to kill him and take her for themselves. This does indeed make Abraham's "Behold I know" seem a bit more reasonable. But this approach would have raised a further question for interpreters: how could Abraham *know* that the Egyptians would try to kill him, indeed, how can anyone *know* for certain what is going to happen in the future? Unless, of

course, Abraham had been told as much by God. It was apparently such reasoning as this that led the author of the *Genesis Apocryphon* to suppose that God had informed Abraham of what was to happen through a prophetic dream.⁶



In short: There was good reason for God to promise Abraham manifold blessings. For Abraham had, even in his homeland, been a dogged opponent of idol worship. Through his study of the stars and/or his exposure to the idols worshipped by his own father, Abraham had come to understand that there is only one true God. That was why the Chaldeans, who worshipped the stars and bowed down to idols, sought to kill Abraham, even, in one interpretation, casting him into a fiery furnace in Ur. God saved Abraham and ordered him to leave his homeland. When he found Canaan in the midst of a famine, he journeyed to Egypt, and a prophetic dream warned him of coming danger.

6. God in fact goes on to refer to Abraham as a "prophet" in Gen. 20:7, after Sarah has been taken to the house of Abimelech under similar circumstances. That such a title was given to Abraham *in that context*, where the narrative itself provides scant justification for calling him a prophet, may have led interpreters to suppose that it was some sort of *prophetic vision* that had led Abraham in both incidents to tell people that Sarah was his sister. And what better place to locate such a prophetic vision than in connection with Abraham's "Behold I know" in Gen. 12:11? Incidentally, it may be that Sarah's words in the *Genesis Apocryphon* passage cited, "Tell me your dream *so that I may know*," reflect this understanding of Abraham's words as implying a prophetic vision. He says, "Behold I know," and she says, "Tell me your dream so that I will know too!"

