Abraham, the Land & His Descendants

By Jim Myers

What people believe about Abram/Abraham affects how they read the Bible and view events in the Middle East today. It has been this way for many centuries. It affects not only religious beliefs; it influences political and military decisions, too. What does the Bible say about Abram/Abraham and the land Yahweh gave him?

What one believes about Abram/Abraham is affected by what one believes about יְהֹוָה (YHVH—Yahweh). YHVH is called the Tetragrammaton -- an ancient Israelite name for God. According to actual count, it occurs 5,410 times in the Jewish Bible.¹ There is a debate among scholars as to whether it was pronounced in public or even heard by those who were not priests. Some believe that only the priests in Temple in Jerusalem pronounced it when they recited the Priestly Blessing over the people daily, but since the destruction of Second Temple in 70 CE, it was no longer pronounced. Others indicate that there was an exception for the temple liturgy, where it was only pronounced once a year, by the high priest, on the Day of Atonement. Still others argue that after the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE, speaking it in public ceased.²

Yahweh is an elohiym (the Hebrew word that means “god.”) Judaism today is a monotheistic religion, which means “there is only one God.” The Hebrew Scriptures, however, contain many references to other elohiyms. The important thing to understand is that Yahweh is the elohiym that calls, communicates with, and makes a covenant with Abram/Abraham.

This is the account of Terah’s family line. Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran. . . The name of Abram’s wife was Sarai. . . Now Sarai was childless because she was not able to conceive. 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 Harran, they settled there.³
Terah is the father of Abram. Abram’s wife is Sarai. The story of Terah and his clan begins at Ur (“of the Chaldeans” was a later insertion⁴) about 2000 BCE. Ur was a major city, and later the capital, of the Sumerian Empire in southern Mesopotamia. Its location near the Persian Gulf made it a center of commerce and trade routes. Between 2030-1980 BCE Ur was the world’s largest city, with about 65,000 inhabitants living within its walls. There were many temples and tombs in Ur, along with the Great Ziggurat,⁵ which Terah and Abram would have seen many times.

Terah’s plan was to move his clan to Canaan after he left Ur, but after stopping at Haran, he never continued the journey. Below is the route that Terah would have taken to Canaan.⁸ The journey from Ur to Haran is estimated to be about 700 miles and then from Haran to Canaan would be another 800 miles. It would have taken a while to make it at about 20 miles per day.

We do not know why Terah planned to go to Canaan, why he decided to stop or remain in Haran, why he did not continue his journey or how long they were at Haran before the famous event below took place.
Yahweh said to Abram: “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

Something we must clearly understand is that Abram was not a Jew. Let me say it again, so there will be no mistake. **Abram was not a Jew.** According to the above verse, Yahweh told Abram to go from “your country” and “your people.” This would indicate that Haran was Abram’s homeland and the people there were his people. The account is about Abram of Haran, who completed the journey planned by his father, who stopped after returning home from Ur.

A man who had escaped came and reported this to Abram the Hebrew.

Abram is called “the Hebrew.” Many readers consider the word Hebrew and Jew to be synonymous. The Hebrew word translated Hebrew means “one who has crossed over.” What he had crossed over was the Euphrates River, which is Abram was the one from “Beyond the River.” “Beyond the Rivers” was an official satrapy after the Persians conquered the Babylonians. It was an area under the rule of a satrap (governor), which included the area in which Syria and Palestine were in. This would mean that “the Hebrew” was been added by later scribes to help people of their period understand the text, as some scholars argue. In any event, it links Abram to the area around the Euphrates River.

Yahweh spoke to Abram in Haran. The only place we find Yahweh between the time He spoke to Noah and to Abram in Haran was the tower of Babel in Babylon. This area seems to be where Yahweh was active. Yahweh does something with Abram that He also did with Noah -- He made a covenant.

On that day Yahweh made a covenant with Abram and said, “To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates; the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.”

It is interesting that the area Yahweh gave to Abram is very close to the same area that made up the satrapy called “Beyond the River.” Look at the map below and think about the size of the area promised to Abram and his descendants. It is clearly much larger that the Land of Israel. Keep in mind as we continue that this is the area that Abram’s descendants will occupy. Therefore, it is very important for us to know exactly who Abram’s descendants are.
The verse after the covenant above reveals a problem – “Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children.” The land is given to his descendants, but he doesn’t have any! Also notice, that the promise wasn’t made to “their” descendants – it was to his descendants.

Sarai decided to help out matters by suggesting that Abram and their Egyptian slave Hagar have sex. Abram and Hagar agreed; Hagar became pregnant. When Abram was 86 years old Hagar gave birth to his first descendant – Ishmael.

Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God. . . God also said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.”
This covenant changes the names of Abram and Sarai to **Abraham** and **Sarah**. It gives the whole land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants. It also reveals that Sarah will have a son, and descendants, too.

As you can see, the second covenant gives Abraham and his descendants a smaller portion of the land than the first covenant. This will be the land of Abraham and Sarah’s descendants, specifically. This covenant is also the "Covenant of Circumcision." Notice that Abraham immediately complies with Yahweh’s new requirement:

> On that very day Abraham took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household or bought with his money, every male in his household, and circumcised them, as God told him. Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised, and his son Ishmael was thirteen.\(^\text{17}\)

Just as Yahweh promised, Sarah became pregnant and bore him a son when he was 100 years old.
Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him.  

Abraham’s connection to his homeland was still very important to him, as can be seen when it is time for Isaac to take a wife. Abraham sent his servant to Nahor, a town located close to Haran, to find him a wife from his people.

You will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I am living, but will go to my country and my own relatives and get a wife for my son Isaac. . . Then the servant left, taking with him ten of his master’s camels loaded with all kinds of good things from his master. He set out for Aram Naharaim and made his way to the town of Nahor.  

He found a wife for Isaac named Rebecca. After Sarah died, Abraham took another wife and had more children.

Abraham had taken another wife, whose name was Keturah. She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak and Shuah. Jokshan was the father of Sheba and Dedan; the descendants of Dedan were the Ashurites, the Letushites and the Leummites. The sons of Midian were Ephah, Epher, Hanok, Abida and Eldaah.

Meanwhile, Ishmael also had sons.

These are the names of the sons of Ishmael, listed in the order of their birth: Nebaioth the firstborn of Ishmael, Kedar, Adbeel, Mibsam, Mishma, Dumah, Massa, Hadad, Tema, Jetur, Naphish and Kedemah.

Abraham’s descendants increased again when Isaac and Rebecca had two sons.

When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. The first to come out was . . . Esau. After this, his brother came out . . . he was named Jacob.

When Esau was forty years old, he married Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and also Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite. There was a conflict between Esau and Jacob, so Isaac sent Jacob back to Abraham’s homeland for protection and to find a wife.

So Isaac called for Jacob and blessed him. Then he commanded him: “Do not marry a Canaanite woman. Go at once to Paddan Aram, to the
house of your mother’s father Bethuel. Take a wife for yourself there, from among the daughters of Laban, your mother’s brother.25

Jacob not only found a wife, he found two and produced children by the two wives and each of their slaves while he was at Paddan Aram.

The sons of Leah were Reuben the firstborn of Jacob, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar and Zebulun. The sons of Rachel were Joseph and Benjamin. The sons of Rachel’s servant Bilhah were Dan and Naphtali. The sons of Leah’s servant Zilpah were Gad and Asher.26

Esau also had children from his Canaanite wives: Eliphaz, Reuel, Jeush, Jalam and Korah.27


Keep these relationships in mind as you read the Jewish Scriptures and recognize the family relationships involved in the events they record. BHC
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KAREN LEYNOR

March 31, 1966
September 9, 2004

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May we help to bring closer to fulfillment their highest ideals and noblest strivings. May their memories deepen our loyalty to those things which we valued and shared -- faith, love, peace and devotion.

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